



The South African Institute for
Advancement

Media Statement by Inyathelo-The South African Institute for Advancement

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Sharp issues for discussion at conference

A conference gets underway in Cape Town tomorrow that will explore issues ranging from the financing of public benefit organisations to the ownership of universities of South Africa. The conference, “Our World, Our Responsibility” will also look at the future role of civil society and actions necessary to build the next generation of activists in the country.

Speaking at a function this evening to welcome delegates, Shelagh Gastrow, chief executive of Inyathelo – The South African Institute for Advancement which is organising the conference, said that there were many crucial challenges facing South Africans that were simply not being adequately addressed at any level.

“For example, at tomorrow’s Inyathelo Philanthropy Awards evening, we will get an excellent idea of just how generous are those who are involved in philanthropy in our country. They come from all walks of life, using their own financial resources to help people in need.

“At the same time, as we recognise these philanthropists, we will be aware of how some people in government waste taxpayer’s resources and use public money as a feeding trough. Whilst public servants are busy buying cars, there are lots of NPOs not being paid what they are due in terms of their contracts with government. And of course this lack of payment extends to the government’s tardiness in paying small businesses resulting in new black entrepreneurs going under as a result,” Gastrow said.

Turning to the conference’s discussion regarding universities, Gastrow said it would be an ideal opportunity to look at the basic question of who owns these institutions of higher learning. Is it the government, students or the universities themselves?

She indicated that the very future of universities was at a critical point.

“Besides the imperative to transform which is critical to the future of institutions, we have also seen threats to Vice Chancellors, most recently of course at the University of Free State and prior to that at Unisa. Universities will always be sites of struggle and contested terrain, but there seemed to be no public collective action from universities to defend their turf. The question of academic freedom also appeared to have totally fallen off the agenda.

“So we are faced with the situation where, since 1994, the government has cut back on funding universities in real terms, on occasion the subsidy not meeting 50% of the budget. The balance comes

from fees, research funding, endowment funds and philanthropy. If the government isn't fully supporting universities, how much influence can they exert on these institutions?"

Turning to the role of the non-profit sector, Gastrow said that there were many cross-cutting themes that had to be discussed. This included the relationship between the grant makers and the grant seekers.

She said that the NPO sector was also affected by globalisation of the sector. There were thousands of international NGOs operating in Africa, for example. These highly sophisticated organisations employ international staff with global networks to influence and money. In time, they begin to compete with indigenous initiatives for local funding and begin to dominate the discourse on political and developmental issues in the country concerned. The result is often that indigenous initiatives are wiped out and the global benchmark imposed.

"What is left in many countries are international NGOs plying the aid-trade."

For accreditation for the conference or awards, contact Chantal Meugens on 083 676 2294 or chantal@quo-vadis.co.za