



Nelson Mandela International Day, 2002: South African Scholars reflecting on Madiba's legacy

By Kendra Connock, Jordan Mc Lean and Laura Rubidge*

Living Nelson Mandela Day, every day.

By Kendra Connock

On the 18th of July 1918, as the First World War raged on in Europe, a baby boy was born in a village in South Africa's Cape Province – now part of the Eastern Cape Province. The boy was named "Rolihlahla", meaning "troublemaker". Some 9 decades later, this day would be recognized by the United Nations as "International Nelson Mandela Day". On this day, individuals, and organisations from around the world are encouraged to spend 67 minutes engaging in acts of community service to commemorate the 67 years of his life Nelson Mandela spent in service of his fellow South Africans. These 67 years included his time as a human rights lawyer, time spent imprisoned for his activism, his political career as South Africa's first democratically elected president, and his role as an international peacemaker.

United Nations Resolution 64/13 ([A/RES/64/13](#)) designated the 18th of July as Nelson Mandela day in recognition of Mandela's leading role in the struggle for liberation in his own country, and unity across the continent. In 2015, the scope of Mandela Day was expanded by General Assembly Resolution 70/175 ([A/70/175](#)) to include the promotion of humane conditions of imprisonment and placing value on the work of prison staff as a social service.

This day not only serves as an opportunity to celebrate and commemorate Mandela's brave actions on behalf of all South Africans but also encourages the

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continuation of Mandela's own values and dedication to serving his wider community. Mandela Day is a chance for ordinary citizens to take a step into Mandela's shoes and contribute their time, effort, talents, or finances to helping others. At its core, International Nelson Mandela Day emphasizes the universal value of human dignity and encourages individuals everywhere to take up the mantle of protecting and promoting this value. The average South African may not have the capacity to lead a liberation movement nor the opportunity to become an international icon for peace and equality, but we are each capable of making a difference. This is the spirit of Mandela Day. To do **what you can, with what you have, where you are**. What matters on Mandela Day is not the scale of your actions, nor how much money you can afford to donate to a cause, what matters is doing something, anything, to help another person.

The official [Nelson Mandela Day website](#) has a plethora of options to consider for your 67 minutes from planting trees or vegetable gardens, to helping at local animal shelters, children's homes, or hospices; helping out on Mandela Day can be as simple as donating clothes or books to a local charity shop or donating blood. As Mandela Day falls in the South African winter, many use the day as an opportunity to spread warmth to those in need through soup kitchen initiatives or blanket drives where blankets, either bought or [handmade](#), are donated to those who need them most for South Africa's chilly nights.

Every year, on the 18th of July, citizens across South Africa (joined by South Africans and others in countries across the globe) put time aside to do something for someone else. These actions are inspired by the life and legacy of our first democratically elected president. But these actions are not limited to Mandela Day. Every day, ordinary South Africans provide meals, services, financial assistance, and other forms of help to those who need a helping hand. The extent to which South Africans are willing to help and support their compatriots in need of a helping hand has been demonstrated in the first two decades of the country's democracy and more so in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The social and economic blows dealt by the pandemic have spurred South Africans to step up to the plate and offer assistance in many different ways. When parts of the country were devastated by recent floods, South Africans came to one another's aid offering a place to stay or a warm meal to someone who needed it. In some ways, every day in South Africa has a little bit of Mandela Day action in it as someone, somewhere, is always willing to lend a hand.

The echoes of Mandela's life of service to his fellow citizens rings true across the country, most notably on his eponymous day. Acts of service are demonstrated by people of all ages, and from all walks of life demonstrating that everyone has the capacity to make a difference. A particular African proverb springs to mind in the context of our young democracy and our celebration of Madiba's life and legacy: "If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together". Despite our challenges and missteps along the way, South Africa has come a long way since Nelson Mandela took the helm as our President in 1994. It is true that, as a country, we still have a far way to go – but with his legacy in mind, and by living a little bit of Mandela Day every day, we are sure to reach our destination.

A Giant of Justice: Lessons from the Life of Nelson Mandela

By Jordan Mc Lean

Now, more than ever, Mandela Day calls on us to not only recognize the struggles of our fellow citizens but to help ease their burdens in our own small ways.

This is the ethos of Mandela Day; to bring people together through their compassion and show the world how individuals can make a lasting and positive impact on the lives around them.

In many ways Nelson Mandela's legacy has touched the trajectory of my own life. As a Born Free, myriad opportunities are open to me through the freedoms Mandela secured after his release from prison in 1990. He grasped the essential understanding that peace and *not* retribution should be the goal of the post-Apartheid era and worked tirelessly to steer the country to free and fair elections and the dawn of true democracy.

His example has influenced the younger generation's understanding of justice and enabled us to act on injustice when it becomes clear to us. Confronted as we are with the injustices of inequality, it is easy to forget that when Mandela became active in the fight against apartheid, he was twenty-four years old.

