



NELSON MANDELA
FOUNDATION

Living the legacy

South Africa is a country where even the very basic conditions of dignity are never realised by most. I recently attended an event hosted by the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) and Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII) on the question of “sufficiency”. The event was also part of the Mandela Initiative (a nationwide university-led endeavour in partnership with the NMF to research and engage with the various dimensions of poverty and inequality) – this event would also reflect on the topical issues of anti-Black racism, poor governance, and poverty in the South African context.

Central to this initiative, and the evening’s dialogue, is the question of how can poverty and inequality be overcome in South Africa. What became immediately clear to me during the dialogue was how the question of “sufficiency” not only spoke directly to these related themes of social injustice and poverty, but also how it offered a chance for a critical and discursive relook at the entire meaning of dignity and human rights in South Africa.

I would be less interested in the dialogue in itself (though it certainly offered many a critical insight into the socio-political climate of the country) than in its ability to creatively, in recognition of the question of Human rights in South Africa– to raise a few provocations that I perceived as being able to help embolden our discussions and understanding of what exactly it means to be human in South Africa. This seemed not only a question central to the NMF, but one which should be centralised by government, corporate, and general civil society in their respective engagements with the social issues of the country.

The recognition that anti-Black racism played and continues to play a role in the dehumanisation of Blacks in the country cannot be separated from the question of what it means to be human in South Africa. In fact, the very moment we start to theorise our responses to this is also the moment we begin to realise that, for most (especially poor) Black people in the country, the very question of humanity is an impossible one given the violent nature of their social and economic materialities, which function toward the erasure of any sense of humanity. There are many examples of this, but I shall here restrict myself to only two of these.

The fact that many years (23) into our “democratic dispensation” we can still have certain citizens deprived of a “decent” form of human dignity in terms of proper housing – as it the case with the oft repeated case of the people of Imizamo Yethu in Cape Town – speaks very obviously to the failure of

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not only our leadership(s), but also to the broader inefficacy of our racial, economic, and land policies in addressing this problem. Similarly, that in the aftermath of life-destroying xenophobic violence – a phenomenon which cannot be understood without the contexts of colonialism (and Apartheid) – a prominent DA leader would come out in a blatant support (nostalgia even) of this greatest tragedy of our recent history is as telling as it is further evidence for the stubborn survival of a logic and practice which continues to legitimate an anti-Black agenda.

These are not isolated incidents and not seeing them as being such would be helpful in our attempts toward the creation of more robust and practical solutions to the problems of racism, poor governance, and poverty in the country. Rather, as the recent dialogue on sufficiency had tried to demonstrate; there needs to be greater communication between different sectors of society around these questions as their resolution is being imagined. For instance, this is what the Mandela Initiative emphasises in its multidimensional philosophy and approach to the question of inequality and poverty. These problems cannot be engaged without a fundamental shift in strategy from monolithic codes to ones that are heterogeneous. In particular, business, the NGO sector, and even academia should all have central roles to play here in ensuring that the humanity of all citizens of this country is not only recognised but – in keeping with the spirit of our hard-worn democracy – also vigorously protected against a hostile anti-human practice. This too should be the case with the treatment of both those interpersonal and structural instances of racism, sexism, and general discrimination experienced by many people in this country.

The event, on sufficiency, was originally meant to be a dialogue on questions of “dignity” and human rights in South Africa. And while it certainly was this (an much more), it also served as a reminder that in a country like ours – where historical anti-Black racism intersects with other injustices like poverty and poor governance – the responsibility of finding solutions to these problems cannot be wholly offered to the government. Rather, recognising the unreliability of a singular response, it should be up to these other sectors (NGOs, business, academia, and others) to help provide direction around issues. In other words, if the questions of sufficiency and dignity are to be addressed in any meaningful way, it would have to be accepted that – while there irrefutably exists these enumerated injustices – the greater injustice by the South African community would be to allow the government absolute control over the lives and livelihoods of its citizenry. Where the government fails to ensure the safety of its own people, it is up to the people themselves to make sure that their lives are not only dignified, but that their human rights are protected too. This is

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neither an exclusively political instruction, nor a moral dictate – but rather, a practical imperative without which the continuance of our democracy cannot be guaranteed.

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