



How can we celebrate Human Rights Day when young people's needs cannot be met?

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Introduction

The Sharpeville massacre will always be entrenched in the history of South Africa as a dark moment during the fight for liberation and equality. It also serves as a reminder of the price that has been paid for human rights and reminds us of how far we still have to go to ensure that everyone's human rights are protected and upheld.

The foundation of South African Human Rights

The Bill of Rights, which defines the scope of human rights in South Africa, is regarded as the cornerstone of our democracy (PSA 2022). It emphasises the principles on which our human rights are based and seeks to define and protect the 'rights of all people in our country in an enduring affirmation of the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom'. It also acknowledges the events of 21 March 1960 as a day that 'marked an affirmation by ordinary people, rising in unison to proclaim their rights' (PSA 2022).

Rather than being a desired feature, the enforcement of human rights is a compulsory feature of contemporary society. The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, for instance (UNGA 1948):

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal an inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.

It recognises respect for human rights as an important feature for society to attain and enforce. Moreover, it refers to ‘humanity, freedom, justice, and peace’ as the foundational principles for human rights (UNGA 1948).

Human rights have for the large part been attained in our country. South Africans are free to live freely as they please, making their own choices, and living without fear of persecution. The human rights violations that were institutionalised by the apartheid regime have been dismantled. However, there is a need to face some hard truths.

South Africa’s envisioned democracy

South Africa’s democratic dispensation was explained in the Freedom Charter. The preamble to the Freedom Charter states: ‘We, the people of South Africa declare for all our country and the world to know: that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people’ (SAHO 2022).

The Freedom Charter documented ten fundamental resolutions to be achieved for this envisaged democratic dispensation (SAHO 2022). Those principles are a direct reflection of what the fathers of our democracy wanted, and directly reflect what they perceived as important principles relating to human rights.

Here I will briefly digress to look at one particular resolution that stands out in the current context, which is the call for ‘the land to be shared among those who work it’. This resolution called for the ownership of land to be returned to its rightful owners. Admittedly, fair strides have been made towards creating a socially equal society, but what is to be done about the land question? Can the job be considered done even though this resolution has not been successfully implemented? The answer has become important more recently.

Another resolution that requires attention is the call for all South Africans to share in the wealth of the country. Debates on who should own industries aside, can it be assumed that this call has been heeded while so many people are still unemployed? Youth unemployment for example, has reached an alarming 34.9%, and constitutes a societal crisis (Sehloho 2021).

Youth unemployment remains a crisis

Two out of every three people under the age of 35 is unemployed (Naidoo 2021). This has resulted in a serious societal crisis. According to Naidoo (2021), the youth are the future workforce, voters and politicians who will determine the future of our democracy. They are also the future customers on whom the success of businesses will depend. He, therefore, asks: 'If they cannot find employment or hope for themselves and their families, what does that foreshadow for the country's future?'

In *The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway (1926) depicts a crisis as something that happens 'gradually, then suddenly', which warns that youth unemployment requires urgent attention. As the youth increasingly struggle to find employment, South Africa's monetary power will be rapidly diminished. There will be less money to go around, which will make it extremely difficult for South African businesses to thrive. Consequently, fewer jobs will be available and even more people will be thrown into poverty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not made it easier to solve our problems. Despite the fact that almost two million people have already lost their jobs as a result of the economic carnage caused by the pandemic, the authorities have failed to adequately address this crisis (Naidoo 2021). Since the #FeesMustFall campaign, large strides have been made and funding for higher education has become more accessible. Government now funds one million students, which means that one million people are preparing to enter a workforce that is unable to accommodate them all as South Africa's current economic structure is not equipped to handle so many graduates (Nzimande 2021).

As Naidoo (2021) notes, discrepancies exist in South Africa's supply of, and demand for skills. While there is a high supply of skills, the demand for those skills is faltering, which results in a challenge that will be rather difficult to solve. There is a need to critique the existing economic structure, and this process must lead to the creation of an economic structure that is able to meet the growing supply of skills that will be offered by graduates.

This process must be led by the youth, who must be prepared to cope with the society they will inherit. Youth unemployment must be considered as being as important as the issues for which the previous generation fought. The fight for free education was championed by the youth and shows what can be achieved when they have the necessary means. It also reflects directly on the youth's understanding of the fundamentals of human rights.

Conclusion

As Human Rights Day is commemorated, there is a need to acknowledge that everyone has

the right to employment. Commemorating this day makes no sense at a time when the youth is struggling to meet their basic needs. South Africa's democracy and the people's realization of the importance of human rights has laid the foundation for South Africans to be free. In the very same breath, one must ask, if we do not embrace the hard truths, then what is it that the forefathers of South African democracy were fighting for anyways?

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