

Indigenoveg Policy Dialogue : workshop welcome

**Rhodes University
Eden Grove Blue
Wednesday, 23 January 2008**

The Workshop Chairperson, participants, conference organisers, colleagues from universities, government and other institutions, ladies and gentlemen – Molweni, good morning.

On behalf of the academics, students and support staff of Rhodes University, a very warm welcome to Rhodes University, to iRhini/Grahamstown, to the Makana District, and the Eastern Cape; and to our international colleagues and visitors, an especially warm welcome also to South Africa.

I trust that you will enjoy a stimulating and productive four days and that you will emerge with insights and ideas that will penetrate and push further the barriers to discovery, knowledge and understanding and the formulation and adoption of appropriate policies in the areas of the promotion of African indigenous vegetables and peri-urban agriculture in African cities.

For transport, logistic and costs reasons, compared to universities in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban, Rhodes scholars have to work especially hard to attract and host national and especially international conferences, workshops and seminars. That we do so with considerable success is, I believe, testimony to the quality of our scholars, recognition of their scholarship nationally and internationally, and also acknowledgement that Rhodes is one of our premier research and development universities. Certainly, it enjoys the best research output of all South African universities per academic. I am especially confident of our standing in the field of Environmental Science, most ably led by Prof Charlie Shackleton.

I am pleased that a workshop of this nature is being hosted by Rhodes University, and that we are an integral part of scholarly and wider co-operation to advance fundamental scientific research and to also contribute to policy-making to address the social and economic development challenges of South Africa and the African continent.

We host many conferences here, mostly in the conventional sense of the word. But this *IndigenoVeg* meeting stands out in a number of respects, all of which make it especially pleasing that it is here at Rhodes University:

- First, it is focused on African problems, African scholarly endeavour and African solutions – the vast majority of you here for this meeting are from Africa.
- Second, it is a result of co-operation and partnerships, between institutions in Africa, as well as between Africa and Europe. No single institution or country can go it alone. Partnerships are vital to address the challenges of modern societies under globalisation.
- Third, its emphasis is on issues that underpin several dimensions of sustainable development of Africa, including nutrition, agriculture, income generation and rational and effective urban planning.
- Fourth, I wish to congratulate the organisers for their creativity and thinking that has gone into devising a format that will see the translation of the standard scientific findings usually reported at conferences into relevant policy lessons and propositions. So many scientists and scientific meetings fail in this regard, with the result that science from Africa does not realise its true potential in addressing the development challenges of our continent. It is also heartfelt to see this meeting trying to communicate the science to wider audiences. In this regard this workshop could swerve as an inspirational model for other conferences on African issues and in Africa.
- Finally, this workshop clearly is not just a talk shop, but is focused on facilitating positive change and development through communication and direct contact with policy makers. I am thrilled as Rhodes has probably never hosted so many officials from the African continent at a single meeting.

In as much as it is important for scholars to meet among themselves, it is also vital that there be spaces that bring together academics, researchers from other civil society institutions and government and state officials.

For the past 17 years I have been involved in higher education policy research and policy development and for 7 years served as the head of the higher education advisory body to two Ministers of Education. It is my experience that the specific constituencies of academics, state and government, and civil society are not always easy to bring together, and especially to hold together.

This is not because there is not recognition among all such constituencies of the need to work together and to build mutually respectful, beneficial, reciprocal relations to address our common concerns and challenges. The reality, however, is that there are sometimes (but perhaps here I am being too diplomatic and I should say that there are often) different and divergent interests, and varying immediate concerns; and therefore, understandably, differences emerge around how issues are theorised and conceptualised, which issues are prioritised, the discourses and language through which they are discussed, and how approaches, strategies and the like are formulated.

In my view this is an unavoidable element of the coming together of such different social actors and a not unhealthy aspect of these different actors finding each other and learning to think, debate and labour together. Whatever difficulties and tensions may arise, the important thing is to appreciate the value of such coming together, to be sensitive and respectful of different views and to recognise that we need each other if we are to address the concerns, problems and challenges that are our common lot.

To the extent that you successfully bring and hold together all these important social actors, my congratulations to you on this endeavour and what will be a significant achievement.

Universities and scientific disciplines and fields must, beyond communicating with a peer scientific community, also engage around science and knowledge with other social actors who have an interest in the results of intellectual labour.

Communicating beyond purely scholars and a scientific community ensures that our universities, as part of their knowledge production and dissemination roles, engage actively with the public and act as catalyst of public debate and education. We are, after all, as universities, meant to advance the public and social good and contribute to the advancement of social equity, social practice, development and democracy.

I am also pleased that there are students at this conference. The reproduction of a new generation of scholars and scientists, who also more extensively reflect the demographics of our country, is an urgent and pressing challenge. Conferences such as this are important mechanisms for the induction of new and emerging scholars into scientific networks and for attracting them to an academic career and public service.

I would love to participate further in your meeting, even if it is just to learn exactly what is an African Indigenous Vegetable. Indeed, perhaps it is something the university administration should put on the daily menu for our approximately 3 000 residence students. Perhaps the organisers should write a motivation in that respect!

I would have loved to also attend the session tomorrow on the policy process. For many years I had taught a postgraduate course on critical policy sociology. I wish to suggest that we should not assume that there is a shared understanding of the concept and term 'policy'. The concept policy is embedded in different problematiques and can have very many different meanings.

I like the fact that in many languages no distinction is made between the terms 'policy' and politics, alerting us to avoid too over rationalistic conceptions of policy and policy-making and to also appreciate that ultimately policies and policy making are contestations and struggles over social relations and the kind of society we wish to create.

I am certain that you also appreciate that policy processes can span a continuum that ranges from being essentially technocratic to democratic in essence. The structure of this workshop and the range of actors that have been gathered here make clear that you are keen to foster democratic policy-making processes.

In closing, I wish you a very stimulating and productive conference, an enjoyable stay at Rhodes and in iRhini/Grahamstown, and I am confident that you will find us informative, helpful, friendly and hospitable hosts. Please do call upon your Rhodes colleagues and conference staff for any information or assistance during your stay.