Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) is a South African socio-economic policy framework implemented by the African National Congress (ANC) government of Nelson Mandela in 1994 after months of discussions, consultations and negotiations between the ANC, its Alliance partners the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party, and "mass organisations in the wider civil society".¹

The ANC's chief aim in developing and implementing the Reconstruction and Development Programme, was to address the immense socioeconomic problems brought about by the consequences of the struggle against its predecessors under the Apartheid regime. Specifically, it set its sights on alleviating poverty and addressing the massive shortfalls in social services across the country -- something that the document acknowledged would rely upon a stronger macroeconomic environment.¹ Achieving poverty alleviation and a stronger economy were thus seen as deeply interrelated and mutually supporting objectives -- development without growth would be financially unsustainable, while growth without development would fail to bring about the necessary structural transformation within South Africa's deeply inequitable and largely impoverished population. Hence the RDP attempted to combine measures to boost the economy such as contained fiscal spending, sustained or lowered taxes, reduction of government debt and trade liberalisation with socially-minded social service provisions and infrastructural projects. In this way, the policy took on both socialist and neo-liberal elements -- but could not be easily categorised wholly in either camp.

Background: The need for an RDP

By the end of Apartheid, South Africa's economy was facing a variety of serious structural problems. The final two decades of the National Party's regime had been particularly damaging to the economic climate, with stagnant economic growth (the average over the entire period was just 1.7%), declining per capita income (averaging -0.7% annually), increasing unemployment (using the broad definition, up from around 20% at the start of the 1970s to around 30% by 1994) and a spiraling debt problem (under the De Klerk government (1989-1994) alone, debt had increased from less than 3% of GDP to more than 9%, and total government debt more than doubled).²

Facing this "deep-seated structural crisis",² the government attempted to put together a policy framework that could begin to address the variety of problems being faced both economically and otherwise. The RDP White Paper, presented to Parliament in 1994, identified economic, social, legal, political, moral, cultural and environmental problems that the country faced.³ To move towards the alleviation of these sizable difficulties, it was established that a completely new macro- and socio-economic framework was required:

"A programme is required that is achievable, sustainable and meets the objectives of freedom, and an improved standard of living and quality of life for all South Africans within a peaceful and stable society characterised by equitable economic growth."³

Six Major principles
The RDP White Paper outlined six major principles that would guide and give substance to the remainder of the programme:

- The RDP would be an **integrated, well coordinated and sustainable** programme, to be conducted in and integrated amongst all three spheres of government, along with civil society, business and parastatals.
- The RDP would be **people-driven**. Here, the programme noted:

  "Development is not about the delivery of goods to a passive citizenry. It is about active involvement and growing empowerment. In taking this approach the Government will build on the many forums, peace structures and negotiations that our people are involved in through the land."

- The RDP would attempt to play a role in ending the endemic violence within South Africa by embarking on a national drive for **peace and security**. Such conditions, the Programme noted, would also help to encourage investment, thus feeding back into the drive towards economic expansion and greater development.
- The commitment of all parties to the RDP would encourage and further the grand project of **nation-building**. Here the Programme noted:

  "We are a single country, with a single economy, functioning within a constitutional framework that establishes provincial and local powers, respect and protection for minorities, and a process to accommodate those wishing to retain their cultural identity. It is on the basis of our unity in diversity that we will consolidate our national sovereignty."

- The RDP would **link growth, development, reconstruction, redistribution and reconciliation** into a 'unified program', held together by a broad infrastructural programme that would focus on creating and enhancing existing services in the electricity, water, telecommunications, transport, health, education and training sectors. Crucially, the programme notes that:

  "...attention will be paid to those economic factors inhibiting growth and investment and placing obstacles in the way of private sector expansion."

