

LAND: SUEDAFRIKA

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## National Church Leaders' Consultation

**On Wednesday the 18<sup>th</sup> October 2017 church leaders from all over South Africa gathered in Johannesburg aiming to define common approaches to health, social and economic issues. The National Church Leaders' Consultation Programme was hosted by the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA) and supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), the Department of Health and the Department of Social Development. The discussion was chaired by Dr Thabo Makgoba, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, and organized by Dr Renier Koeglenberg and Dr Sipho Mahokoto representing the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD).**

Archbishop Makgoba led the conference in a spiritual way and invited the participants to engage in an open and honest dialogue. He introduced upcoming presentations and discussions by highlighting the importance of conversations to explore new models of partnership to advance economic and social inclusion and thereby serve the common good with national resources. Singing the traditional song Senzenina - "what have we done?" the participants set the awareness of their own ability to give raise to change as the fundament of their discussions.

During the course of the conference, several participants from civil society organisations presented their actions and projects to the church leaders and explained how, through seeking cooperation with the Churches, they hope for an improvement in the efficiency of their endeavor.

### Fighting TB and HIV/AIDS

The first speaker, Ms Yolisa Tsibolane from the National Department of Health, argued in favor of a partnership between the religious sector and the NDOH/Global Fund in the fight against Tuberculosis (TB) and HIV/AIDS. Ms Tsibolane presented TB as a serious threat to public health in South Africa, one of the most affected countries worldwide. She explained that the Department of Health is consequently engaged in fighting TB and that the available treatments are very efficient if applied properly. The major challenge regarding TB treatment in South Africa is on the one side the high number of people who have TB but are not identified and treated, hence infecting others with the disease and on the other side the high number of people who are treated for TB but fail to continue with their medication in the prescribed way, enabling the bacteria to build resistance. Here the Department of Health seeks help from the religious sector, claiming that church leaders, thanks to their closeness with their communities, could take decisive steps in the fight against TB and HIV/AIDS. These steps would include mobilizing communities and bringing across messages in order to process the credibility and influence of the department's actions.

The church leaders supported the Department's actions and expressed a wish to help the Department of Health in fighting TB and HIV/AIDS since both diseases pose a threat to all dioceses and communities.

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However, the church leaders raised questions regarding the nature of this assistance, arguing that a pastoral approach has to be developed and that the Churches will need training in order to enable such kind of cooperation.

Afterwards the NRASD presented its actions, functioning, funding, achievements and future objectives. At this stage the NRASD and the Department of Health declared that they would work together in providing training for the Churches on the TB and HIV/AIDS issue.

#### **Support for Child-headed Households**

The third presentation was held by Ms. Tshidi Maaga from the National Department of Social Development and raised the issue of child-headed households. For various reasons, starting from a demise of traditional social structures to the impact of HIV/Aids, child-headed households are on the rise in South Africa. In many cases this means one of the older siblings taking de facto care of the rest of the family. The government is the custodian of all children in South Africa and has to find foster families for orphans. However, children older than 16 have the possibility to care for the family with support from the government. The key challenge the Department of Social Development is facing is the registration of the children as such. They need to be identified and registered to get support from the government. Here the Churches could play an instrumental role in identifying such child-headed households and by doing so enabling them to become registered and receive government support.

After the presentation of the Department for Social Development, the church leaders' assembly acknowledged the integration and education of children, in particular those from dysfunctional families, as an essential precondition for the reconstruction of a "whole society". Members of the conference expressed their eagerness to support the Department of Social Development in this matter in enabling cooperation between the department and the NRASD. However it was clearly stated by the church leaders, that

child-headed households cannot become the norm and that supporting these children is essential but should not be seen as an ideal situation. During the discussion the participants were reminded of the saying "it takes the whole village to raise a child". It was agreed on that efforts from the communities are needed to ensure proper care and education of these children. Again the church leaders asked the department for training on this important issue and identified a clearly defined pastoral strategy as a precondition for successful intervention and cooperation. The fundamental role of a clearly defined theological background for the taking of decisions on issues linked to social structures was also highlighted during the discussion.

#### **Conversations in the mining sector**

The next speaker, Mr. Dorian Emmett represented the Anglo American mining company. In his speech, he focused on the importance of wide ranging discussions and consultations between all affected stakeholders when it comes to issues linked to the settlement and operation of mining activities. He described the mining companies as being very aware of the various impacts mining activities might have on communities. It is therefore important for mining companies to engage with stakeholders, become aware of their interests and find a way of accommodating those interests and concerns from an early planning stage. Mr. Emmett emphasized that the major challenge to such exchange and coordination of interests lies in a deep lack of trust between stakeholders when discussing mining issues. Having identified these challenges, he then pointed out what can be done to enable constructive dialogue between mining companies, workers and third parties affected by mining activities. So called "safe space conversations" are in his view a constructive way to promote and enhance dialogue. Churches often assist by provide a spiritual context for such "safe space conversations". This spiritual context allows for more open and frank discussions and builds trust between the stakeholders involved.

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In the following discussion, the church leaders showed a keen interest for "safe space conversations" and acknowledged that mining is an important sector in South Africa, affecting the wellbeing and economic survival of many families and communities. The fact that mining in South Africa will have to undergo fundamental changes in the near future, as many mines will close, contributes to the church leaders will to engage in this issue. Cooperation in developing a retirement strategy for former mine workers was considered a crucial item on the agenda. While the church leaders indicated their willingness to cooperate with mining companies on issues related to the wellbeing of affected communities, they clearly stated that such cooperation must not be mistaken for a general endorsement of all mining activities.

The conference ended by a discussion on the relationship between government and the church. The church leaders emphasized that the role of government is to serve the citizens. However, they also made clear that it is not the right approach just to criticise government but that churches have to do some introspection as well and look at their own pastoral approach. The discussion ended with a focus on the need of coordinated theological engagements and pastoral responses to enable efficient response to the various societal challenges.

The conclusion, led again in a spiritual atmosphere, raised the lack of communication between Churches and church leaders and even within the Churches. Perpetuating and increasing the frequency of meetings like the National Church Leader's Consultation was considered essential for improved communication.



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