

Blame for Marikana is shared, says report

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NO ONE has emerged from Marikana with an unblemished reputation. Workers, unions, employers, cabinet ministers, the state and the police must all share some of the blame.

This is according to a report on a round table discussion on what South Africa could learn from the experiences of regulating the labour markets in India, Brazil and Malaysia, whose contents were released by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) on Wednesday.

The CDE said a number of participants noted that efforts to reform the labour market had to be premised on recognition that the labour market did not exist in isolation. Many labour market challenges had roots in problems elsewhere in society.

"For one participant, it was important to recognise that the challenges facing the labour market

were less about contractual relations between equal parties, and more differential power and access to resources, and about 'whether the poor in society have any power to get access to the resources that the wealthy and powerful are monopolising'," the think tank said.

The CDE said a second participant took a different view, suggesting that a key reason why labour market reform had proved so difficult around the world and across time, was that labour market institutions "are part of the DNA" of societies.

For example, the American and German labour markets had shaped (and been shaped) by the nature of those societies.

Changing labour market institutions was difficult precisely because they were so deeply embedded in the terms of a society's social contract.

The round table discussion was held in November and included experts from business, labour,

academia and the government. The CDE said a comprehensive report on these issues would be published in the coming months.

The CDE said the discussion also heard why reforming the South African labour market was so difficult: labour institutions were having to bear the weight of expectations not being met by other institutions.

Thus, in Marikana and elsewhere, the failures of local government were clearly making labour relations and wage negotiations more complex and fraught. Reforming the labour market might, therefore, be facilitated by resolving crises in other institutions.

The think tank said another participant argued that companies could have done more to provide leadership on social issues in and around Marikana.

"You'd have to be pretty blind if you are a platinum chief executive not to see what was happening to that region of the country."