"The Evolution of Civic Engagement: South Africa: a Case Study"

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I must begin by stating that democracy is centrally important to these aspects of intellectual practice that we are engaged in and which inform civic engagement in Higher Education.

It is an honour to address distinguished scholars and others in the Arab world.

It is a particular honour and pleasure to be here as a guest of the American University of Cairo/John Gerhart Center for Civic Engagement and Philanthropy.

John and Gail Gerhart have a very important place in the political history of South Africa. They are the authors of one of the most authentic accounts of the struggle for freedom in our region. Their professional commitment to active research stands out as one of the best examples of community based research.

In South Africa, we have a particular history of community or civic engagement in higher education. That engagement has its roots in civil society engagement outside the universities.

In South Africa under apartheid, NGOs and civil society organizations formed the advance guard in the fight against racist oppression. This was done both as a direct subversion of the oppressive state, and as an endeavor to ensure progressive development opportunities for communities. NGOs and CBOs became democratic alternatives to the state.

Churches, NGOs, unions and civics took up community issues and empowered people oppressed under apartheid. This was very important given the fact that oppression often leads to a situation in which people are disempowered and unable to become agents of social change. Active civil society played a key role in assisting communities to realize that the ability to make a difference exists within every community.

Through providing development support, through being the incubators of democratic practice and culture in South Africa, organs of civil society visibly altered the character of the struggle and the role of people in achieving social change. These structures empowered the people. Street-block-area committees, literacy organizations, and bursary organizations, the UDF, churches and other religious bodies - all played a role in ending apartheid. They showed people that they could take control of their own affairs and be a force to be reckoned with.

Churches, NGOs, unions and civic mass-based organizations also played a vital role in promoting and providing education. Many interventions that led to success for students of the oppressed majority tended to be NGO-led interventions.

To put this in perspective, it is useful to refer to three key features that characterized the education and training system under apartheid.

First, the system was fragmented along racial and ethnic lines, and children were taught the racist ideology and educational doctrines of apartheid.

Second, there was unequal access to education and training at all levels of the system. Vast disparities existed between black and white schooling and large numbers of black children and adults had little or no access to education and training.

Third, there was a lack of democratic control within the education and training system. Students, teachers, parents, and workers were excluded from deciding what sort of education they wanted.

The fragmented, unequal, and undemocratic nature of the education and training system has had profound effects on the development of the economy and society. It resulted in the destruction, distortion or neglect of the human potential of our country, with devastating consequences for social and economic development.

As important, apartheid education and resistance to apartheid education destroyed the culture of learning within large sections of our communities, leading in the worst affected areas to a virtual breakdown of schooling.

The challenge we faced at the dawn of a democratic society was to create an education and training system in and through which all our people would be able to develop their potential to the full.

The democratic transition of 1994 brought about major changes in the relationship between institutions of higher education and society. In 1997, the White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education was released, promoting the creation of new models for community engagement within the broader plan for national transformation.

Three of the key goals outlined in the White Paper were particularly relevant to civic engagement:

- ***Improve the quality of teaching and learning and ensure that curricula are responsive to the national and regional context***

- ***Secure and advance high-level research and the application of this research to technological improvement and social development***
- ***Promote and develop social responsibility and awareness among students through community service programs***

The government views community engagement both as a way to fulfill the institutional missions of higher education and to contribute to the transformation of South African society. Underlying the principles outlined in the White Paper is the belief that community engagement and service learning constitute serious academic work and enhance the fundamental educational purpose of knowledge creation.

The challenge for government, as is always the case with social transformation in new democracies, was to convert the policy goals into practice. In this regard, Government was able to call on the assistance of the Joint Education Trust. JET was an independent, non-profit organization that drew together the private sector, the mass democratic movement, the private sector, international development agencies and education institutions to work together to develop policy alternatives and practices in education. JET was an unusual organization as its purpose was to develop models and policies for a free South Africa.

