

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

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The role of civil society in attaining a constitutional state of mind

Former Independent Electoral Commission chief **Professor Mandla Mchunu** gave the keynote address at the Civil Society Initiative's forum in KwaZulu-Natal in November. This is an edited version of his speech.

"A vote means nothing to you if you cannot survive...Man is driving towards extinction because of the fact that he is doing everything to reduce the essentials for survival. The reason we do this is because we live only for ourselves." (The late Professor Christiaan Barnard - heart transplant pioneer)

Classically, in gatherings where civil society activists, enthusiasts, leaders and their followers come together to discuss issues, one finds mention of common themes such as resources for community development, the role of the government, transformation, collaboration between civil society organisations and many other related topics. To add more value to those kind of discussions, I thought my contribution should focus on matters more fundamental, perhaps slightly subtle, but directly supportive of the entire course of community advancement and the civil society movement.

I wish to make comments that may broaden civil society perspectives and possibly inspire deeper thought about civil society initiatives. I wish to stimulate dialogue around strategies and direction of civil society initiatives. I will be glad if my input affirms civil society initiatives and energises community activists and leaders. I aim to provoke thought and hopefully initiate a search for ways and means of attaining a collective constitutional state of mind.

The Civil Society Initiative (CSI)

The national CSI conference held in Johannesburg in April was attended by former presidents Nelson Mandela and Bill Clinton. The chairman of the CSI is former politician Roelf Meyer. The CSI aims to raise South Africans awareness of and participation in civil society. Meyer has emphasised that the CSI is not a new movement, but is aimed at creating dialogue on national issues. The first of nine one-day forums to be held throughout South Africa, was staged in KwaZulu-Natal.

Our five-year-old Constitution envisages a society guided by certain fundamental pillars such as a human rights ethos, consultation, transparency and accountability, a participative culture, a level of industriousness and maturity to carry forward the ideals of healing, reconciliation and peace. Its fundamental values of justice, equality and human dignity permit us to strive for economic freedom whilst being tolerant and conscious of interests of other fellow South Africans. As much as

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it can seem to be demanding, it was hammered out by our own representatives and thus by ourselves.

In May 1996, we tasked ourselves with immense responsibilities. We adopted a Constitution that maps out a vision of great hope that sometime tomorrow we will indeed conquer our own prejudices, love more than hate, be constructive and not destructive, and truly forge our own brand of nationhood.

As such a daunting task calls for teamwork, our constitutional aspirations demand collaboration. They dictate that we should be aligned and share a similar constitutional outlook.

The expression 'home country' or 'umkhaya' in Nguni, has much meaning which best describes civil society. Home country relates to a place where your home is, which is the home of your family, the world of your friends, relatives and your social and intellectual environment. It is your country too, with its languages, cultures, climate and place where you have a fundamental right to inhabit for as long as you like. Civil society is an entity that is constituted by people who share these 'home country' sentiments about their local, regional, national and even continental environment. These are individuals who in their multitude constitute a society of interests, which seek expression in a collective.

Civil society is about relating, interacting, engaging and impacting on each other. Civil society is also about associating and belonging, being part of a larger whole. But, in fact, 'we' are a civil society, whether you are in government, in the private sector or on a Sunday school charity picnic. It is an all-embracing entity comprising 'us'. We then logically need to ask ourselves the question: "Who are 'we'?"

We are South Africans and proud signatories of our Constitution. Above all, we are many individuals. As such, we have personal and individual states of mind, outlooks, beliefs, attitudes, joys and sorrows. To the extent that we are still fearful of the future, doubtful of the course of change, at times violent, prejudiced, destructive and angry, we have to confront ourselves. We should start to reconcile our internal conflicts and interpersonal differences, and question our own abilities of powering our communities forward. We should search for all the points of disjuncture within ourselves. We should review our state of mind. This will reveal to us our core failings and weaknesses as torchbearers for future generations. Somehow, we need to free ourselves of negative qualities such as self-pity, helplessness, panted anger, cynicism, racism, ethnicity and regionalism. If we are the driving engines towards a very positive future, we have to acquire a collective positive conduct, outlook and expression. We have to be mature and equal to the task.

The new order has presented many paradoxes and challenges. We face personal dilemmas and various uncertainties. Our constitutional vision often gets blurred because of our internal strife. Perhaps with some assistance we can take to the path of searching for ourselves and thus redefine our civil society.

Civil society should help us as individuals to get to a point of realisation. Unless we help to free the hearts and minds of members of our civil society, the necessary collective energy to reinvent ourselves will remain only a possibility.

