

WELCOME TO ISER 2011 SUMMER SCHOOL

**Rhodes University
Stephen Bantu Biko Building**

12 September 2011

The Director of the Institute of Social and Economic Research, Prof. Robbie van Niekerk, organisers, speakers, participants, molweni, good morning.

Welcome to Rhodes University, to iRhini/Grahamstown, to the Makana District, and the Eastern Cape.

On this 12th day of September, and on the 33rd anniversary of the murder in prison of Stephen Bantu Biko, it is a pleasure to also welcome you to the Stephen Bantu Biko Building.

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 testimony to the quality of our scholars, and recognition of their scholarship nationally and internationally. In the case of this Summer School (in spring) it is also acknowledgement that at Rhodes there are outstanding scholars that seek to engage seriously with the challenge of advancing social transformation and human and social rights through engaged and committed yet critical scholarship.

I trust that you will enjoy a stimulating and productive four days and that you will emerge with insights and ideas that can further enhance knowledge and understanding in the areas of *Governance, Social Policy & Inequality* and their challenges at the *Local Government* level.

It is to be hoped that such understanding will be deployed to erode the social structures and conditions that constitute barriers to transformation in these spheres at the local level as the lack of transformation has serious and debilitating implications for the poor and marginalised of our society.

Bidding to win the rugby world cup again, there is one world cup that we have already won: the dubious honour of 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 old divides of 'race', class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Impunity and morbid ills such as rape and abuse of children destroy innumerable lives and wreak havoc in our country.

Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, crass materialism, corruption, tenderpreneurship, and unbridled accumulation, often of the most primitive kinds, run rampant.

What does citizenship mean for those who are poor, unemployed, struggle to survive or live in fear of rape, other violence and crime?

For sure, and to be fair, there have been many social gains and many positive developments since 1994. Our institutions of democracy and justice and our media remain robust and vibrant. There continue to be strong voices defending and promoting constitutional values and ideals and a just and humane society.

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 may be citizens, but our citizenship remains to be fully developed. We are yet to 'live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others'
- 'Our devotion to freedom' of all from want and to a life of dignity remains to be seen, as does 'our devotion' to an inclusive citizenship
- The idea that 'with freedom comes responsibilities' to advance the common social good seems to be lost on too many in positions of power

- Indeed, the 'long walk' to full citizenship rights for all in a just, non-racial non-sexist, and democratic society 'is not yet ended.'

'We dare not linger' too long in in our walk to freedom for all, for there will be grave costs if we do so.

To return to Biko: Any meaningful social justice agenda cannot ignore our contemporary conditions, and must imaginatively and creatively develop strategies to address, erode and transform these conditions.

Here Biko and the early Black Consciousness movement SASO provide pointers: the *right way* is to tackle our challenges boldly and fearlessly, and with the aplomb, energy and uncompromising intellectual, cultural and organisational endeavour of the BC generation.

Like them, we must push 'to the limit the bounds of possibility' in the pursuit of social equity, justice, human rights, democracy and development.

I am extremely pleased that that the Summer School is sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. This is an opportunity to keep alive the memory of an outstanding revolutionary who has influenced and inspired many critical scholars and activists around the world.

Those who are committed, to a more vigorous assertion of the values of human dignity, of freedoms, human rights and equality, and inclusive culture can draw inspiration from Rosa Luxemburg.

In the current conjuncture of the epoch of globalisation and the hegemony of neo-liberalism, there can be a temptation to give up on the idea of a more just and humane society, to succumb to the idea that there is no alternative to the dominant paradigm. Rosa Luxemburg, however, provides sage strategic guidance.

A century ago she posed the important question: Can we 'be against reforms? Can we counterpose the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reform' (1970:8).

Her answer was an unambiguous 'Certainly not'; that 'the daily struggle for reforms...within the framework of the existing social order' is a means of working towards the 'final goal'. 'Between social reforms and (transformation) there exists an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is the means; social (transformation) its aim' (Luxemburg, 1970: 8).

This cooperation with the Foundation is vital in a context in which neo-liberalism hold powerful sway on the thinking, policies and practices of governments and institutions to the detriment of an agenda of social justice and social transformation.

Historically, some of universities were sites of critical scholarship on crucial aspects of South African society, pioneers of a disinterested, critical and rigorous, yet socially committed scholarship that connected with mass organisations, workers and the rural poor. This work also found expression in popular publications.

Today, when we are a constitutional democracy with an admirable Bill of Rights, there is a dearth of critical and engaged scholarship.

If we are to protect, extend and deepen our freedoms, rights and democracy, and ensure, we need a scholarship that is engaged and critical.

Such a scholarship, even where it identifies with the social goals of social actors, - the government, state, political parties or social movements – must freely interrogates the thinking, priorities and policies of all these actors.

The goals of our society and the means to their achievement are never settled. It is the task of critical scholarship to investigate the theoretical foundations, and the empirical analyses that define the direction our country and key social actors have taken.

This work could well show that today's conventional wisdoms (and their associated policies) rest on shaky foundations, with possibly profound social consequences. As Antonio Gramsci insisted, research 'must produce knowledge for politics, without cutting itself off from the objective and scientific investigation of the world'.

I very much hope that there will be a durable relationship with the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation that gives impetus to the critical scholarship that is vital for social justice and the deepening of democracy in South Africa and elsewhere.

In closing, I wish you a very stimulating and productive Summer School, an enjoyable stay at Rhodes and in iRhini/Grahamstown, and I am confident that you will find us stimulating and hospitable hosts.