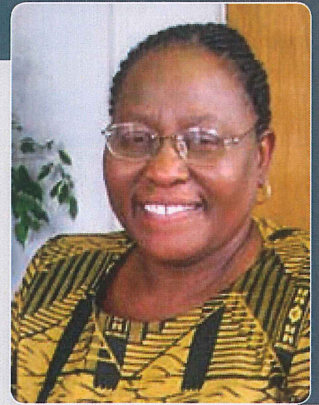


Dr Olive Shisana



PURSUING

'social science that makes a difference' – how the HSRC sees its mission

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES and humanities are currently under considerable threat in South Africa – both as academic disciplines and as priority research areas. For all the right reasons, the country is focused on promoting the 'hard sciences' of mathematics, the physical sciences and technology. The modern, rapidly globalising economy rides on hard science-based technology and South Africa admittedly has a critical human resource deficit in this regard.

However, this single-minded focus on technology and the hard sciences poses the risk of relegating the social sciences and humanities to second-class status in terms of resource allocation and prestige. The subsidy to universities for these disciplines is already considerably lower than that for the natural sciences. Funding for social science research at academic institutions is diminishing and some universities are severely reducing their social science departments, or closing them down altogether. Furthermore, the present higher education system is designed to attract the brightest students away from the social sciences, and there is an alarmingly lackadaisical attitude towards the critical shortage of social scientists in the country.

The HSRC seeks to reverse the perception of the social sciences as less worthy and less relevant with regards to the country's development. The HSRC's motto – 'social science that makes a difference' – seeks to convey the indispensable role of the social sciences in the reconstruction and development policies of our country and society. Today, societal development can no longer be exclusively measured in economic/technological terms at the expense of its human aspects.

Development planning has profound implications for people and their environment that only social scientists can unpack, whether for a new health system, a new housing project, a programme to target 6% national economic growth or for building

the contentious freeway along the Wild Coast. There is an inevitable and inextricable partnership between policy-making and social science. A society that ignores social science-generated research in its planning does so at its peril.

South Africa is unlikely to benefit from the lessons of the past or fashion a thriving, cohesive and harmonious society for the future if we fail to take our history, diverse cultures and artistic heritage into account in our developmental planning and policy-making. We will also have failed this country if we do not conduct research that documents and analyses our democratic and social transition to provide a context for our future development.

A society that ignores social science-generated research in its planning does so at its peril

The disjuncture between social science research and national policy-making is also a matter of concern at international level. I recently attended a thought-provoking conference on this theme, convened by the UNESCO Forum on Social Science/Policy Nexus, whose current president is Zola Skweyiya, South Africa's Minister of Social Development. The Forum identified as a target the enhancement of policy-relevant, social science research capacities, particularly in Africa, and pledged to invest financial resources in this regard.

The perceived importance of the natural sciences notwithstanding, social scientists must accept a portion of the blame for the low profile of their discipline. They have not always been the most effective advocates of their own calling, nor have they trumpeted the value of their research in advancing the cause of society. Historians have not enlightened society about the value of history, and

neither have sociologists, linguists, nor other social scientists with regard to their respective disciplines.

Social scientists have tended to remain in their ivory towers, limiting their activities to publishing inaccessible articles in learned journals. They have not put enough effort into seeking recognition of their work as important building blocks in nation building. This hands-off stance has tended to make social sciences rather irrelevant to development efforts. A variety of think tanks which fed into pre-democracy planning were dismantled, leaving little collective capacity to inform policy.

Through a variety of initiatives, the HSRC seeks to place social science and humanities at the centre of the development agenda. It has restructured itself in order to create capacity for public policy analysis and to contribute to policy-making. It is establishing structured ties with universities for a collective and more cohesive visibility and effectiveness of the national social science community. This partnership will also create enhanced opportunities for the training of young scientists to help augment the dwindling pool of social science experts across the country.

