

# Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

## Working to end racism at Durban's international conference

United States journalist **Ellie Hidalgo** attended the five-day NGO Forum which preceded the intergovernmental World Conference Against Racism in August. She captures the experiences of the delegates she accompanied from the organisation United to End Racism (UER) and of a group of women who attended the NGO Forum in rather unusual circumstances.

'Sawubona." Hello to all of you from Durban, South Africa!

UER delegate Melphy Sakupwanya from Zimbabwe has encouraged us to learn how to say hello and thank you (ngiyabonga) in Zulu to connect more personally with some of the South Africans we are meeting.

Tuesday was our first day at the NGO Forum, but first I'll tell you some about the opening ceremonies at Kingsmead cricket stadium. The section of the stadium that had been set up for the conference was packed with people. You could look out into the audience and see people from all over the world, particularly Africa.

The Dalits from India sat in the front to ensure their visibility. The Palestinians carried large banners. UER delegates were scattered in pairs throughout the stadium ready to strike up conversations with the people surrounding us.

"This conference is about relationships," said United Nations high commissioner for human rights Mary Robinson. She also noted that what she had most understood from the Youth Forum (which preceded the NGO Forum) is that young people want to be listened to more and talked at less.

After Robinson's remarks, more than 100 young Zulu dancers performed on stage. They were powerful! When they finished their performance, they sat on the stage and South African President Thabo Mbeki approached the podium surrounded by the dancers.

Mbeki made an impression on UER delegates because of the numerous times he linked racism and sexism. South Africa, he said, could be counted on as a reliable base in the struggle to "create a non-racial and non-sexist world".

The defeat by black South Africans of minority rule in 1994 was just the beginning, he said. But he reminded people that Africa carries the scars of the second millennium. "The lives of millions continue to be defined by the legacy of slavery and colonialism," he said. "We're in a struggle against global apartheid."

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### **About United to End Racism (UER)**

UER is a Project of the International Re-evaluation Counselling Communities. It consists of a group of people from many racial groups and all ages and backgrounds from many different countries who are dedicated to eliminating racism in the world.

UER believes that eliminating racism is necessary for humankind to progress. The main work of UER is to illuminate the damage done to individuals by racism and to undo this damage on an individual basis, using the resources and process of Re-evaluation Counselling, which is also known as RC or co-counselling.

As people do this work, UER believes they become better able:

- to interrupt racism in their daily lives,
- to free themselves from all of racism's effects,
- to take leadership,
- to form deep relationships across racial lines,
- to remove racism from our societies' institutions, and
- to support the work of other individuals and organisations in ending racism.

UER states in documentation that through its work it has developed a new and important understanding of racism and the relationships between racism and other oppressions. This understanding includes how racism and other oppressions are inflicted upon people, how they damage people, how this damage is passed from generation to generation, how people can resist such damage, and how people can recover from it. Using this understanding of racism, UER has developed methods for undoing its damage. The work to recover from the damage of racism is done, in different ways, both by people who are members of groups targeted by racism and by people who are members of groups that play oppressive, racist roles.

Back to the NGO Forum where conference organisers struggle with internalised racism and racism at every step in organising this conference. Lack of financial support from countries like the United States has made it an even more difficult conference to organise. And as a result of internal disagreements, the programme listing workshop descriptions, dates, times and locations is filled with mistakes. A number of UER workshops were listed in the wrong location. Also, workshops are scattered in buildings and hotels surrounding the cricket stadium, but participants were not provided with a map. Participants have to try to figure out where different buildings are located on their own.

Another struggle is that conference organisers were not able to prepare translations for the many Africans speaking French (it's estimated some 40 percent of Africans can speak French), nor the many Latin Americans speaking Spanish. Even registration forms are available only in English. As a result, UER delegates with Spanish speaking skills are in big demand, and on registration day I

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was able to help a group of Latinos from Honduras, Brazil and Uruguay fill out their registration forms.

On our first day, Barbara Love led a workshop on Healing the Damage Caused by Racism, and Lorenzo Garcia organised a panel speak-out. About four support groups were arranged. I was at Lorenzo's panel so I'll tell you a bit about that one. Seven new people came: two black women from Canada and a young woman from Nigeria, two men from South Africa, an African-heritage woman from the United States and a Mexican man now living in the United States. There were about nine co-counselors in this group.

