

**Keynote Address by Hon. Baleka Mbete at the Human Sciences  
Research Council (HSRC) Public Dialogue Commemorating 65  
Years of the Freedom Charter, 25 June 2020, via webinar**

Thank you Chairperson, I stand on the protocols as already presented by you.

Good afternoon to all participants and viewers!

I am happy to have been invited to be here today, among great minds, at this important event, to commemorate the 65 years of the Freedom Charter. I commend the HSRC for bringing us together in this Public Dialogue to reflect, promote and advance knowledge and debate on the role of social and human science research in South Africa in the context of this occasion.

Our lives have been touched by the Freedom Charter in many ways, our history impacted by its vision and the dream it represented, and our country has started to be transformed by ideas contained in it.

My generation encountered the Freedom Charter along the way, in our long march to freedom over the decades. We sang and recited poetry in its praise, and carried it on our shoulders as our flag.

After 1994, we were fortunate to be among those South Africans assigned by history to be in the frontline of implementing its vision. Besides a mixed bag of memories that this history has bequeathed us, there are achievements we are proud of, but there are also disappointments we should be frank about and find answers to.

I'll leave the celebration of our achievements for another day. Instead, we should talk more about our disappointments without lamenting. We should learn from our failures, to appreciate better our challenges so we can do something about them.

Nostalgia is necessary for the human spirit. It brings back good memories and reminds us of the golden days of our past which we must always cherish. Today, however, we must be forward-looking and solution-based. We should look to the past to seek the wisdom we need to handle current challenges.

First things first;

To focus our collective hearts and minds on what has to be priority let's look at the promise of clause 9. Houses, security and comfort. The same clause promises that "no one shall go hungry". It also promises to abolish slums and ghettos. In the most recent times as our government tried hard to ensure implementation of regulations right at the start of level 5 of the lockdown in response to the covid 19 pandemic, we saw the glaring over crowdedness of most informal settlements. According to Stats South Africa, more than 66% of South Africans are living in urban areas. They are in the townships and squatter camps where social distancing and regular handwashing is near impossible. To avoid that disjuncture between government messaging and the reality of the majority we must ensure our policies positively impact especially those who are the poorest beleaguered with the issues of survival. I must also make a point that the lack of infrastructure in the underdeveloped rural areas needs focused attention.

Secondly, some lessons, to the generation of leaders of the 1950s, the Freedom Charter had a meaning and an intended purpose. They criss-crossed the country, united in action, listening to the people to capture their voices and aspirations.

Since 1994, we have institutionalized the imperatives of listening to our people throughout our open, democratic society; and in our law-making process that makes public participation compulsory. As we know our media is among the most fearless and noisiest in the world.

For the ANC, the governing party, it is standard practice to conduct door-to-door campaigns, talking to people, receiving their feedback.

I have participated in many door-to-door campaigns, and I have seen public participation unfold in the many years I served in our Parliament. But the question is, do we really listen like the generation of the 1950s did? Do we engage in these activities as a ritual or a political routine?

A government that listens does not feel threatened by crowds and rallies. A leadership that listens does not get irritated by criticism, or become defensive. Listening is a bottom-up exercise that is essential not only in the making of public policy, but also for assessing and evaluating relevance and impact of state actions.

As leaders we must strive to hear and understand the service delivery protests taking place in different parts of our country many of which are sending us a message we should not ignore. We should listen to the songs of these protesters. They are no longer about Voster or apartheid leaders, but about us. It is clear that the people want our government to do more and do better.

Unity is another take-away from the 1950s – Unity across race, gender and generational divide. The 1950s generation provides us with an example of what we can achieve when we are led by a leadership that is united in its mission and purpose, and firm in its commitment to the people's cause.

Chairperson

A research center like the HSRC is better placed to develop a detailed, evidence-based assessment of how South Africa has performed in its delivery over the last 26 years since liberation.

I can only offer my tentative thoughts. And due to time-constraints, I'll confine myself just to a few clauses.

