



NALEDI HLEFANE

'Covid-19 calls for global solidarity' – Prof Nkondo



Professor Muxe Nkondo, a renowned scholar, expressed his views and recommendations regarding the Covid-19 pandemic during the recent Beyers Naudé Memorial Lecture. The lecture was organised by UNIZULU in partnership with Kagiso Trust.

THE advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and its detrimental effects on society and the global economy has highlighted the urgency to mobilise for global solidarity.

This was the crux of renowned scholar Professor Muxe Nkondo's address during the recent virtual Beyers Naudé Memorial Lecture, which was organised by the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) in partnership with Kagiso Trust.

An initiative of Kagiso Trust, the memorial lecture series began in 2003. It aims to provide students with the opportunity to be exposed to interesting topics around societal values, higher education and leadership in honour of Dr Beyers Naudé, one of the trust's founding patrons.

Prof Nkondo's address was titled "Covid-19 An Existential Crisis: Challenges for Knowledge, Political, Economy, Ethics and Religion". This topic is very close to his heart as he recently lost his nephew to coronavirus, and the lecture was therefore dedicated to his deceased loved one. Instead of delivering a lecture, he opted to challenge the audience by posing some questions that have guided his thinking on the issue of Covid-19. In this way, he hoped to start a conversation around ways in which knowledge, politics, economics, ethics and religion can be used to combat the effects of the virus and build global solidarity. He defined solidarity as an ideal, feeling, attitude and a form of action.

According to Prof Nkondo, Covid-19 has exposed the cracks that exist within

our political, economic and social systems – from the graphic limits of capitalism to the antagonism at the centre of economies and the barriers of social

cohesion, among other issues.

"We say, 'You are one of us; you are not one of us'. That is the general anatomy of new relations in the world. If you are one of us, you have a claim to our moral obligation. When you allocate resources or make appointments, being 'one of us' decides the appointment. We are called upon to come up with a new political platform in which what we call differences are no longer antagonistic, but complementary," he said.

In Prof Nkondo's view, the fact that we share a global vulnerability means that we share a global humanity. This, he said, is the insight we must carry in our various occupations, disciplines and the way in which we relate to each other. The pandemic renders matters of race, nationality, ethnicity and gender irrelevant if we are to successfully conquer this global crisis and build global solidarity.

Touching on the spate of violent attacks against women, Prof Nkondo explained that this has to do with the fundamental assumption that the female

is "antagonistically different" and that her humanity must only be defined in terms of the humanity of men.

He concluded by clarifying that solidarity must not be thought of in terms of government-to-government, but rather people-to-people. "We need to find a way to collapse categorical thinking and feeling. What should matter now is not how wealthy or notable you are, but that the person next to you is fundamentally human and that humanity cannot be qualified by any contingency," he said.

In his response to the main address, Dean Zwo Nevhutalu, Director of Kagiso Tiso Holdings, agreed that with Covid-19 having opened the fracture lines faced in South Africa and the globe, it was true that new thinking should arise. He was particularly moved by Prof Nkondo's suggestion that socio-linguists should work with political economists to explore African languages as languages of science and technology, a space now dominated by English.

UNIZULU's Covid-19 risk adjusted strategy

THE University of Zululand has been hard at work ensuring the institution's facilities are able to accommodate the categories of returning students identified under each level of the national lockdown. The preparation includes adherence to physical distancing, the handling of communal spaces, hygiene requirements and dining hall arrangements.

The University is now ready to receive Nursing students who are in their final year of study. Their actual return is expected in the week starting on June 29, 2020. Undertaking clinical visits and training is a requirement for these students.

Students who require laboratory equipment and other technical equipment to undertake their studies will be prioritised.

Faculties are currently working on identifying these groups. It is envisaged the University will be able to accommodate the remaining 33% from July 6, 2020.

♦ 33% of the students will be accommodated at the University's KwaDlangezwa campus.

♦ Only 20% can be accommodated at the Richards Bay campus due to space constraints and adherence to health and safety protocols.

Covid-19 awareness programmes are in place and a code of conduct for both staff and students is being drafted to ensure strict adherence to regulations.

The focus right now is to curb and manage the spread of the virus on both campuses by prioritising projects that enhance prevention and mitigation.

result of the displacement of those occupying double rooms.

♦ A space modification plan to de-densify existing student accommodation and lecture halls is under consideration for implementation.

Uncertainty with regard to assessment

Senate has decided that:
♦ No sitting examinations will be conducted for the first semester. Continuous assessment will form the basis of evaluating students' academic progress.
♦ Examinations will only be considered in the second semester.

Teaching and learning

As part of its multimodal approach, the university has decided to deliver paper-based teaching and learning materials to students who do not have the resources to engage electronically or online.

While teaching and learning has been taking place online, a significant number of students have not been actively participating due to connectivity challenges.

Faculties have been printing, packaging and distributing learning materials for students who do not have digital access or have bandwidth and network challenges.

♦ The Faculty of Arts has packaged and distributed 95% of its learning materials.

♦ The Departments of Anthropology and Development Studies have 100% of their students active on Moodle.

♦ 70% of students in the Faculty of Education are active on Moodle. The academics and administrative staff have created WhatsApp groups to check on students who need materials. Learning materials are being distributed.

♦ The Faculty of Commerce, Administration and Law has printed and is distributing learning material for every student that is registered but is not on Moodle. This includes those who have not been actively participating during the last six weeks. Most of the students are active on the Moodle platform.

♦ The Faculty of Science has 144 modules. Printed learning material will be distributed to students from the week starting on June 29, 2020. A significant number of students are active on the Moodle platform.

All faculties have created WhatsApp groups and use emails to communicate and send information to students.

