

Keynote Address to the Centre for Human Rights Seminar held at the University of Pretoria, 16 March 2015

By Tshwane EM K. Ramokgopa

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Esteemed Representatives of DAAD

Honourable officials from the German Government

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and gentlemen

It gives us great pleasure to have the distinct privilege of playing a role in your seminar on the occasion of hosting your partners in the form of representatives from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and a delegation of officials from the German government.

On behalf of the people we represent, the citizens of the Metropolitan City of Tshwane, we wish to take this opportunity to welcome you in all your eminence to the capital city of the Republic of South Africa.

We are interminably indebted to the leadership of the University of Pretoria (UP) and the Centre for Human Rights for making it possible for us to cement ties with the knowledge communities within the city frontiers.

Our city occupies the Northern Development Corridor that has been designated by the Gauteng Provincial government as the hub of research & development; innovation and the knowledge-based economy.

This designation follows on, and is an endorsement of the vision spelt out in our Tshwane Vision 2055 Statement in which we seek to position the city as the fountainhead of excellence anchored in the knowledge economy.

We have over the years undertaken various initiatives to leverage the enormous amount of human capital located in numerous institutions of higher learning and various research institutes resident within the city.

For that reason, our presence here today is congruent with both our goal of delivering on the fundamental aspirations of the people of our city, province, country and the continent as a whole.

It is in that context and in that sense that we are grateful to the activities of the Centre for Human Rights, the university and all its strategic partners.

The African Union, through its Constitutive Act and various interventions such as the NEPAD and Peer Review Mechanism, is very clear that the cultivation of a democratic way of life and the nurturing of a human rights culture are indispensable for the renewal and development of the continent.

Your Master's degree programme on human rights and democratisation is extremely relevant to the governance imperatives identified as being conditional for the renewal and development of the African continent by NEPAD.

The degree programme is a living testament of the centre's awareness of and responsiveness to the challenges facing the people of our continent.

The fact that you have not only extended access to candidates from the rest of the continent; but also engaged 13 universities from the sub-regions of the continent to take part in the conception and execution of the initiative goes a long way in cementing its developmental credentials.

For that reason it is only befitting that we heartily congratulate the leadership of the centre, the university and its strategic partners for thoughtfully positioning yourselves to contribute towards the ideals of Africa's renewal and development.

Programme director,

I have been requested to deliver this address and with a dexterous degree of skill and subtlety enjoined to do so within the context of two possible themes:

The one was to talk about the contribution of science and technology to the realisation of human rights.

The other was the need for greater collaboration between institutions in Africa and Europe for furtherance of human rights.

From a distance I sensed that the organisers must have encountered difficulties in assigning a specific theme to me; and somehow decided to transpose that difficulty to me.

I then thought of making your problem even more complicated by disregarding all those instructions safe for reference here and there on key issues of science, human rights and collaboration.

I hope to somehow respond to your request by way of general allusions on what I consider to be cardinal issues surrounding the imperatives of democracy and human rights in Africa.

For those of your audience inclined to concrete specifics will bear with me in advance as my rendering will predominantly inhabit the region of generality for what should hopefully pass as judicious and sensible reasons.

Programme director

In what follows I wish to share general remarks on the necessity and desirability of human rights; and on that basis say a few things about the place of science and collaboration in pursuit of that imperative.

By human rights we have come to understand a set of entitlements and duties aimed at cultivating a particular social and political order defined by fairness, equality and justice.

This kind of order doesn't occur as part of natural history, as an outcome of the immutable laws of nature, it has to be cultivated and nurtured.

Hence in most if not all democratic dispensations, such duties and entitlements are codified in the rules and regulations governing co-existence in society.

In the case of South African society, fundamental human rights have been codified in the Bill of Rights and rightfully buttressed by stringent measures to cushion them from popular pressure.

In the words of the American theologian, political theorist and essayist Reinhold Niebuhr:

'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary'.

The codification of such entitlements and duties is thus not only meant to guide good behaviour, but also to discourage what is not in the collective interests of society.

Programme director

Jurisprudential scholarship demarcates human rights into three categories: political rights; socio-economic rights; and cultural rights.

These also came to be known as the first, second and third generation rights.

The idea is that the enjoyment of these rights and entitlements goes a long way in defining the nature and quality of a democratic way of life.

