

Respected members of the Council of Stellenbosch University, dignitaries, colleagues and friends – welcome. A special welcome to our esteemed visitors to Dakar of 20 years ago, whom we give thanks for this commemoration and for whom it was possible to be present here today.

Honorable members of the Stellenbosch University Council, dignitaries, colleagues and friends, good morning and welcome to this event that is presented jointly by the University and Die Burger.

Ndibulisa kuwo onke amalungu abekileyo eBhunga leYunivesithi yaseStellenbosch, kwiindwendwe ezikhoyo, koogxa bam nakwizihlobo ngale ntsasa yanamhlanje ndisithi masibe kunye kulo msitho wenziwa ngokubambisana phakathi kweYunivesithi ne-Die Burger.

The arrival of Henry Jeffreys as the current editor of *Die Burger* will still be acknowledged in history as one of the most significant media events of our time and environment. I thank him that Stellenbosch University and *Die Burger* can be the proud hosts of this first conference on social cohesion. It is significant that the week in which the conference is being held coincides with the groundbreaking discussions of 20 years ago between the so-called enemies of the day. Dakar bears witness to the daring that we again need today for the development of social cohesion: a daring that was born from the prospect of a free South Africa where people were no longer viewed as the products of their pigment, but as expressions of an inalienable human dignity. However, it is also 20 years after the heroic death of Ashley Kriel, a young man from the Cape Flats who, like many other activists, paid the highest price for the dream of a liberated country. I would like to invite you to stand for a moment's silence in memory of the loss of many heroes of our freedom.

Thank you, you may be seated.

We are gathered here today because we all feel a sense of loss. Our nation has a growing awareness of us losing the glue that should be holding our society together.

Allow me, therefore, a few thoughts on “social cohesion in South Africa today”:

Our young democracy is struggling to realise social cohesion, solidarity and national building. We only have to look at our newspapers every day and try to make sense of the accusations and counter-accusations about everything that is wrong in our country. The letters to the editors of newspapers are characterised by our people's growing intolerance, lack of fellow-feeling and continuous finger-pointing. All signs of a country where social cohesion still suffers from many deficiencies.

It is for this reason that, in his state of the nation address earlier this year, Pres Thabo Mbeki extended an invitation to civil society to do its share in the creation and promotion of social cohesion. This is a task and a responsibility that rests on all our shoulders. It is not something that the government can bring about successfully on its own. It is a task that has to be tackled on a much broader and more comprehensive front and in which all of us, as citizens of this country and every institution therein, have a decisive role to play.

In my installation speech on 11 April 2007 I already indicated that there are important aims for both myself and SU that will guide our actions for the future. One of these is the rejection of the perception that we try to barricade ourselves behind the Boland mountains to avoid the realities of and the challenges in our country. We are here today, in the steps of those who went to Dakar, people who will go far to search for and recover our social cohesion.

Just as those who went to Dakar 20 years ago – and many of them are well-known academics at our University – had a longing and a quest for a better future for all of us, for new hope, I believe that SU has an important role to play precisely in that creation of hope and to contribute to the fibre of our social cohesion. We wish to be at the cutting edge of issues of national importance, and be involved actively in the shaping of our country's future. That is why we have brought together some of the foremost minds in civil society here today so that they can reflect together on an issue that is of central importance to the healthy development and extension of our democracy.

This is part of the essence of a university of significance, one that can be a melting pot for new and conflicting ideas that can lay the foundation for a broadening of our thinking and where differences can make way for communalities, suspicion make way for harmony, and in which the fragmentary and self-interest can make way for the greater, holistic challenges; a lively space where we can move away from behind our pseudonyms towards each other and experience that we belong to each other by name and may be exposed to each other.

Just as those who went to Dakar 20 years ago, we stand today before the challenge to face the true enemy of our democracy: the erosion of our social cohesion.

We know that we have lost the art of loving one another. We all know that when we see a homeless person despicably kicked to death by school going children. Or when a fellow South African loses his life in a police holding cell after being assaulted by other inmates. His crime apparently was that he had too much to drink. We know that when a precious girl child of our nation is raped, held in captivity and finally murdered because of the ignorance of uncles, fathers and grandfathers. We have lost the art of loving and the signs are there for anyone to see.

We know that we have fallen out of love with one another. We experience that when we see the poor cringe in the face of an economic reality that tells them that they are misfits. We feel it when we drive pass the many walls of security between the rich and the poor. We know that we have fallen out of love with each other when we see the neglect of all working class areas regardless of race. We know that when we read about corruption, greed and exploitation. We face that when we get in touch with people who feel really marginalised because of their race, sexual orientation, gender and social location. We realise that when the people of Mitchells Plain and of Kayamandi feel that they are on their own.

I am convinced that, in the course of the day, we will hear divergent and sometimes clashing standpoints. And maybe we will realise anew that there are no quick fixes for an issue as important and extensive as this one. But the challenge facing all of us is to think constructively and inclusively so that, at the end of today, we will walk away with the

first signals of a modus operandi for the strengthening of our social cohesion.

Dakar also reminds us of the express and communal role of civil society, the media and those who have committed themselves to a pedagogy of hope. Twenty years ago, one of those who went to Dakar experienced “an enormous sense of new political possibility”. May we today be joined together as partners in the future and agents of hope for all our people in our struggle against the erosion of our social cohesion.

Our national efforts for regaining social cohesion must lead to actions on two parallel fronts: unity and justice. Too often have we been subjected to social actors who separate these two, and now we are unfortunately facing serious drops in the level of social cohesion. Some have taken race as the main course of justice at the cost of unity. Others have sentimentally embraced unity at the cost of justice – particularly towards the poor. Social cohesion in South Africa requires the dual memory of and action for unity and justice. This conference must remind us all of our unity and simultaneously inspire us to act for justice. In unity we will capture our common South African-ness. However, our South African-ness will never be fully shared unless the walls of injustice towards the poor in our country are effectively demolished.

I hope that we will continue the conversation even when and where we differ most. I hope that we will not fall victim to the traps in our diverse languages of social living, of the past and of the future. I hope that we will rise to the occasion to embrace each other to turn this cradle of humanity into the personification of the glue of social cohesion; that we will find strength in the human spirit to stop the erosion of our social cohesion.

Thank you once again for your participation and presence here today. And I am looking forward to a conference that will lay the foundation for revitalising and galvanising our social cohesion to new heights.

Thank you / Baie dankie/ Enkosi.

