

# SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE: Locating restitution in the South African context

An inaugural Restitution Conference, the first of its kind, aimed at bringing to the fore the difficult but necessary discussion on restitution in South Africa. Parusha Naidoo reports.

‘The past few years, along with the events of recent months, have shown us that we are not the rainbow nation we once envisaged. Increasing protests, racism, inequality, poverty and political contention tell us that there is still much more to be done’ noted conference co-chairs Prof. Sharlene Swartz (HSRC), and Zinzi Mgolodela and Dr Lionel Louw (both from the Restitution Foundation) in their welcome letter to participants.

Under the conference theme of *Something for Everyone*, the HSRC, Restitution Foundation and the Castle of Good Hope, along with 12 partners, brought together 520 participants from over 46 institutions and organisations, practitioners, academics and ordinary South Africans from across different sectors.

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Taking place at the Castle of Good Hope, the conference coincided with the commemoration of its 350th year of existence, with its historical significance as a place of enslavement, oppression and dispossession. Acknowledging this symbolic importance, the Castle’s CEO, Calvyn Gilfellan, said that the conference provided a ‘momentous opportunity to re-imagine the Castle as a catalyst for restitution’.

The first day began with a Restitution Pilgrimage led by Azola Mkosana (Castle of Good Hope) and Rev. René August (The Warehouse). Sites were mapped out throughout the Castle, with each site recalling contentious aspects that shape the past and present: land, labour, law, faith and business. Participants were invited to reflect, discuss and read at each of the sites, enabling an understanding of how space is tied to historical meaning.

Prior to the conference, intergenerational dialogues on the role of restitution had been held at the Groote Kerk and St George’s Cathedral in Cape Town. The evening of the conference formed part of this series of dialogues, with a distinguished panel of South Africans: Nomonde Calata, whose husband, Fort Calata, was one of the Cradock Four murdered by apartheid security agents, and her son Lukhanyo Calata; Leon Wessels, a South African lawyer, politician and ‘verligte’ minister in the National Party government during the apartheid years, with his daughter Erika Wessels; and former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela and her daughter Wenzile Madonsela, a member of the EFF.

Panel members related their personal experiences and engaged with topics of redress and accountability. Speaking specifically about the role of education and the importance of access to learning, Adv. Thuli Madonsela and Wenzile Madonsela provided a lens to view the current climate of tertiary institutions. Concluding the first day of the conference, participants were invited to engage with the panel through discussion groups where they interrogated the insights provided and debated ideas on how restitution can be realised.

The second day began with a plenary on institutional responses to the past featuring: Zinzi Mgolodela, head of transformation at Woolworths, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba of the Anglican Church, Dr Max Price, vice-chancellor and principal of the University of Cape Town; and Professor Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, head of the Archie Mafeje Research Institute at UNISA. The session highlighted the work that has been done and remains to be done by universities, corporates and faith communities.

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With efforts of transformation in tertiary education and business particularly falling under scrutiny, the plenary session became an important learning opportunity for participants to make sense of the call for decolonisation across all areas of the education system and to understand the prevailing conditions in the private sector that continue to hinder access to opportunities and growth for black South Africans. A key response to these sessions included a plea to focus on the ways in which Khoisan communities have been dispossessed and ignored in debates about transformation.

Following this, concurrent paper sessions consisting of almost fifty presentations were held. Topics ranged from subject areas of identity, land, education, to theology, trauma and peace-building. While some sessions aimed to explore and discuss the underpinnings of

restitution, others attempted to make sense of what practical approaches towards restitution might look like or how to understand current attempts at restitution. In discussing practical models for restitution, Nicole Joshua from Common Change SA explained that ‘Restoration is an integral part of healing and transformation. Healing in our country should be emotional, psychological, economic and political’.

In the closing plenary of the conference, Drs Marje Jobson (Khulumani) and Deon Snyman (Restitution Foundation) presented the work of their respected organisations and reflected on what still needed to be done. Youth respondents were given the platform to reply to these reflections and voice their views on the failures, successes, blind spots and disappointments of restitution in South Africa.

The conference drew to a close with the recognition that much work lies ahead in creating deep-rooted changes. Despite this difficult reality, there was further acknowledgement that long-term commitment was necessary to fulfil the responsibility of restitution across generations, sectors and for all dispossessed groups.

During 2017 a proceedings book detailing the outcomes of the conference will be published and further topic specific seminars will be held. It is envisaged that two further conferences on restitution will be held in 2018 and 2020 to chart civil society progress and to focus on institutional responses to restitution.

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Reflection and discussion formed a central component of the inaugural conference on Restitution at the Castle of Good Hope.