Further to ourselves as individuals, civil society is the people we relate to in our immediate environments. For example, families, friends and relatives are our community. Family life may be in crisis because of a myriad of interfacing factors. It falls victim to substance and physical abuse because of human failings and absence of a sense of purpose, a lack of belonging to a bigger

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realisation. It is a casualty of the HIV/Aids pandemic. It grapples with issues of abject poverty and local decay. Families disintegrate because people at times move in and out of marriages with the empty hope that some day they will meet their perfect partner. This is not because we love less, but because we do not love ourselves enough.

Cherrie Carter-Scott said in *If Love is a Game, These are the Rules*: "The depth and quality of the link between you and yourself ultimately determines the success of your relationship with others. If an authentic love relationship is what you desire, then the first natural step you must take is to learn to love, honour and cherish yourself as a truly precious and lovable being."

This author further argues that love creates more love and when your inner love shines, you are open to experiences of a deeper and powerful connection with others. Our former president Nelson Mandela propounded and practised this doctrine and I believe it gave him greater vision and strength as our leader.

In turn, families constitute local communities, which are a slightly broader plain of interaction and interface. At this point of community exchange all the characteristics of individuality and family come together, in our case perhaps like a gathering storm, which explodes into crime, xenophobia, racism, sexism, intolerance, rage and rape. The community does not give these negative results to us; these are manifestations of our own inner shortcomings, apathy, inaction and inertia, our make-up and outlook. For instance, there is so much property-related crime whilst average families are keeping loads of discarded or unused property, which could be given away freely and to some extent may diminish the market for stolen goods. As local communities we are not able to counter these and other social ills because these are taken as national issues. We never pause and start to own these problems, ring fence them within our localities and begin to understand them within a specific context. In fact, we react by moving away from such a community hoping that we will find a safe haven somewhere else. Our local communities suffer because of the pervasive transient state of mind. We do not have a profound dedication to our immediate locality. Therefore the same profound affection we should have for ourselves, as individuals, should transcend to a degree of dedication to our localities. It is a paradox that our localities are, in essence, what we are, as Reverend Father Trevor Huddleston once opined that young juvenile offenders called 'tsotsis' are a symbol of a society that does not care.

Whether we like it or not, local communities should summon their united and deeper strengths to improve the quality of life in their vicinities. The state is already doing as much as it can. The rage and violent streak in us cannot be quelled by state action. The state will only succeed if community aligned programmes of action meet its intervention halfway.

Civil society programmes should be well informed and flow from thorough inquiry into the nature and extent of its social ills. For example, the issue of unemployment presents a unique paradox because there is abundant talent and skill but fewer opportunities for gainful employment. However, there are so many people who are in jobs but are not employed because they do not perform the duties that they were employed for. This creates a conundrum of a kind. It depicts rather painfully the contrasts that we need to understand and eventually resolve. It also shows that we are truly disconnected as a society. If we were not, those in employment would cherish their fortunes of economic stability and be productive. These knots point us back to the fundamentals of our individual state of mind, our family, community and national level of awareness.

Our level of awareness and our collective state of mind translate into a regional context as people in a province like KwaZulu-Natal. In spite of our weaknesses, the terrain of KwaZulu-Natal has wealth in geographic splendour, beautiful weather and inhabitants, infrastructure, cultural

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diversity, international ports and a lot of good things going for it. In our quest for being in sync with our constitutional destiny, we have so much to draw from the beauty that surrounds us. These natural endowments are our heritage, which we should enjoy, preserve and pass on to future generations. It is up to the people of KwaZulu-Natal to opt to espouse and assimilate the strength and glory of their province.

The South African nation is the bigger collective of all the elements contained here. It is a land of immense beauty populated by a people who are slowly mutating to realise the essence of their identity as a rainbow nation as seen by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. A rainbow is a joyful and strong symbol.

Our Constitution defines our desires of a nationhood that transcends our borders into the family of nations. We thus should reach a point when our Constitution becomes our way of life. Civil society should take us to that collective constitutional state of existence; it should close the gap between our national ideals and us.

Civil society should energise us so that we should and can do amazing things. We might as well be accused by future generations of having experimented too much, but not of inactivity and paralysis. We need to be brave and pioneer the means of rising above our differences and forge a sense of nationhood.

In conclusion, I can do nothing else but express my hope and vision of a society of emancipated people who are not hateful, greedy, racist, sexist, cynical, intolerant, hypocritical and negative in outlook. In the horizon I can see a society congruent to its constitutional ideals and a civil society that can sustain and nourish our constitutional aspirations. Whatever else we do, we should keep the dream alive that one day we will attain a collective constitutional state of mind.

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