Some democracies put premium on one set of rights (say political freedoms) over others (say socio-economic rights) so that for as long as people are free to choose political representatives, it doesn't matter much what their state of material existence is.

Hence over time political scientists and political theorists wrestled with a binary discourse on formal vs substantive or real democracy; with the latter emphasising the importance of socio-economic and cultural rights as crucial aspects of democracy.

In the South African context, the Constitution makes it clear that the responsibility of a democratic government is to secure an expanding floor of political, socio-economic and political rights.

From the point of view of South African polity, at least as defined by the Constitution, the three sets of rights are viewed as being indivisible and equally important to the success of democracy.

In other words, the realisation of these rights is not only crucial for the success of democracy; but also a basic condition for its existence.

The democratic ideal imposes an imperative on governments to view these rights as inextricable linked to one another so that failure to access one right is a guarantee for failure to extend another.

There will be no point in insisting on accountable, responsive and answerable if citizens are not empowered to monitor the practical observance of such standards.

In this context, what Cornell West, defines as a democratic political culture, with reference to "a culture of criticism, dialogue, discussion, debate, contestation, questioning, accountability, answerability and responsibility" is central to the enterprise of democratisation.

Without thoroughgoing efforts to empower citizens, notions of freedom of speech, assembly and association remain empty shells.

Merely codifying freedom of speech without measures to enable citizens to effectively exercise their voice amounts to what the late Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake, called 'democratisation of disempowerment'.

Equally, without sustainable improvements in the material conditions of existence for citizens the notion of democracy remains an empty vessel.

The provision of such basic services and social infrastructure as housing, electricity, water, energy sources and roads is foundational to social, economic, intellectual and cultural development.

The absence of these conditions seriously compromises the quality of democratic life as the majority of people will be condemned to the vagaries of daily survival, leaving little room for meaningful political engagement and participation.

An adulterated form of democracy is clearly not what the pursuit of justice implies; and therefore, in order to freely participate in processes shaping their destiny, people must first secure their basic conditions of existence.

Throughout the world there is a degree of correlation between the levels of social and economic development and the quality of democratic participation by citizens. A prosperous society is almost always accompanied by a vibrant democratic political life.

There is a sort of dialectic in which social and economic development makes possible quality democratic life and yet the opposite also holds in that the quality of democracy is also critical for social and economic development.

In the context of developing societies like ours, it becomes crucial that the living standards of our people are significantly improved to kick-start this reciprocal process of cyclical developments.

Although there is a chicken and egg situation in terms of which comes first, material improvement or active political participation in governance; what is clear is that in the absence of the former participation easily descends into a scramble for resources.

On the other hand, an expanding and sustainable floor of socio-economic entitlements presupposes high and sustained rates of economic growth.

Programme director,

Historically, scientific knowledge and technological innovations have been at the forefront of humanity's ability to surmount raw nature into the service of human needs.

Throughout the history of human existence, technological innovations have been at the centre of the relationship between human beings and nature.

For human beings to survive and prosper, they must find ways to manipulate raw articles of nature to serve their needs.

The effectiveness and efficiency with which this manipulation of nature was undertaken marked not only different epochs in the evolution of humanity, but was also indispensable to human progress.

Technological innovation was at the centre of this progress. From the most elementary forms that constituted not more than an extension of a human hand to

the most sophisticated and complex modern, various technological platforms helped humanity to grow and transform the world.

From the Stone Age to the Iron Age to the modern industrial and information technology world; the history of human progress is inseparable from the history of technological innovations.

Technology has mediated the metabolism between human beings and nature in a way that principally accounts for the most achievements in human history.

It is in that context that we understand the place and role of technological innovations in the quest to serve and improve the lot of humanity.

Historically, therefore, various technological platforms have evolved to help human beings improve their ways of relating to nature to preserve and sustain the quality of human existence.

Today science and technology have literally dissolved spatial and temporal dimensions of the bygone eras and thus rendering prospects for the realisation of the totality of human rights entitlements even brighter.

It is also thanks to modern technological platforms that the centre can conceptualise and execute an extensive tuition programme spanning several countries in all the sub-regions of the continent.

In their own right, science and technology have no ideological or political orientation; they mainly depend on the use they are put to.