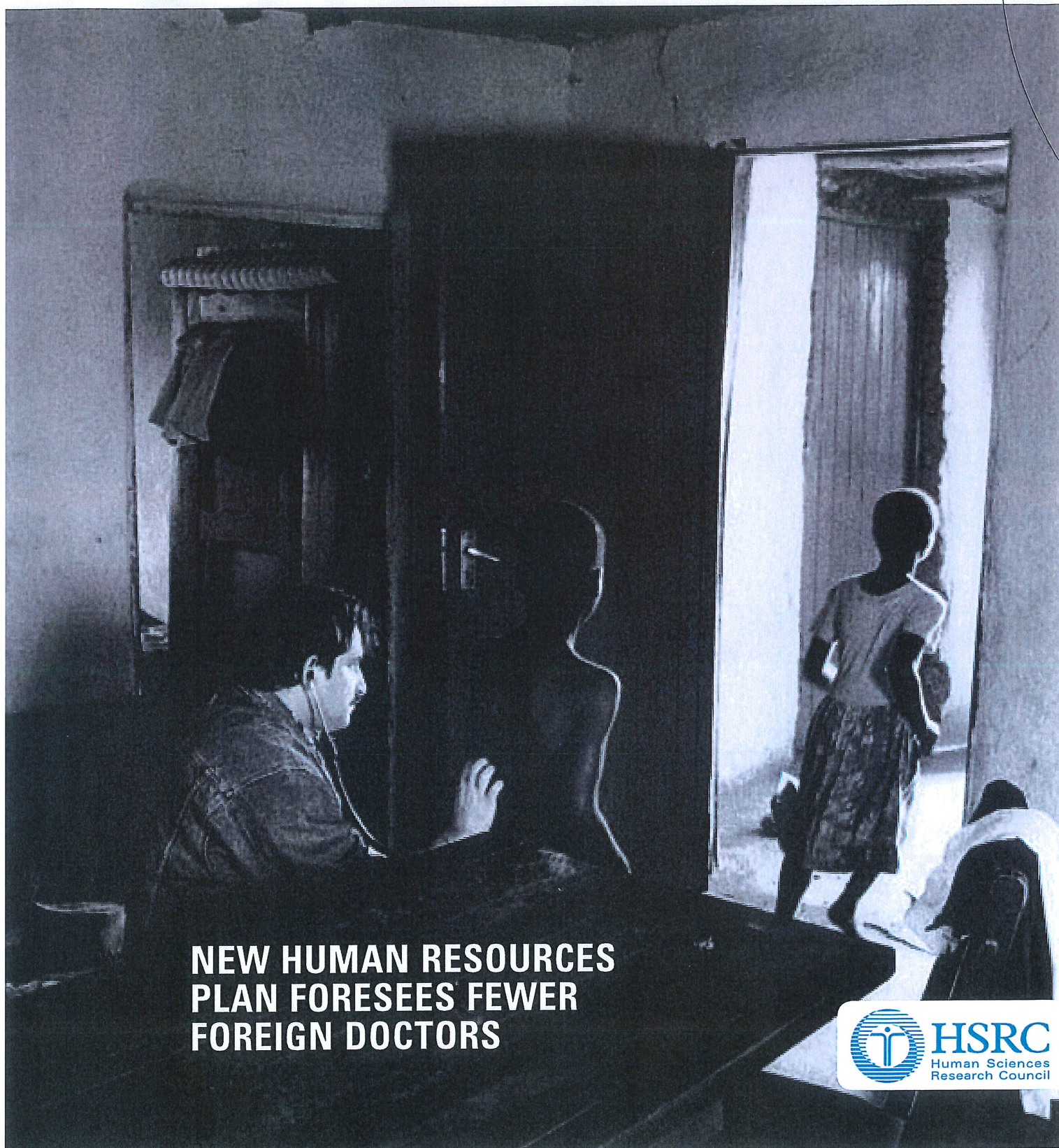
The HSRC is partnering with researchers elsewhere on the African continent to tackle the problems of poverty alleviation, HIV and AIDS, and other common developmental challenges as reflected in the Millennium Goals. It seeks to establish implementation networks and partnerships with stakeholders, from the planning and execution of research to its implementation in the public domain.

With these and other initiatives, the HSRC intends – with its university and other research partners – to restore the prestige and position of social science on the ladder of intellectual pursuit. ●

Dr Olive Shisana is president and CEO of the HSRC.

HSRC review

www.hsrc.ac.za **4** VOLUME No. | JUNE
02 | 2006



**NEW HUMAN RESOURCES
PLAN FORESEES FEWER
FOREIGN DOCTORS**