### **The doors of learning and culture shall be opened (clause 8)**

Policies of the present day government have ensured that the doors of learning are opened to all, particularly the girl child. Access has opened up to many who, in the past, had doors closed in their faces. We however need to pay attention to the curriculum and be satisfied that it will produce innovators and problem solvers who will take South Africa into the digital and environmentally friendly future we envisage.

Learning in indigenous languages is critical in producing the type of outcomes we are looking for. When looking at the schools and universities around the world, in addition to the curriculum responding to the challenges of the day, they teach their children in their indigenous languages. In clause 2 we've said "All people shall have equal right to use their own languages" But we have opted to adopt English as the official working language which puts the child on the back foot even before they

engage with the concepts. Much as we did not want to rock the boat too much initially, we should take bolder policy positions now such as teaching in our own languages and other bold policy options to fulfil that dream.

A space that was once extremely vibrant when we were in the external mission was the cultural sector / the creative sector. It played a big role in how we communicated to the world about South Africa, inside and outside of the country at the time. It communicated more effectively both atrocities and our dreams of a new South Africa. Let us learn from OR Tambo's example when he directed our veteran musician who was based in the USA to form the Amandla Cultural Ensemble utilising our young MK cadres drawn from the military camps in Angola.

### **All national groups shall have equal rights (clause 2)**

The issue of culture is also raised again in clause 2, where the charter promised the people the right "to develop their own folk culture and customs". Ways must be found to achieve this by allocating resources for activities in each district closer to the people. Cultural festivals are good for the soul especially for a society emerging from a bloody past like ours. Equality among the national groups is also about wealth and ownership of land. Some have access to wealth and land and others not? These ownership patterns are racially based. We must address this reality.

How has it happened that at some schools, 26 years after liberation, we can still call black children the "K" word without fear of reprisal like at St. Anne's in KwaZulu Natal which has been covered in the news?

Ladies and gentlemen

My third point, the Freedom Charter was written as a vision for a future South Africa reflecting the aspirations of ordinary South Africans but its application is universal.

We have recently witnessed how racism is a global phenomenon and must be fought on all fronts, and across borders. We saw how a black life was squeezed out with a racist's knee in 8 minutes 46 seconds.

In England some activists took the cue from here, indeed, 'Rhodes Must Fall' they echoed. The racist symbols of colonial figures must fall everywhere, together with statues of those who shipped us across the Atlantic to bondage in the Americas.

South Africa is a nation in the making that has admitted the existence of racial divisions among us. We admit that racism is both historical and structural in our society. The difficulties we continue to encounter in building a non-racial society that the Freedom Charter envisaged, is a lesson to the world that we cannot overcome the racial divide over-night.

It is more difficult to eradicate racism when those who are privileged by skin colour cling to their privileges at all cost, resist transformation, and refuse to share and live with others in the spirit of solidarity and Ubuntu. The most difficult step is when it comes to sharing the wealth and other productive forces of the world.

The message of the Freedom Charter is that:

- "The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth!"
- To the landless people of the world – that "The Land Shall be Shared Among Those Who Work It!"

To keep the youth and women at the center of our efforts, I want to conclude by paying homage to our youth whose importance to our country we must always affirm like we did recently on June 16<sup>th</sup>. The new struggle is no longer just political, but also socio-economic – about the millions of young people who enter the job market each year and find themselves in the ranks of the unemployed.

Femicide must stop! Society must deal harshly with the perpetrators of gender based violence. All rights promised by the charter are for all South Africans, men and women. We should mobilize all social sectors to ensure a life of dignity for all and to leave no one behind.

The best way to guarantee a future that realises the Freedom Charter, is by investing in industry and the structural transformation of our country.

The political will of the ANC to implement the pronouncements of the Freedom Charter cannot be disputed. We also cannot dispute that the lives of our people have vastly improved from the past we come from. Besides political rights like the freedom of movement and association, many more of our people can now access basic needs and services.

I end in the words of the Freedom Charter: “no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people”.

I thank you Chairperson!