



**Publication:** Cape Times - Opinion

**Title:** COMMENT: Human rights honour past, present and future generations

**Publish date:** 20 Mar 2024

**Page:** 6

**Reach:** 10921

**AVE:** R 59505.60

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# Human rights honour past, present and future generations

*Rights flourish where there are responsible citizens and leaders in all walks of life*

## COMMENT



NICO KOOPMAN

DEAR Grandchildren. I told you a while ago that you will receive many communications from me during this historic year in South Africa.

This year we celebrate 30 years of democracy. On the 21st of March every year, we celebrate Human Rights Day. On this day in 1960, police of the apartheid government of South Africa killed people in Sharpeville who were protesting against the regime. The day was since then called Sharpeville Day but was renamed to Human Rights Day to emphasise that the tragic incident in Sharpeville should never happen again - anywhere.

Human rights are a crucial instrument that on the one hand, protect and, on the other hand, advance dignity, healing, justice, freedom and equality for all. Three dimensions of rights are acknowledged, namely first dimension civil and political rights, second dimension socio-economic rights, and third dimension environmental and developmental rights.

During the past 30 years we made good progress with the implementation and fulfilment of first dimension civil and political rights. All citizens of South Africa enjoy civil rights. Nobody is viewed as a second-class citizen anymore. The tragedy of Sharpeville occurred because the civil rights of black South Africans were not recognised. Black people had to carry passes in the country of their birth. On March 21, 1960 they protested against the carrying of such dehumanising, humiliating documents.

For 30 years now, we have had equal civil and political rights. We have an inclusive and participatory democracy. We participate in elections and other decision-making processes. We have freedom of movement. We have created structures like the Human Rights Commission, the Gender Equal-

ity Commission, the Public Protector, and the Constitutional Court to advance civil and political rights.

Having these rights is a major achievement. Macro-apartheid organised us into different population groups according to our skin colour. Different colour groups were forced to live in separate neighbourhoods. We could also not fall in love and marry across colour lines. The Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act and the Act on the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages were the cornerstones of apartheid.

Back then, various micro-apartheid acts were developed, based on your skin colour. These determined where you could be born, where you could go to school, where you could play, at which beach you could swim, in which hospital you could be cared for, in which hotel you could stay, in which restaurant you could dine, where you could be buried, through which door you could enter a post office, how much state subsidy you could receive for education and welfare, and in which part of the country you could live.

I remember with sadness how we could not enjoy all the beaches in South Africa. On the beach at Strand were two signs close to each other – the one read “Whites Only”, and the other “No Dogs Allowed”. Dogs and people of colour were not allowed. I remember the late Wessel Jenneke, a school principal in Danielskuil in the Northern Cape saying: “Every time I drive with my children through Barkly West, on our way to Kimberley, they ask if we can visit the beautiful holiday resort next to the Vaal River. I just tell them we don’t have time to do that. I can’t muster the courage to tell them they are viewed as inferior human beings, and therefore are not allowed to enter that resort.”

Children, I share this with you not to elicit negative emotions in you, but to make you understand why it is so important for us to celebrate Human Rights Day. Human Rights Day tells us we will not go back to the dark days of discrimination and dehumanisation. Instead, we go forward together to a society of dignity for all. We must remember, celebrate, and stand up for these rights. They will not stay in place automatically.

With the dawn of democracy and



THE message engraved on the PAC memorial to those who lost their lives in the Sharpeville Massacre. | INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS ARCHIVES

the adoption of a Constitution with a Bill of Rights, we could break with the violation of human rights and human dignity in the past. Although we have not achieved full civil and political liberation, we have made great progress.

During the last 30 years, we made less favourable progress with the fulfilment of socio-economic rights. We are not world champions in rugby only. Unfortunately, we are also world champions with regard to socio-economic inequality.

According to some measures, we have the biggest gap between the haves and have-nots globally. Some even view Stellenbosch as the town with the biggest gap between rich and poor in the world. Although it is no longer exclusively so, socio-economic inequality still runs largely along colour lines. In terms of civil and political rights, while all of us have access to the necessities of life, many cannot afford these and are still excluded. In some sense, political apartheid is dead, but socio-economic apartheid is still alive.

A lot of work needs to be done to advance the implementation of socio-economic rights. Twenty years ago, I participated with other theologians, legal scholars, economists and sociologists in a research project at Stellenbosch University on the development of theories that can advance the implementation of socio-economic rights. Such theories are required

urgently to build socio-economic well-being for all. The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, famously said that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. The building of good theories that lead to good policies, practices and societal habits is one way of practically advancing socio-economic well-being for all.

We also need to do more work as South Africans to advance the implementation of third dimension environmental and developmental rights. We need to cherish the inherent dignity, worth, value, esteem and splendour of the so-called non-human part of creation.

We need to emphasise that there is no talk of human dignity without talking about the dignity of animals, plants and nature. Such a focus will ensure that the holistic development of human beings is not at the expense of nature. This will also help us reduce the high levels of ecocide, of killing and destroying the natural environment, and thereby ourselves and the coming generations. If we neglect environmental rights, we steal from the future. We steal from you and your offspring who must live in this world long after we are gone.

So, grandchildren, human rights are an intergenerational matter. By honouring rights, we honour past generations who sacrificed so much for a world of human dignity and human rights. We also honour our contemporaries. And we honour tomorrow’s children.

Rights imply that we take up responsibility. There is no right that does not also call us to act responsibly. Rights flourish where there are responsible citizens and leaders in all walks of life. Human rights also flourish where there are right humans. We need to nurture right humans with habits of dignity, intuitions of healing, predispositions of justice, inclinations of freedom and tendencies of equality. Children, on this Human Rights Day and beyond, let us embrace rights, responsibilities and virtues, so that South Africa can flourish, so that the world can blossom – from generation to generation!

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