The student-led #FeesMustFall movement in 2016 – which reached its zenith on the University of the Witwatersrand campus where he began his legal career – saw young people, many as young or younger than Mandela was when he first joined the African National Congress, band together and stand for equitable access to higher education.

After devoting his life to the service of *all* of the people in South Africa, it is a testament to Mandela's selflessness and humility that he had asked us not to celebrate his life with gifts and honors but to sacrifice a small amount of our own time – 67 minutes – to the betterment of the lives around us.

Born Frees have much to learn from the figure of Nelson Mandela at a time when South Africa is at an important juncture in her young democracy. Youth unemployment and dissatisfaction with the current government have created significant cracks in the rainbow nation so many fought hard for at Mandela's side. His steadfast belief in the principles of equality, unity and justice and his commitment to realizing true freedom for all serve as lessons for what just one person can do.

Mandela's life is not only a lesson for Born Frees in leadership and justice, but his humble retirement from office after only one term is an example for current leadership as well on how to use power effectively while still recognizing the capabilities of younger generations to accept such a great responsibility as that of public office.

He humbly ended his single term as President having achieved the drafting and adoption of the most progressive constitution in the world which enshrined inclusive civil and socio-economic rights for all South Africans.

He possessed a deep understanding of the duality of leadership, knowing how to drive just social change and when to hand over that responsibility to the next generation.

There is much for the youth to learn from Mandela's life and from the genuine and exemplary decent human being he was.

As a young student and freedom fighter, his unwavering commitment to justice and equality have and should continue to permeate the actions we take as we enjoy the freedoms he helped to extend to the whole country.

And as a leader, he was resolute in making a credible start on the promises of the liberation. These promises have not yet been met but what is clear is that Born Frees can carry on the legacy of Mandela – and most importantly, we are up to the challenge.

Whether it is 67 minutes or a lifetime of dedication, the life of the 'giant of justice', as former UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon named him, demonstrates that through compassion, any change is possible.

Nelson Mandela's legacy in South Africa today: the responsibility of the 'born-free' generation

Laura Rubidge

Nelson Mandela's legacy in current South Africa emerges from his almost inimitable dedication to improving the lives of *all* South Africans. Although this aspiration remains largely unfulfilled, his inspiration still resonates with many South Africans.

Democratic South Africa has achieved undeniable gains such as the right to vote, to basic education and primary health care; the introduction of an extensive social security system that has lifted many people out of poverty; the provision of affordable housing and basic services to millions. However, it is common knowledge that true prosperity remains lost in the quagmire of social, economic, and political challenges confronting South Africa today.

The [national unemployment rate](#) stands at 34,5%. South Africa remains the [most unequal country](#) in the world, with 10% of the population owning more than 80% of the wealth. South Africans are also struggling with the rising cost of living and rolling blackouts in the form of 'load-shedding'.

Furthermore, the country is still reeling from the capture of the state during the Jacob Zuma presidency, which is estimated to have cost the country well over [R50 billion](#). State capture is a significant stain on the legacy of Mandela who, in his inaugural speech in 1994, pronounced that "never, never and never again". Although Mandela was referring to the oppression of one by another, not corruption, inherent in his declaration was an accountable government that serves all South Africans. This promise was declared in our constitution which ensures that the law protects *all our people* against abuse of power, against the indignity of discrimination and against the oppression of one citizen by another. Thus, it is to the great pain of South Africans that 28 years later, this pledge had to be reiterated by our current President, asserting that state capture should "never be allowed to happen again".

In 2021, [public trust in institutions and representatives](#) reached a new low. Many 'born-free' youths have become despondent, feeling betrayed that the promises of Mandela have not been kept. However, it was always going to be difficult to overcome the injustices and inequalities wrought by apartheid within one generation. Rather Mandela's legacy lies in the acknowledgement that this is what the South African people deserve and should aspire to.

In 2008, [Nelson Mandela](#) noted that "It is now in the hands of your generations to help rid the world of such suffering".

As we celebrate the living legacy of the great eponym of Mandela Day, the youth of South Africa ought to reflect on our responsibility to honour his legacy and further his aspiration for a better South Africa for all. We should remember that with rights come responsibilities.

In South Africa's last election, out of the nearly 1.8 million 18-19 year-olds who were eligible to vote, [only 10% registered](#). As the 'born-free' generation, we need to alter this trend in 2024 by exercising our right to vote.

Concerningly, it has been reported that [67% of South Africans](#) would be willing to give up elections if a non-elected government could provide security, housing, and jobs. It was Nelson Mandela in 1992 that said, "without democracy, there cannot be peace". It is beyond doubt that Mandela's vision and promise of a peaceful, free, and prosperous South Africa remains distant. Nonetheless, on this Mandela Day, South Africans should reflect on their constitutional right and responsibility, to rechart South Africa's course towards prosperity through democratic elections. This right remains a significant legacy of Mandela and ought not to be taken for granted.

About the authors

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