- The success of the first five principles would in turn facilitate the sixth -- **democratisation**. Here the document made note of 'minority control and privilege' within the economy as a major obstacle to the achievement of an integrated developmentally-orientated economy. It also acknowledged that the people most affected by economic policy should participate in the decision-making, and that the government would also have to be restructured to fit the priorities of the RDP.
Proponents of the RDP argue that the programme oversaw many major advances in dealing with South Africa's most severe social problems:

- **Housing**: Between 1994 and the start of 2001 over 1.1 million cheap houses eligible for government subsidies had been built, accommodating 5 million of the estimated 12.5 million South Africans without proper housing.\(^5\)

- **Clean water**: By the beginning of 1998, standpipes had been installed within 200 metres of the dwellings of about 1.3 million rural people. By August of that year, Minister of Water Affairs Kader Asmal stated that since he had taken office more than 2.5 million people had been given access to fresh safe water. By 2000, a total of 236 projects had supplied clean piped water to nearly 4.9 million people -- most of whom were inhabitants of former homelands.\(^5\)

- **Electrification**: Between 1994 and May 2000 around 1.75 million homes had been connected to the national grid, while the proportion of rural homes with electricity grew from 12% to 42%.\(^5\)

- **Land reform**: By 1999 some 39,000 families had been settled on 3,550 square kilometres of land. Authorities claimed that 250,000 people had 'received land' within four years.\(^5\)

- **Healthcare**: Between April 1994 and the end of 1998, around 500 new clinics gave an additional 5 million people access to primary health care facilities. Under the polio-hepatitis vaccination programme that began in 1998, 8 million children were immunised within two years.\(^5\)

- **Public works**: A community-based Public Works Programme provided employment over five years to 240,000 people on road-building schemes and the installation of sewage, sanitation facilities and water supplies.\(^5\)
Critics have questioned the scope of change represented by many of the statistics, and have argued that realities on the ground signify a far more modest improvement than the government claims. They have attacked, in particular, the standards of housing and water delivery, healthcare improvements and the successfulness of land reform policy and agricultural reforms:

- **Housing:** Critics of the RDP point to poor housing quality as the chief problem being faced. One research investigation in 2000 found that only 30% of new houses complied with building regulations. Critics also note that new housing schemes are often dreary in their planning and layout -- to the extent that they often strongly resemble the en masse bleak building programmes of the Apartheid government during the 1950s and 60s.\(^5\)

- **Clean water:** Critics of the RDP have targeted in particular the government’s assertions regarding the provision of clean water -- citing an array of problems and complications with RDP policies that have led to their partial or full failure during the implementation stage. Lodge notes\(^5\) that water projects faced, in many cases, severe design faults that led to unworkable bureaucratic messes on the ground. Subsequently, the percentage of households relying on rivers, streams and dams for their water actually increased slightly between 1995 and 1999\(^6\) while the percentage of households using piped water only increased slightly. In 2000 the government announced a major change in policy by providing free basic allowances of 6,000 litres per month -- solving the financial restrictions of the rural poor in accessing water, but placing even more doubt in the financial sustainability of the schemes.\(^5\)

- **Land reform:** The number of families settled on land under the RDP was way off the Programme's goal -- the RDP had aimed to resettle families on 300,000 square kilometres of land -- in reality only just over 1% of this goal was achieved. Moreover, the advances in many other areas of public services came partly through the removal of agricultural subsidies -- which subsequently created huge job losses. Between 1994 and 1998 the number of workers on commercial farms declined from 1.4 million to just 637,000.\(^5\) Thus the number of people employed in the agricultural sector actually declined substantially under the RDP.

- **Healthcare:** Critics of the RDP argue that access to healthcare only improved slightly under the RDP and that, even with moderately improved access, standards at many medical institutions declined rapidly. They cite, in the first place, that usage of healthcare facilities increased by just 1.6% between 1995 and 1999, and that even these modest improvements have been eclipsed by the advance of the AIDS pandemic and other health epidemics such as malaria. Between 1995 and 1998 life expectancy of South Africans fell from 64.1 years to 53.2 years, with AIDS patients sometimes occupying up to 40% of beds in public hospitals. This, say critics, is indicative of a "public health system... in crisis" rather than one undergoing positive transformation.\(^5\) Equally troubling has been declining quality of services -- Lodge notes,\(^5\) for
example, that in Soweto 950,000 patients attended primary healthcare clinics in 1994 where they were seen by 800 nurses -- but by 2000 the number of patients had spiralled to about 2,000,000 while the number of nurses had fallen to just 500.