

Ask the poor what a life of dignity means

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Late last year at a Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) board meeting, activist and academic Leigh-Ann Naidoo posed a simple but important question. She asked, "what is sufficient?" Her question has a history and is probably best surmised by the Xhosa phrase of *Ubomi obunga hlelelekanga*, literally translated as "a life without struggle".

For many privileged South Africans, this is a question that rarely enters one's consciousness. Rather than engaging with what is sufficient to meet our needs or to create the conditions for all South Africans to have a life without struggle, the default position for many of us has often been one of individual consumption and the accumulation of capital. We use relative comparisons and consumer-driven consumptive indicators of "success" as a base.

At the Nelson Mandela

Foundation, part of our mandate is to look into inequality at various levels. This extends to the various manifestations of inequality outside of just economic indicators. Like many advocacy and outreach organisations, we are often seduced by technocratic solutions to reduce the inequality gap. Similarly, national discourses have often focused on quantitative "silver bullet" solutions involving a minimum wage, increased taxes for the rich or occasionally calls for a cap on executive salaries. In a country driven by extreme poverty and crises, aspirational goals have become a taboo and a luxury, quickly dismissed as impractical, implausible and dangerous.

However, at a policy level, the National Planning Commission has committed in the National Development plan 2030 to facilitate national conversations too on what constitutes a decent life for South Africans. However, this conversation has arguably not taken place on the scale

required. Instead, for the most part, many of us involved in poverty and inequality research or advocacy work have failed to ask the poor, those we claim to speak for, what they need. We also often create a narrative around poverty and label those who do not see themselves as poor as poor or poverty stricken. This labelling fails to account for the different circumstances and needs that people may have. We often impose what we believe to be of value on to those who are marginalised and have the expectation that academics and elites "know best".

The work undertaken by the Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII) and their partners has shifted the approach on understanding poverty. Rather than focusing solely on a minimum wage or indicators of what the

poor would presumably need, SPII has tried to shift the discourse into asking "what is a decent standard of living" and what would be required to allow people to realise their constitutional right to living a life of dignity. In order to do this, SPII has used a Minimum Income Standards Approach which involves a process

asking ordinary people questions to develop an understanding of what is necessary and how much is necessary. This question is distinguished from a question of what a luxury standard of living would be and seeks

to provide an answer to what we need to fulfil the constitutional objectives of human dignity, equality and freedom.

While the research conducted by SPII is still at a pilot stage, it does provide a base to create a second narrative outside of a targeting the "poorest of the poor",

with a thought and policy trajectory under a human rights framework. This becomes the aspirational goal for the country that is constantly engaged and updated.

For example, as technology becomes increasingly important to one's livelihood, the importance and money needed to remain connected increases. Creating the conditions for this conversation would not detract from conversations over the critical needs in our country, but would engage us in creating multiple aspirations. It will also seek to change the outlook of the wealthy. For those who earn multiples of what is required, a level of introspection and self-reflection would become the norm.

In order to start the facilitation of this conversation, NMF has therefore partnered with SPII, as part of the broader Mandela Initiative efforts, to host a dialogue on "sufficiency", drawing on the experiences and knowledge of academ-

ics, activists and researchers in the field.

It is time to change the narrative and the conversations we are having. Madiba in 1994, on taking leadership of the country and delivering his first State of the Nation address to Parliament, stated, "My government's commitment to create a people-centred society of liberty binds us to the pursuit of the goals of freedom from want, freedom from hunger, freedom from deprivation, freedom from ignorance, freedom from suppression and freedom from fear. These freedoms are fundamental to the guarantee of human dignity."

As we move into 2018, Madiba's centenary, it's time we take things into our hands and work toward provide real human dignity.

Khalil Goga, Nelson Mandela Foundation – research specialist and analyst. NFM will host the dialogue tonight at the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory in Houghton.

Aspirational goals have become a taboo and a luxury