All postgraduate students are monitored and supported by their supervisors. Reports are submitted to the relevant deputy dean when required.

The return of the next category of students will be announced by faculties once the university is satisfied that the necessary health and safety protocols are in place.

Emails and other forms of communication will be sent to students who belong to each category of returning students.

Issued on behalf of University management

UNIZULU PhD student earns respect for research accomplishment

PRECIOUS SHAMASE

UNIVERSITY of Zululand (UNIZULU) PhD student, Dr Priscilla Masamba has become the first student at the institution to use Diamond Light Source, the United Kingdom's national synchrotron, to solve the partial structure of a protein from Schistosoma mansoni.

Dr Masamba's research work involves determining the structures of proteins for alternative treatment and providing insights into diseases of human importance such as schistosomiasis. Schistosomiasis, which is commonly known as bilharzia, is a tropical disease of poverty responsible for seriously aggressive clinical deformities and high mortality rates, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In South Africa, an estimated 4.5 million people are infected with this disease.

Unpacking what her PhD thesis entails, Dr Masamba said the aim is to generate insights for the design of an alternative treatment regimen targeting specific stages during the developmental cycle of the schistosome.

Sharing her research findings, she said: "Currently, a partial structure of the G4LZ3 protein has been generated, but is still undergoing refinement. Among the many of the objectives of this project is the inference of function of this protein. It is already thought that the G4LZ3 protein may be a potential member of the nucleotide-binding USP subfamily, with the protein showing possible binding to molecules such as ATP. Establishing this would entail generating additional crystallographic data, which unfortunately is not



Dr Priscilla Masamba has made a name for herself – and for women in science – after successfully solving the partial structure of a protein from Schistosoma mansoni.

Picture: Rebekka Stredwick – ©Diamond Light Source

possible because of the lockdown. In spite of this hiccup, I am currently refining and building into the structure using software such as MR_Rosetta, Coot and Chimera

and using various homologues whose structures are similar to mine."

She said she not only sees this achievement as a success story for herself, but for

women in science as well, especially those who come from rural areas, disadvantaged backgrounds or who just don't have the clear advantage many others in historically advantaged universities have.

"Many times the field of science is viewed as a male-dominated arena. I view this as an opportunity to put women on a really high pedestal, because it shows that we too have the ability to be pioneers of something, just like our male counterparts, if only we are encouraged and given a chance," she added.

Professor Adibemi Kappo, Dr Masamba's supervisor, is equally thrilled by her achievement. "Priscilla has always been a trailblazer in all she does – and for what she has managed to achieve in her PhD, she joins that select group of structural biologists in (South) Africa to have a novel protein structure accredited to her name. She recently won a Young Scientist Grant from the International Union of Pure and Applied Biophysics (IUPAB) and a Scarce Skills NRF Postdoctoral Fellowship. Congratulations to her for achieving her PhD against all odds in a very difficult field, to her parents for instilling the ethos of hard work in her from a young age, and to Prof Trevor Sewell for his (contribution)," said Prof Kappo.

Dr Masamba was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Her family then migrated to Scotland, where her father was pursuing his postdoctoral qualification in Chemistry at the time. She spent her formative years in various countries including Zimbabwe and has been living in South Africa since 2005.

DR SIPHIWE NDLOVU

Race, inequality in US is mirrored in South Africa

THE killing in broad daylight of George Floyd, an African American, by Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, correctly sparked protest and outrage across the US and beyond. While these began as knee-jerk reactions to the callous manner in which Floyd's life was taken, the protests have now turned into a general demand for social justice, reforms and racial redress, and have opened up old wounds about the painful history of racial hatred and suffering.

The latter has seen protesters across the Atlantic defiling the statues of Mahatma Gandhi at Parliament Square in London and toppling the statue of 17th century slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, south west England. We have

to caution that as vociferous, apropos and more importantly, justified as these demands are, they are not likely to yield many results in regard to social justice.

There have been movements that sought to change American society and make it receptive to black American lives, but these have not gone far enough and thus not yielded the desired outcome. A major and fundamental stumbling block in the way of justice, I argue, is the way American society itself is constituted.

This stems from the fact that in the "discovery" of the new world, a new system of power emerged. It is a model of

power that sought to classify the world's populations around the idea of race; and America becomes the first space for its realisation, organised along with the logic of racial domination. In essence, it is a system that leads to the white man assuming a high trope of human existence, while subordinating everyone and everything to his control.

So black people and other "non whites" were precluded from the realm of reason, a key criterion in the Western tradition of determining who is and is not human, a rational being. Ultimately, what emerges from this is a system of white supremacy.

This is why white police officers are able to maim and brutalise black members of society with consistent impunity. This has created two systems of justice: one for whites that is patently detrimental to black America, hence the rallying refrain that Black Lives Matter.

So this is the condition that modernity has wrought upon us. The system has normalised white superiority, with black people expected to reconcile with their inferiority. The protests prompted by Floyd's brutal killing brought to the fore historical social inequalities that exist between blacks and whites, something that

we as South Africans know much about. The reality is that black people remain under represented in various sectors of the economy. Only a few rise to prominence.

This is as true in South Africa as it is in the US. The reasons are varied. In the final analysis, we have to ask whether the system that evolved over centuries is capable of shedding its racial historical burden. These are some of the challenges that the US faces as the debate rages.

The same argument and concern should be extended to South Africa. As a black South African and an academic, I yearn to see and experience genuine free-



Dr Sphiwe Ndlovu

dom in my lifetime. It is in this sense that I raise doubt about the protests yielding meaningful results.

The author has written this article in his personal capacity and it does not represent the opinion of the University of Zululand.

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