They can serve noble causes such as egalitarian, just and democratic societies; but they can also be deployed in the service of authoritarian and anti-democratic agendas.

What principally determines the role of science is the nature of a political dispensation as well as the intent and interests of those in positions of rulership.

In the context of endeavours to ossify and fortify a democratic way of life, it becomes critical that the practice of science itself is subjected to the same values and ethos.

In other words we need to demand of the enterprise of scientific inquiry to also become responsive, accountable and answerable to needs of society.

And this requires that science itself needs to expand the floor of participants in its core activities; not just a case of the majority of people brought in as consumers of scientific products; but also as producers of scientific knowledge.

In that way we would have secured the minimum conditions for making sure that science exist in the service of the majority and not just the elites.

Yet an imperative to have an inclusive and accountable scientific enterprise must be transparently insulated from populist impulses.

In so doing we will be heeding the cardinal message by Ben Goldacre in his famous book titled: *Bad Science*, when he says:

‘Science advances knowledge by continuously making itself an object of criticism, not by peddling commodifiable solutions’.

And he went on to explain that:

The fundamental reason why we do science is to prevent ourselves from being misled by our own experiences and prejudices.

In other words, without dispassionate criticism science stands little chance of transcending human limitations.

And without processes that pierce beyond levels of appearance to reveal concealed underlying patterns we are left with habitual notions of reality which at best constitute partial depictions of inner reality.

Programme director,

The basic point being made is that for science to serve the agenda of advancing human rights its needs to be democratised; and that such democratisation must guard against stripping science of its intrinsic nature.

It is here that collaborations between institutions not only in Africa and Europe, but also in other parts of the world become crucial.

Significantly, such collaborative efforts can only help advance the culture of human rights provided they are themselves also underpinned by the same in their world outlook.

Logically, we cannot make use of undemocratic means to cultivate and attain democratic ends!

For that reason, institutional collaborations are ideally better positioned to advance democracy and human rights if in their formative and operative processes they engender the very same principles and values they aim to build.

Irrespective of the nature and content of such collaborative relations, whether these be South-South or South-North relations; or based on capital injection; or even exchange of experiences and expertise; there are certain elementary fundamentals that all parties should equally embrace.

Crucially, the following are certainly be among those considerations that should loom large if human rights and democracy remain our ultimate goals:

Upper most in the list of considerations should be accountability, responsiveness and answerability between the collaborating partners.

Such collaborative initiatives also call for due sensitivity to the needs, interests and voices of their intended beneficiaries.

In addition to providing relief to a pressing situation, ideally, such relations should eschew the culture of dependence and instead make concerted efforts to engender the spirit of self-reliance.

I firmly presume that approached in this way collaborative efforts will be consistent with solidaristic and egalitarian values, which I deem obligatory for the successful cultivation of a human rights and democratic culture.

Programme director, distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen:

Those are some of my exploratory thoughts on the necessity of democracy and human rights and the possible place of science and collaborative efforts towards their realisation.

There is general consensus on the necessity and desirability of democracy and a culture of human rights; and yet between this unanimity and the actual realisation of these ideals lies an incredibly diverse set of challenges that must be surmounted.

To take up these challenges requires concerted efforts from all sectors of society – the knowledge community, faith community, the media, political formations and other players within civil society.

This is a campaign in which the forces of progress have to emerge triumphant as the margin of failure is almost zero.

Failure to consistently improve material conditions of existence of the lot of humanity does not only rank as a violation of human rights; most crucially such failure carries an ever present danger that our people will lose faith in democracy as a vehicle to deliver and just and equitable social order.

The implications of such a failure are transparently clear for all to see and yet too ghastly to contemplate.

It is in that light that we appreciated the thinking and efforts behind the initiatives undertaken by the centre, particularly the degree programme aimed at expanding the pool of cadres equipped with the knowledge and understanding of the imperatives of human rights and democracy on the African continent.

Once more, congratulations to the centre, the university and your strategic partner, DAAD for your invaluable contributions to the renewal and development of our continent.

We implore you to double your efforts, continue the good work and wish the name of your centre and all those associated with it go down in the annals of history as monument of human rights, justice, equality and egalitarianism.

We hope and pray that your graduates go on to cultivate finer traditions of human rights and ignite democratic impulses throughout the African continent and beyond.

Thank You for Listening!