Lorenzo invited the new people to talk for ten minutes each about their own experiences of racism. People were open about their personal experiences, and several began to cry as they shared their stories. The young man from South Africa asked if he could be trained more in these skills to bring this process back to people in his township. One of the young women from Canada who started her own non-governmental organisation to address racism in Canada also said this process could have a big impact for the young people she works with.

At the end of a long and busy day, co-counselors gathered for dinner together in our main meeting space in a nearby university building. Tim invited several of us to share our highlights from the day. Here are some of them:

Azi Khalili was supposed to lead a support group, but when she got to the building where it was due to be held no one had come. So she went back out and as she passed a bus stop, noticed a group of about a dozen young people in their late teens and early 20s. Azi listened to them, and then asked them how their day had gone. She started to tell them about UER and invited them to our meeting space to get the chance to listen to each other. The leader of the group agreed and all dozen of them walked over to the meeting room, during which she found out that they were part of the Zulu dancers' group that had participated at the opening ceremony. In the half hour they had before their bus arrived, Azi gave them a short introduction to co-counseling and then invited them to get into pairs and listen to one another for three minutes each. At the end of the session, one of the group's leaders asked if it was possible for them to be trained in these skills so that they could bring the concept back to their township. Arrangements were made for Azi and others to lead an introductory workshop on Friday for this group of youth. As they left to catch their bus, each youth was given a copy of our pamphlet, Working Together to End Racism.

Ibtisam Barakat attended the Arab caucus where participants immediately began fighting with each other and the leader struggled to lead. Ibtisam stepped in and told the group that her job in the world was to organise workshops and held out a timer. They agreed to listen to each other for three minutes each and every time someone began to attack another person or the leader Ibtisam deftly interrupted. By the end of the meeting, she said, tempers had calmed down and the group had agreed to meet regularly during the week.

Michaela Purdue spoke a little bit more about UER participation at the Youth Forum. In one meeting she attended, the youth leader became overwhelmed and quit leading. The other youth struggled to figure out who would lead and the meeting became chaotic. Michaela counselled the leader into deciding whether he would go back to leading or officially hand over leadership to a person he designated. He designated another leader who was able to do a good job.

At a lunch time gathering of Jews, Cherie Brown got people laughing and talking about what their days had been like. The discussion turned to the intersection of Jewish oppression and racism and Cherie talked about UER work. She was then invited to attend a meeting at the Jewish Community

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Center. Dottie Curry is going to be going with her and they plan to talk about the commitment of African and African heritage people against anti-Semitism and the commitment of Jews against racism.

Dvora Slavin had said earlier this week she hoped UER delegates would humanise the conference. I think we're off to a good start!'

Every conference has its heroes or heroines, and for me the heroines of this NGO Forum are the women on the train. Let me tell you about them.

About 350 South African women from many community organisations in or around Johannesburg decided they wanted to attend this conference. These African women are community workers, social workers, nurses, traditional healers and child care workers. Since they are poor women, they applied to the conference organisers for funds to attend the conference.

The organisers, who never received the international financial support they hoped for, had very limited funds to offer them. No way could they support 350 women staying in a hotel for a week. But rather than send only a few women with the funds they received, the women got creative about thinking of ways all of them could go. So they rented a train. All of them boarded the train, which carried them from Johannesburg to Durban. During the day they attend the conference and at night they go back to the train which is parked at a nearby station. They would sleep and wash up on their train.

Early during the week UER delegates Njoki Kamau, originally from Kenya, and Olivia Vincenti from London met Eunice Ratlhagane, one of the women of the train. They invited her to a UER workshop, and the next day Eunice came with four other women, including the only two white women on the train. They loved their UER workshop, said Eunice They appreciated the information, skill building and opportunity to be listened to so much that they have been coming back every day and cycling through whichever workshops we are offering that day.

Last night after our reception, I rode on the UER van that took some of the women back to the train and got to talk to Aurelia Gulwa-Addae. She is married to a man from Ghana and started her own organisation to help people deal with black on black internalised racism, particularly the bad feelings South Africans have towards Africans from other countries.

The women came to the conference, said Aurelia, because "we wanted to learn how to approach this thing of racism. We wanted to learn skills and learn about good approaches. We want to learn how to change people's minds."

Eunice added: "We're excited to be part of history." "Let people know," she said, "that there were some women in South Africa who slept on the train so they could end racism."

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