

NEWS RELEASE

South Africa's untapped peace-builders: women traditional leaders



To round off their week of conflict-resolution training with the Centre for Mediation in Africa are, from left, Nkosikazi V Gwebindlala, Nkosi(kazi) P Ngonyama, Nkosi N Jumba, Nkosi Ntsika Joyi, Nkosikazi NS Ndamase and Nkosikazi N Mhlauli from the Eastern Cape, and Princess Julliet Mamushi, Ms Sarah Mojela and Kgosi Phophi Vhengani Ligege from Limpopo Province.

PRETORIA - Women traditional leaders are almost unknown outside the rural areas of South Africa, despite their vital role in building social cohesion and resolving disputes. Now, their value as peace-makers is being recognised far beyond their own communities, from Pretoria to France and the Netherlands.

“Peace is essential for any society to thrive, and women traditional leaders can play a decisive role in achieving it. I salute you for the wonderful work you are doing in your communities,” said Ambassador Joanne Doornewaard of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, addressing traditional leaders attending the final day of a week-long training programme hosted by the University of Pretoria’s Centre for Mediation in Africa (CMA).

The participants, mostly from Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, with a few from Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal, had been undergoing co-learning training in conflict-resolution, mediation and trauma support, as part of a CMA pilot project, “Strengthening pathways to community cohesion and wellbeing in South Africa”.

The project, which started in the Eastern Cape in May 2023, is being funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Embassy of France, whose Chargé d’Affaires, Arnaud Roux, also addressed the group at the event, held at UP’s Future Africa Campus on 30 August.

Mr Roux emphasised the importance of early action to prevent conflict from escalating – which can happen in a flash if left unchecked.

Act early to prevent escalation

“Fighting a conflict can be similar to fighting a fire,” he said, noting that when a fire has just started, a small glass of water would be enough to extinguish it. One minute later, a bucket would be needed. Left any later, it would take “planes and helicopters and dozens of firefighters” to quench the flames.

“It is the same with conflict. One needs to act at the very beginning of conflict at local level to prevent escalation,” he said, adding that it was also crucial to address deep-seated trauma in communities.

Several speakers touched on generational trauma in communities and how it can manifest in cycles of anger, violence and conflict.

“At the start of the project, we listened to the traditional leaders and learnt about their amazing work, but there were a lot of gaps where there was an urgent and important need for support,” said Dr Sofka John, Deputy Director at the CMA. “Trauma support was a very big request from almost every stakeholder, and also conflict-resolution skills.”

The CMA has responded by partnering with the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture in Cape Town to provide trauma training and support.

In a panel discussion, Nkosi Ntsika Joyi, a senior male traditional leader from Mthatha, gave a chilling example of how past trauma was still affecting communities today. He said 16 families in the area had lost fathers, brothers and sons in 1964 due to apartheid era hangings, resulting in trauma that had spread across generations. “We are trying to unblock the clogged trauma that is there. This programme gives so much hope; it is greatly assisting us to pick up issues in the community as they build up.”

Nkosi N Jumba, also a senior traditional leader from Mthatha, said the programme had helped her to help others. “First, I found peace for myself. I could not distribute peace to my people without peace in me. With the programme, I am calmer and relationships with my stakeholders have improved greatly. My area was known for violence and crime; now we work well with the South African Police Services and all the government departments.”

Making connections where there are disconnections

Through the programme, community peace forums have been established, serving both as early-warning systems and as platforms for dialogue on issues critical to communities. So far, Nkosi Jumba and Nkosi Joyi have each trained 25 community leaders from their areas to take the peace forums’ work further afield.

“Our forum is inclusive of community members and its focus is not restricted to our area of jurisdiction,” said Nkosi Jumba. “We have foot soldiers to spread peace.”

Professor Cori Wielenga, Director of the CMA, compared the Eastern Cape community peace forums of 2024 to the peace committees that had sprung up across townships in South Africa during the late 1980s.

“People say that the national dialogue and peace committees of the 1980s are one reason why South Africa did not degenerate into civil war,” she said, adding that while the CMA’s social cohesion initiative is still a pilot project, the centre would ultimately like to see community peace forums all over South Africa, all connected to each other. “So, when there is unrest like in 2021, these kinds of networks can create a safety net and early warning.”

Summing up the programme, Prof Wielenga said it was about “making connections where there are disconnections”. In the Mthatha area where the project had started, the CMA had identified disconnections between traditional leaders and government officials; different levels of government; value systems; resources and budgets; and between policies and implementation.

A multiplicity of connections has since been made – as demonstrated by the participation in the recent CMA event of representatives from various levels of government. They included Sibongile Taukobong from the national Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), Stanford Nkcinkca, Senior Clerk at COGTA in Mthatha, and Cllr Liemakatso Molakalaka, Government councillor.

The CMA is also seeking to bridge the rural-urban gap. “So often, the rural areas are left behind,” said Prof Wielenga. “We have brought everyone to Pretoria to build bridges between Gauteng and rural South Africa.”-

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Media enquiries can be directed to Mr Sashlin Girraj - Public Relations & Events Manager

Email: sashlin.girraj@up.ac.za | Cell: +27(0)72 447 3784

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

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