

## EVENT

# Community Leaders Training Workshop SDGs & Access to Justice (28–29 May 2019)

*Paula Knipe*

The Dullah Omar Institute hosted a community leaders training workshop (28–29 May 2019) on the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs) and access to justice. The purpose of the event was to examine how the SDGs affect vulnerable and marginalised groups and how communities can use the SDGs to access their right to justice. It was an opportunity for social justice activists, advocates, academics, community-based organisations and non-governmental organisations to discuss the importance of the SDGs in the South African context.

Prof Diane Cooper explained the development of the initial Millennium Development Goals 2000 (MDGs). She asked probing questions: Were the MDGs successful? Has poverty been reduced? Could we say we have retrogressed and become a more unequal society? In 2015, the MDGs were redefined as the SDGs, placing stronger emphasis than before on global responsibility and with a target date of 2030.

Prof Cooper's presentation focused on SDG 3, aimed at ensuring good health and well-being. In the past, many diseases and illnesses were seen as the result of bad lifestyle choices, but over the years they have come to be understood as the outcome of environmental factors such as access to health facilities and nutritious food.

Dr =j pdkj u Diala's presentation looked the impact of SDG 5, namely gender equality, on women. He outlined the historical development

and context of women's status today. It was noted that the colonisation of Africa and the myth of women's inferiority can be understood in three spheres.

First, economically speaking, women were stripped of the land and thus their means of agricultural production and main source of food and power. Secondly, colonisation brought with it a religion that explicitly depicted man as superior and woman as inferior, opposing the matriarchal ideology that existed on the African continent. Thirdly, in the political sphere, when Europeans



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encountered the indigenous people, the men were protectors and warriors – the Europeans viewed them as the heads of the household, superior to women. In addition, encounters between Europeans and the indigenous people were impeded by language barriers that led to misunderstanding of African customs.

Due to a combination of these factors, women came to be regarded as inferior, a mode of thinking that is still in place today in spite of the strides made in attempting to change it.

Dr Diala said that women should be equalised with men not only because everybody has equal rights before the law, but because it would be unfair to continue treat women unequally when the social environment that shaped traditional relationships between men and women has changed irrevocably. Cultural and religious customs were socially constructed and thus can be deconstructed. However, many inegalitarian laws and practices still deny women their agency. Dr Diala called on community members to exercise their agency and act for positive change.

Dr Maria Assim looked at the SDGs in relation to vulnerable children. Children do not have the luxury of having their rights progressively realised over time: when they turn 18, they are no longer considered children and have no protection. Moreover, when they are surrounded by crime and abuse, they are likely to become dangerous adults. Intervention needs to happen while they are still impressionable and able to unlearn bad habits. Children are also marginalised when it comes to access to justice – this is often difficult for them as they are not empowered to engage with the system.

Dr Assim noted that an effective way to realise children's rights is to understand it as a collective, with all rights being interrelated. The challenge is for the government to understand the urgency and prioritisation of children's rights. Pressure needs to be put on the government to dedicate more time and physical resources to realising children's rights.

In a further presentation, a representative from *Open Up* said the relationship between landlord and tenants is often fraught with problems. A common issue is that there is no proper contract or lease agreement in place, with the result that tenants have little protection under the law. The representative



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provided some useful tips on how best to prepare when dealing with housing battles.

She noted, for example, that it is unlawful to evict somebody without a court order, so you should ensure one is presented to you. Also, while the legal system can be hard to understand, there are ways to make things easier. It is important to have a written contractual agreement or any documentation as such, including payslips, photographic evidence and affidavits. This information is necessary when presenting your case, as you do not want to be dismissed for making procedural errors.

Another tip concerned a useful but little-known forum, the Rental Housing Tribunal, where decisions are legally binding. However, you cannot have a matter being heard at the tribunal and at court.

Community members welcomed these tips, as many have faced or been involved in eviction cases. It was also the general consensus that many of them are unaware of their rights in relation to housing and evictions, and that this was a conversation that should be continued.

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