

THE CONSTITUTION AT WORK: ‘THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN BUILDING INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES’

By Rebecca Sibanda: Legal Assistant; Centre for Constitutional Rights

On Monday 25 July 2016, the Centre for Constitutional Rights (CFCR) supported by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), hosted a discussion at Rhodes University (RU) in conjunction with the Law Faculty as part of their running constitutional dialogue series. The aim of these discussions is to create a platform for conversation and debate about the Constitution and the values and rights contained therein. This discussion focused on the role that universities play in the building of inclusive societies, especially in the communities that they occupy.

The discussion was the first time the CFCR and KAS have partnered with Rhodes University in addressing issues surrounding the Constitution. The speakers at this event were Dr Sizwe Mabizela, the Vice Chancellor (VC) of RU, and Mr Mpumelelo Ncwadi, the Director of Indwe Trust - a non-profit organisation that works with rural communities in the Eastern Cape. The discussion was opened by the Director of the CFCR - Ms Phephelaphi Dube - who introduced the CFCR and its functions and gave a brief background on the speakers. The Dean of the Law Faculty, Prof Rosaan Krüger, acted as moderator for the evening’s conversation.

The VC began by stating that universities are not simply about building inclusive societies but also sustaining them. He identified the purposes and functions of universities as the production and dissemination of knowledge, as well as teaching in ways that encourage critical engagement with knowledge. Further, universities exist as part of the community in which they are located, hence the added obligation to engage with local issues. He said that this engagement allows for genuine partnerships to be forged between universities and the communities.

Another important aspect he identified was that of an inclusive society. When describing this, he quoted the Expert Group Meeting on promoting Social Integration of 2008, and explained this society as one that overrides differences of race, gender, class, generation and geography, to ensure inclusion, equality of opportunity and capability of all to determine an agreed set of social institutions that govern social interaction.

Ensuring equality of opportunities for all was highlighted as necessary for the attainment of one’s full potential. Policy change and shifting of prejudices are mechanisms for such attainment. He also emphasised the creation of conditions that enable effective participation of every member in society, in all aspects of life, such as public participation in decision-making processes. The VC noted the progressiveness of our Constitution but highlighted the fact that its value lies in the extent to which it is given practical effect in the lives of the people. A large portion of South Africans do not enjoy the protection in the Constitution and universities prompt innovation to help rectify this.

In answering the question of what universities can do to build inclusive societies, Dr Mabizela said that universities should model practice in inclusiveness by, for example, broadening access to quality education to the poor and marginalised. Furthermore, the creation of welcoming classrooms and fostering a feeling of belonging for all is essential. He mentioned the re-evaluation of curricula as a tool for this change, as well as speaking out firmly against all forms of intolerance.

Mr Ncwadi began his part of the discussion by emphasising the importance of universities in strengthening societies and building social cohesion. He described social development as being supported by ‘maps’ or tools that universities should help create for both students and the communities. He identified these ‘maps’ as being economic opportunity, environmental wellbeing, social equity, prosperity and resilience.

He said that being awarded the opportunity to be a Nelson Mandela Scholar at the University of Cambridge opened his eyes to the methods used by other institutions of higher learning to empower their communities, which is something close to his heart as he grew up surrounded by poverty. He spoke about the primary school planted on the university grounds for the less privileged children in the community and as such contributed to the building and uplifting of the less privileged members of that community.

Regarding prosperity, Mr Ncwadi said that it allows a nation to provide essentials such as shelter and nutrition for its people, which lets people lead healthy lives and seek excellence. Prosperity creates a space for flourishing and allows people to engage in productive activities and create sustainable livelihoods. In terms of resilience he spoke about the determination possessed by those who have had to adapt to the changing South Africa in the wake of apartheid.

The final map he discussed was economic opportunity and he said that universities help to effect change. They investigate what to change and how to change it. They then connect people and their ideas, and facilitate conversation. The creation of these maps by institutions of higher learning helps build and sustain inclusive communities.

The floor was then opened for questions from the audience. The first question came from a RU student and addressed the sense of alienation experienced on campuses and it was attributed to differences. In response, the Deputy Dean of the RU Law Department, Professor Juma, said that inclusiveness was to live beyond differences whilst simultaneously embracing diversity. The VC echoed these sentiments and cautioned against fixating on the differences between us so that we become blind to the commonalities we share. He encouraged celebration of said differences. Mr Ncwadi added to this by explaining the concept of the ‘*holon*’ which is something that is simultaneously a whole and a part. The *holon* highlights the fact that with our differences we are whole as individuals, and in spite of the differences we contribute to another whole - our society.

Another question spoke to the agency role played by universities and asked how they can help the less privileged in their community. In relation to this aspect of inclusiveness or community involvement the VC cautioned against the ‘saviour complex’ and to approach communities with a mind open to learning, as there is a wealth of knowledge living in such communities.

A community member asked how the academics can translate their learning to effective solutions for the communities in which they exist. In response, Mr Ncwadi said he had no concrete answer but reminded the students of the brevity of their time in Grahamstown and to focus on making a change in the short time they have in the town and to bear in mind that the community will outlive their degree.

The discussion highlighted a consensus in the notion that universities cannot build and sustain inclusive societies without the participation of the very communities they wish to serve.