



**Embargoed: Opening Address at the Annual Conference and Annual General Meeting of the Bench Marks Foundation, 20 October 2020**

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**Beyond the Mine Gates-Communities Engaging Power**

We have gathered at this meeting, for the first time through electronic medium. I need not explain the obvious but just a reminder and for the record, it suffices to say, indeed we now live in a mindboggling time of great uncertainty. A time of global challenges resulting from Coronavirus. Last year, as conference we addressed the challenges of Climate catastrophe which was threatening life. A year later today we find ourselves faced with global pandemics, such as food insecurity, increasing unemployment and loss of livelihood. There is no doubt that great disparities have been revealed by Covid-19 around the world. Vast and growing inequalities, particularly in South Africa and Africa are laid bare for all to see. It is also a time that say black lives do not matter as witness in brutal killings of Black people, women, and children, more so in South Africa. It is as if we are at the end of time, where all goodwill is gone, where the exclusively rich do not care for the poor and most vulnerable.

Opening this thirteenth Annual Conference and Annual General Meeting of the Bench Marks Foundation, never have we been so worried about the course of history, and the unfolding life threatening drama of Covid-19. Evidently our hope has been swallowed by despair, but we continue on old paths, of neo liberal economic policies that shape government policies, not thinking of the common good, of humanity and what it means to be human. Human solidarity, compassion, and striving for a humane world built on human values, of care and respect, do not matter, only the accumulation of wealth, but at a huge expense to humanity, and the sustainability of the world. I suggest that individualism and the attitude of all for me and nothing for the other must be stopped.

In South Africa R500 billion were earmarked to mitigate the blow of COVID-19 on the poor, the jobless and those most in need of relief measures. Unfortunately, this has not fully materialised. Corrupt officials have been giving tenders to unknown companies resulting to billions of Rands lost at the cost of life, livelihood, and food security. The approach of government which was and continues to be warmly applauded by the World Health Organisation, for early lockdown, has in fact been nothing short of a disaster. Testing which we all know is key to monitoring and modelling, has been dismal in our observation. Lack of full transparency and

accountability about what is really happening on the coal face has raised suspicions to most citizens. We have since moved from 100000 tests a day and dropped in level 2 to just 16000 tests a day. Surprisingly, we dropped from over 12000 infections a day in July, to 2000 infections a day. Deaths have also not been properly accounted for as the national tally of unnatural deaths we are experiencing are estimated by Scientists to be closer to 42000 and not the 17000 plus reported.

The reason for this is that unlike other countries we do not include in our statistics the increased death rate beyond the common causes. We talk of recovery rates of 89%, without giving facts. Our understanding is that recovery means one did not die, but we know those who survive, live with heart problems and lung hardening diseases which causes breathing difficulties. Even the Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize acknowledged that at least 12 million people are infected and Scientists at Wits University, Professor of Vaccinology, Shabir Madhi estimates COVID 19 infections to be as high as 15 to 20 million in high density areas. He alleges that the asymptomatic and mildly symptomatic do not get tested. We also know that we have higher youth population of 20 million people, 20 years and younger that are probably carriers of the Covid-19. Nonetheless, officially we claim 667000 infections, which makes us the 8<sup>th</sup> highest in the world. He further states that at the peak of the pandemic, the country was reporting about 14000 cases a day, but new models showed it was between 60000 to 80000 a day. So, the question to be asked is, who is fooling who? (DJ Guy van lint Discobar Express 1982)

So, the militarists approach by government during the lockdown and brutal killings of innocent citizens in townships not complying with lockdown confirms our assertion that even in our constitutional democracy, black lives do not matter. Mr Colins Khoza who was beaten to death by the police outside his small shack in Alexander tells a lot about the attitude of the governments towards black people. Of course, government had an opportunity to gain community support if only it had acted in a democratic and participatory manner. It could have involved community organisations in awareness campaigns, dealt with small businesses differently, like Spaza shops, with their more secure one person at a time practice queuing system. Instead it went for a complete lockdown, where this was more needed in the mining sector, and other densely populated industries. The whole question of the economy versus lives and illnesses has come to the forefront of the debate.

The needs of the economy have surpassed lives. And whilst we know that many communities have said we would rather die of COVID 19 than of empty stomachs, much of government relief went to big business who could afford losses in profits for the good of the country. Anyhow, contrary to government self-praise, to our observation little was really achieved during the lockdown. As a result, most of testing has been done in private laboratories, that do not cover 50% of the population.

Bench Marks Foundation together with other progressive civil society organizations warned in May, that 50% of workers going back to work prematurely would lead to a wave of infections in mining affected communities. In North West province, infections rose to all time high of about 14 thousand compared to about 200 before mines reopened and with similar figures in Limpopo by mid-August and have since gone down. The real issues among communities we work with is lack of testing. Sadly, many mines are not prepared to go beyond the mine gate in opening their clinics for community members for treatment. According to our records communities are witnessing between 3 and 6 unexplained deaths a week. Often the industry's response has been to shift responsibility to local government and not itself. This is problematic as mining does not stop at the fence of the mine and migrant labour is a big spreader of infections.

In fact, contrary to what the Minerals Council say, the mining sector has become the epicentre of spreading the disease in adjacent communities. Already these communities suffer from poor nutrition, poor living conditions, lack of access to clean and portable water, and are excluded from decision making that affects their lives. It is a known fact that across Africa, infectious diseases, like Ebola, HIV/Aids, SARS, and more have had a devastating impact on poor vulnerable working-class people. Notwithstanding, positively, mutual aid, solidarity, and activism has united people, with very little help of government and big corporations.

Therefore, we the people, must begin to ask critical questions about what the new normal is. Does it mean increasing poverty and ill health, loss of livelihood and letting people die due to human greed. Conversely, can it be a single change, a change that is human and people centred? Since its inception, the Bench Marks Foundation has firmly stated the principle of 'people first,' that economic life begins with communities. We believe that the economy must serve people's lives, not people serving the economy. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has revealed the fault lines, and now is the time for the industry to take responsibility and go beyond the mine gates to recognise all the mining impacted communities' socio-economic needs, and be reminded that most communities gave away their land in an uninformed manner, thus in the process lost their livelihoods, through forced removal.

So, we conclude by asking pertinent questions on principles that must guide us in striving for an equitable society, that is based on human solidarity? For instance, how do we work together to ensure food sovereignty and self-reliance? How do we combat the climate catastrophe and ecological damage and ensuring provision of clean water for all? How to we attain a quality health system, open and accessible to all? How do we centre human dignity as the cornerstone of all policies, government, and business alike? How do we stop the scourge of violence, particularly against

women and children? How do we get support for a Universal Basic Income Grant? How do we promote robust debate and vibrant democratic space to speak as equals?

It is for this reason that this conference features stories of the people on the ground sharing their life experience amidst Covid-19. I therefore encourage you to attentively listen and hear the voices of communities engaging power and speaking truth to power. Talking about story sharing, I wish to reiterate Nina Simone words in her song about freedom and I quote, "I wish I knew how it would feel to be free. I wish I could break all the chains holding me, I wish I could say all the things that I should say them loud, say them clear for the whole around world to hear..." This must be everyone's wish in times such as this. This will teach us all what it means to be free and feels like to be free and be responsible for real freedom. So, let each one tell their story of her/his dream to be free for a better future.

Thank you for listening and for your support of our work over the years. Enjoy the rest of the conference. I thank you.