



## **Media Statement:**

### **Thirty years into democracy: What is the value of democracy if it does not transform lives especially the lives of those most marginalised in society?**

Freedom day in South Africa is a moment of celebration, a moment of remembrance of where we come from and where we never want to be again. Freedom day also provides a moment of reflection on the promises we had stepping into democracy and the extent to which such promises had been fulfilled.

*“The brutalities of the past - detentions without trial, disappearances of our people, deaths in detentions, hangings of those opposed to apartheid, imprisonment, exile, massacres, assassinations, forced removals, banishments, the Group Areas Act and many more laws that made the lives of black people unbearable - are testimonies that our freedom was never free. Although today we walk tall because our collective efforts culminated on the 27th of April being our Freedom Day, we all still carry scars that remind us that our freedom that is at times taken for granted, was never free...”*- President Thabo Mbeki, 2008.

It is undeniable that in the past 30 years of our democracy, government had made great strides in addressing the social service backlog; providing access to clean water, sanitation, educational and recreational facilities in areas where little or none existed before. Furthermore, significant progress had been made towards achieving an open and transparent public service through the enactment of laws that establish and affirm the separation of powers between legislative, the judiciary and the executive arms of government. Regulations that establish the institutional structures, powers and functions as well as articulate the limitations of such powers, had also been established as a way of strengthening public administration and governance. A range of statutory mechanisms were also established to facilitate public accountability and citizen participation. Indeed, one could say that the country has come a long way since 1994.

However, in the last 30 years so much still remain in place for a majority of South Africans. Over 60% of the country’s population still live below the poverty line. The country ranks amongst the highest in the world in levels of inequality. Poverty is apparent to the eye in that it is profiled by growing shacks, homelessness, joblessness, poor infrastructure and lack of access to clean drinking water, a substandard quality

of education, and other basic services. Up until 1994, exclusion was based on race and class; in the post-1994 dispensation, it matters greatly whether one lives in a leafy suburb or an informal settlement and whether they are in a rural or urban area. Informal settlements and rural living are characterised by harsher socio-economic conditions.

One is forced to reflect on what freedom is and what it means for a majority of South Africans. Is Freedom day truly a day of celebration for many South Africans?

That as a people we were able to achieve political freedom and break free of the shackles of racial divide is undoubtably worth celebrating. In celebrating freedom day lies a recognition of the oneness of the people of South Africa, it is moment to build social cohesion and to affirm a commitment to protect, consolidate and strengthen our hard-earned democracy.

In Freedom day also lies a moment of deep reflection. A reflection on our shortcomings as a society, on the extent to which we are leaving so many people behind, languishing in extreme poverty, lacking the basics, trapped in conditions that would perpetuate poverty for generations to come. We are creating conditions for the haves to thrive and the have-nots to perish in ways that trample on the notion of 'the oneness of the people of South Africa'. In our inability to restructure our economy, and land ownership patterns and the apartheid spatial legacy in meaningful ways we run a risk of making a mockery of democracy.

What is the value of political freedom to a person who is hungry, lives in an informal settlement, who drink water from dirty streams with animals, who must walk long distances to get to a school or a clinic and even when they get there the quality of services provided is sub-standard? For such a people, *"it would be better to go back to Egypt as slaves and labour with stomachs full, than to die of hunger and starvation in the wilderness"* as the verse from the Bible goes. The country's inability to address its the pressing and deepening socio-economic challenges threatens the very democracy celebrated through Freedom day. For many, economic freedom is as important as political freedom. What is the value of any democracy if it does not transform lives, especially the lives of those most marginalised in society?

The meaning of democracy will again come into question and it is yet to be seen the extent to which such conversation will inform how many of the marginalised people will exercise their right to vote as a tool to hire or fire a government.

**ENDS**

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