

# Beyond the talk of the deaf

Social science is the missing link in our development approach as a changing society, argues **Mamphela Ramphele**

Seventeen years may sound like a long time, but for a society in transition it is short. We have much to celebrate. But we also need to have the self-confidence as a nation to talk about why the whole seems to be less than the sum of the parts in our performance as a society.

South Africa needs to pay more attention to the understanding of social relationships to operate better and harness the benefits of legacy; it needs to learn the lessons of history to inform our present and to shape our future.

I believe that social science is the missing link in our development approach as a changing society. We have to ask questions about:

- The role of social scientists in generating the type of conversation that could lead to the level of understanding of the self;

- The impact of social science on how to combine political unity and freedom, common values and toleration in a post-apartheid society; and

- The extent to which social science affects monitoring and evaluating policy performance in a society undergoing momentous changes.

Despite the commitments in our Constitution, we are not yet able to speak of ourselves unselfconsciously as South Africans. We remain locked into conversations of the deaf because we have yet to develop the capacity to listen to one another without downloading what we think is "the agenda" of the other. We struggle to speak to one another without fingerprinting or fear of retribution.

We need to draw wisdom from a wider set of sources, to help us understand ourselves as individuals, families, communities and society.

We have tended to be impatient for more rapid change, despite the difficult starting point in our democracy.

South Africans have yet to come to terms with tensions between the cultural approach to communication, rituals and symbols, value systems that derive from small-scale societal elements of our citizenry and those from people who have adopted large-scale societal values.

Apartheid unfortunately delegitimised merit in the eyes of



**Dr Mamphela Ramphele: 'Humans are wired for interconnectedness and interdependence.'**



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Leopards • Leading Africa • Dikgopelo ka Dikholof

**www.up.ac.za**

her latest book, *Begging to Be Black*. She reports on the comments of white people on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission asserting that there is something wrong with black people for being prepared to forgive even before forgiveness is asked: "You see they are not like us; they can't even hate properly."

She concludes that white people were prepared for revenge from black people but not forgiveness. The generosity that informs the humanity of black people in being willing to reconcile is seen as a sign of weakness by some white people.

Inequality and inequity in societies create social pain and shape the quality of social relationships. Psychologists have now demonstrated that pain inflicted on the psyche is as devastating as physical pain, if not more so. Humans are wired for interconnectedness and inter-

connectedness through its affirmative action. Acknowledging these tensions is essential to enabling open conversation. Failure to understand these tensions often leads to a conversation of the deaf between black and white, as well as between generations.

Antjie Krog confirms the risks of conversations of the deaf in her lat-

dependence within families, communities and societies. Any disruptions of these relationships inflict pain and leave those marginalised vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty.

What role do you see your university playing in advancing our self-understanding? What contribution are you as a university making to open conversations about complex issues of social pain and their implications for a society with a legacy such as ours?

We tend to underestimate the practical problem of translating the values of our Constitution into political unity in action in day-to-day life. How do social scientists explain the rise in violence against women and children, despite a Bill of Rights that entrenches gender equality and the rights of the child?

How do we explain the brutal institutional and physical violence against foreign nationals that has largely gone unpunished, despite South Africa being a signatory to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Migrants and their Families? How do we live in harmony in a country with divergent views on traditional customs that seem to contradict the values enshrined in our Constitution?

How safe are women and other vulnerable students from abuse in our institutions of higher learning? How focused are our institutions on educating, challenging and supporting young people to think differently about gender relationships and not hark back to indefensible "traditions and customs"?

Our society is characterised by a growing gap between laudable public policies derived from our Constitution and implementation that makes a difference in the daily lives of ordinary South Africans. The establishment of the monitoring and evaluation ministry by the Zuma government signals recognition of this gap. What is the role of social science in addressing this gap?

Social scientists have a special task of helping us to understand ourselves as we navigate the complex changes our society is undergoing.

You dare not fail.

*Formerly vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, Dr Mamphela Ramphele is chair of the Technology Innovation Agency and of the Letsema Circle. This is a summarised version of her address on February 3 to the University of Johannesburg's Sociology, Anthropology and Development Studies Wednesday Seminar (details at [www.uj.ac.za/](http://www.uj.ac.za/))*