

Environment and sustainability

15 October 2011

In late November some 30 000 people from around the world will descend on Durban for the Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP 17) on the environment and sustainability.

For centuries we have plundered our planet, decimated countless species and habitats and wrought huge environmental damage. Quite rightly, there is now deep concern about how we interact with nature. Finally, if belatedly, we are becoming acutely aware that our natural environment is hugely important to our quality of life and that of future generations.

Given the scientific evidence, it is vital that we – you and I as individuals, you as Oakdene, we as Rhodes - begin to mitigate our damage of the atmosphere, land, forests, rivers, lake and seas; that we begin to innovate adaptive strategies in response to changes that are occurring because of climate change, and that we navigate new pathways and develop new models to address the needs of human subsistence.

There is no other way – not if we wish to leave a world that our children, grandchildren and their children can inhabit without threats of great calamities that will be a consequence of our reckless degradation of our natural environment.

At the same time it must be hoped that our growing concern with our abuse and damage of our natural world - the environmental injustice that we perpetrate - will also extend to our continued unconscionable treatment of our fellow humans.

Indeed, the violence that we do to nature is often connected to the violence we do to fellow humans; frequently the rationales are the same and the key actors are the same.

Having failed, to win the rugby world cup we have nonetheless triumphed in the dubious honour of now being the most unequal society on earth.

Already a perversely unequal society in 1994, during the past seventeen years income inequality has increased in general and within so-called 'racial' groups.

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994. Conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994.

The poorest 20% earn 1.7% of income; the richest 20% take home 72.5%. 43% of our fellow citizens eke out an existence on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year – that is R8.22 a day.

If it were not for state social grants, death through hunger and starvation would join HIV-AIDS as a leading cause of mortality in South Africa.

The struggle for environmental sustainability and the struggle for people to lead rich, decent, productive, free and rewarding lives - environmental justice and social justice is *indivisible* - two sides of the same coin.

On the final page of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Tatamkulu Nelson Mandela writes:

The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed
For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others
The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

He adds: 'I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended'.

'The truth is that' in 2011

- We are yet to 'live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others,' and is also respectful of our natural environment
- The extent of 'our devotion to freedom', including the freedom of all from want and to a life of dignity, and in a way that does not destroy the planet remains to be seen
- The idea that 'with freedom comes responsibilities' to advance the common social good and protect the environment seems to be lost on too many in positions of economic and political power.

Indeed, the 'long walk' to full citizenship rights for all in just, humane, non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic societies 'is not yet ended.' 'We dare not linger' too long in in our walk to freedom for all and for environmental sustainability for there will be grave costs if we do.