

Delivering on the Constitution means effecting social justice

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Ubuntu-driven leadership is needed for South Africa to 'bounce forward' as a nation, according to Professor Thuli Madonsela, chair in social justice research at Stellenbosch University and the founder of the Thuma Foundation.



Delivering the keynote address on the first day of the Dialogue Business in Society Conference on 10 May, Madonsela said that the country has pivoted away from social justice, as promised by the Constitution, but returning to a sense of shared humanity can help us to 'realise the dream'.

Reflecting on the challenges we have faced over the past few years – the Covid-19 pandemic, food insecurity, around 70% youth unemployment – as well as the decade of state capture, Madonsela said we need to address the "grievances and exclusions from the common goods" that prompted the civil unrest in July 2021, and which threaten social stability. Disaffection has led to a situation in which "... our people are gaslit to fight against our fight against corruption," Madonsela said, adding that our failure to confront inequality and recognise fundamental human rights will further alienate communities from democratic processes.

"People only stay vested in a community when their own humanity is embraced and when togetherness works for all of us, not just some of us," she pointed out. "We have pivoted from social justice, which is a dimension of ubuntu, because at the core of social justice is justice."

Guardians of the Constitution

Madonsela, who served as South Africa's Public Protector from 2009 to 2016, started The Thuli Madonsela (Thuma) Foundation to develop leadership for democracy, development, and peace. The Thuma Foundation follows an Epic leadership model – ethical, purpose-driven, impact conscious and committed to serve.

Madonsela reflected on the values that underpin this leadership model: "What are the ethics linked to our shared humanity that form the guardrails for our way forward, so we don't unconsciously pivot away from where we want to go?" Madonsela asked. "The ethics in the Constitution have given us the values to govern how we're glued together in this shared space as human beings, namely equality, human dignity, democratic values that involve everyone, and philanthropy to help people live their lives."

Madonsela said that it was leadership anchored in shared humanity that kept her going when she came under attack during her tenure as Public Protector. "It started as a one-person crusade, but the cause would have died had it stayed that," she said, citing the proverb "if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."

How to implement social justice

Madonsela said that there are two strategies to adopt that will help to deliver social justice. "The starting point is for us to become guardians of the Constitution and some of the human rights instruments," she said. "We also need to focus on the sustainable development goals – not in isolation but together."

Referring to how development practitioners can address the issue of inequality, Madonsela warned against unintentionally exacerbating inequality by reinforcing attitudes and approaches that supported colonial domination. “Apartheid enforced attitudes about who knows and who doesn’t know – but skills have no colour,” she pointed out, adding that we need to develop impact consciousness.

In closing, Madonsela urged conference delegates to help deliver on the Constitution. “Let’s be the generation Madiba said we have the capacity to become,” she urged. “We are the leaders we’ve been waiting for and together we can lead the country out of our losing streak, to become the nation that Madiba and others thought we could become.”

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