

From Subject to Citizen: How far have we come in Africa?

Opening Address at the Highway Africa Conference MTN Dinner

Dr Saleem Badat

Vice-Chancellor, Rhodes University

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Welcome on behalf of Rhodes University to the 15th edition of Highway Africa, a critical African platform of African journalists and media that pleasingly continues to grow in leaps and bounds year on year.

As we prepare for discussions in coming days and on the eve of the Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP 17) on the environment and sustainability, I wish to use this dinner hosted by MTN to reflect on the issue of citizenship and subjecthood, and how far have we have progressed in this regard in Africa.

To begin with, reflection on how far we have progressed in Africa requires us to clarify our notions of 'subject' and 'citizen' and subjecthood and citizenship.

First, as with notions such as democracy and development, there are 'thick' and 'thin', notions of citizenship – notions that reduce citizenship to the formal, legal and primarily political dimensions versus those that also encompass wider issues of economic and social rights and freedoms.

Second, the question of movement from subject to citizen has to be sensitive to the nature of our society: 'how far we have come' cannot be broached only at the level of the population in general.

It has to also be considered in relation to the social class, race and gender dimensions of our society, the divides of urban and rural, employed and unemployed, and those who wield authority and power within our society and those who are at a distance from such power.

Third, we may have to grant that between the poles of 'subject' and 'citizen' there could be a range of conditions such as semi-subjecthood and semi-citizenship and the like.

Finally, we have to also accept that historical development is seldom the relentless triumphant march on *all* fronts of citizenship over subjecthood. Some actions expand citizen rights in certain areas, while others can create subjecthood in other domains.

So clarity on the terms 'subject' and 'citizen' is vitally important for discussion on how far we have progressed in Africa.

In all parts of Africa, national liberation and independence was, politically, a revolutionary breakthrough.

From being oppressive, racially privileged and authoritarian societies, countries in Africa became democracies and for the first time almost all inhabitants became citizens.

As societies, as social groups and individuals, the hitherto oppressed and excluded majorities made a significant transition and advance from being 'subjects' to becoming 'citizens'.

Still, a number of post-colonial and current realities compromise the promise of a substantive citizenship that independence and freedom held out.

Indeed, they condemn many people in African societies, women and men, young and not so young to conditions that are more associated with being subjects and subjecthood.

For one, almost all African countries continue to be highly unequal societies, with South Africa leading the way in today being the most unequal society on earth.

In many countries, since independence from colonial masters income and other inequalities have increased. The percentage of income of the poorest of our countries tends to be a tiny fraction of the income that the economic and often political elites of our countries take home.

Take South Africa: today the poorest 20% take home 1.7% - down from 2.0% in 1994. Conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% in South Africa is 72.5% - an increase of 0.5% since the transition to democracy!

Millions of our fellow African citizens live on daily incomes of less than \$2 a day.

The divides of class, gender, 'race' and geography are still very evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our societies. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, crass materialism, elite conspicuous consumption and unbridled accumulation run rampant.

Various morbid ills destroy innumerable lives and wreak havoc in our countries. What, then, does citizenship mean for those in our societies who are poor, unemployed, and struggle to survive?

Across the continent, education systems continue to compromise the provision of high quality education to children and youth and thwart the realization of their talents and potential. It is the youth of our societies that bear the crushing burden and distress of unemployment – in this context, and in the midst of continuing recession following the economic crash of 2008, the North African spring is hardly surprising.

Yet education is strongly connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, to the cultivation of a humane society, and the defence, assertion and pursuit of citizen and human rights and active democratic participation.

Our education systems by and large fail dismally to develop the critical capacities that are essential for functioning as democratic citizens, not to mention the basic literacies that citizens require to function effectively in a complex and changing knowledge and informational society.

What are the consequences of the educational failures of our education and what does this mean for the kind and quality of citizenship that can be exercised by those that have been failed by our education systems?

Of course, it must also be asked whether our universities are contributing to forging critical and democratic citizenship through their purposes of producing knowledge, learning-teaching and community engagement.

Our responsibility is to produce graduates who are not only capable professionals, but also intellectuals and critical citizens; graduates who dare to speak truth to power, and to critique states that are anti-developmental and parasitic on society.

Yet, the trend is to approach higher education largely in terms of promoting economic growth and preparing students as skilled workers. Is there adequate engagement by African universities to support the intellectual and cultural development of a critical and active citizenry and civil society?

Here, note the misguided and appalling recent comment of the former Governor of the South African Reserve Bank who bemoaned the production of Humanities graduates by our universities.

Today the competition for and concentration on economic advantage means that certain kinds of knowledge and research, especially that generated by the natural, medical and business sciences and engineering are privileged. The humanities and social sciences are the objects of either benign tolerance, or neglect or outright hostility.

However, as the great African scholar Thandika Mkandawire argues, 'attempts to improve Africa's prospects by focusing on scientific advances and the benefits accruing from them have all too often overlooked the important perspectives which the humanities and social sciences afford.'ⁱ

He is absolutely correct that 'it is vital that the social sciences and humanities are granted their rightful place...if Africa's development challenges are to be fully and properly addressed.'

But do not our shortcomings have their roots in our colonial pasts? Perhaps!

In some quarters it is argued that democracy and meaningful citizenship is impossible without particular levels of economic development. This suggests that we have to wait for economic development to ensure democracy and meaningful citizenship. This is a dangerous idea and must be strongly refuted.

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

- In much of Africa we may be citizens, but our citizenship is inadequately developed and we are yet to 'live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others'.
- 'Our devotion' in practice to a thick idea of citizenship, the fostering of which the media and the new information and communication technologies have important roles to play – as we have seen in North Africa - is debatable and has to continue to be struggled for
- The idea that 'with freedom (and citizenship) comes responsibilities' has all too quickly been forgotten or has to still be fully grasped in far too many quarters in Africa.

We are becoming acutely aware that our natural environment is in myriad ways hugely important to our quality of life and also the quality of life that future generations can expect to have.

Understandably, we are deeply concerned about the nature of the interaction between ourselves and nature and about the multiple negative impacts of humans on our natural environment.

It must be hoped that our concerns extend to not only our abuse and damage of our natural world but also that of our fellow humans.

For the violence that we do to nature is not unconnected to the violence we do to fellow humans; frequently the rationales are the same and the key actors are the same.

Our challenge is four-fold how do we pursue *economic development*, with *social equity*, and do so in a way that is *environmentally sustainable* and also recognises the need to extend, deepen and consolidate *democracy* in our societies? And crucially, how do we do all of this simultaneously and not consecutively or sequentially?

For many good social reasons it is not an option to postpone one or other elements of this four-fold development challenge or to tackle them in sequence. They have to be confronted, by and large, *simultaneously*.

There is no other way – not if we wish to be stable, equitable and just societies and leave a world that future generations can inhabit without the threats of great calamities that we seem to be so selfishly and recklessly keen to bring upon ourselves and bestow upon our children, grandchildren and their children.

In closing, as we discuss the environment and sustainability in coming days we may want to hold fast to the idea that the right of people to lead rich, decent, productive, free and rewarding lives and the care of the natural environment that sustains us - social justice and environmental justice - is *indivisible*, and that environmental justice and social justice are two sides of the same coin.

ⁱ Mkandawire, T. (2009) 'Preface' in *The British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (2009) The Nairobi Report: Frameworks for Africa-UK Research Collaboration in the Social Sciences and Humanities*. London: The British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth Universities, page vii