In 1992 (and shortly before democracy in South Africa) the Joint Education Trust (JET) was a private sector initiative (a consortium of 20 leading companies) with a commitment of R500 million over five years. It supported more than 400 NGOs involved in early childhood development, youth development, adult education and training, and teacher development.

In 2000 it began a new life with a commitment of R650 million from local and offshore donors. It has provided key policy support to government.

With funding from the Ford and Kellogg Foundations, JET created a special initiative called CHESP (Community Higher Education Service

Partnerships). The original pilot programme worked with seven diverse universities to support the conceptualization, implementation and research on:

- Service-learning academic courses
- Community, faculty and service agency involvement in community-HE engagement
- Student assessment in community engagement
- Organizational structures conducive to community engagement
- Quality assurance of community engagement and service-learning

To date, CHESP has researched "close to 200 credit-bearing modules (courses) that incorporated the principles and practice of service-learning. Collectively, these modules included 39 different academic disciplines and almost 7 000 students ranging from first year to Master's level" (HEQC Good Practice Guide, June 2006).

In the late 1990s, most South African universities had a wide range of community service projects. Yet there was no systematic audit of these activities. CHESP has helped universities to audit their programmes. This has assisted these institutions to develop a typology of community engagement activities and to use the data to inform the development of an institution-wide policy and strategy for community engagement.

CHESP worked closely with the Department of Education and the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) to advance community engagement in South African higher education institutions.

CHESP has been seminal in making community engagement an integral part of teaching and research – a mechanism to enrich teaching and research with a deeper sense of context, locality and application. This is very important because community engagement is not about universities setting up projects in communities. It is an empowering process in which

communities should have an equal say in determining the nature of engagement and in elaborating its objectives.

As a result of the initial CHESP intervention the terminology used in community engagement has shifted from "community service" to "knowledge based community service" to "community engagement" and to the current "scholarship of engagement".

CHESP was innovative in identifying service learning as the entry point into community engagement. CHESP supported the conceptualization, implementation, and, evaluation of 256 accredited academic courses, in 39 different academic disciplines, in 12 higher education institutions. These courses served as a basis for generating data that inform higher education policy and practice at national, institutional and programmatic level.

This intervention was not only about community engagement. It was also about assisting in the shaping of the democratic society and state that South Africa was committed to be. It was about academics seeing the validity and importance of research and engagement in the development of the institutions of a democracy, the legislation, the social and economic policies, the building of social inclusion in a diverse nation. It was also about producing better engineers and better architects and better mathematicians - responsive to the needs of communities including those in the rural hinterlands.

Community engagement is no longer on the margins of academic life in our universities. It is located in the DVCs' office in some of the institutions. It is to be found in the introduction of short courses in service learning for new academics and student leaders. In addition, it is also included in some of the post-graduate modules in higher education and orientation programmes.

Community engagement is embedded in higher education institutions as a core function. It's not hard to see why this should be the case, given our

history and the demands we make on universities to undertake research that offers the opportunity to lift as many communities out of poverty as possible.

We look for a community engagement component in all courses and not only the most obvious ones, like lawyers and doctors working *pro bono* for a period of time in medical or legal aid clinics.

We look for a new way of designing courses so that social upliftment is not the object of a course but is embedded in the course itself.

For example, one of our leading universities will run an MA in Social Justice from next year. Social justice is not a subject in the law syllabus or in any other syllabus on most campuses. Yet it is a defining concept in public policy and democratic thought. This course will combine law, social justice and development to teach students how to realize the transformative vision of our constitution. In many ways at the heart of this course is what governments grapple with every day – how to translate policy into effective practice so that the lives of our citizens are transformed for the better.

A judge involved in the design of the course described its aim as follows: "What we do will be absolutely critical to our constitution's survival. Closing the gap between the promises of social justice and the delivery of it requires the expertise of the legal community in particular, to make our constitution work."

By making community engagement a core value in our universities, more and more university courses will be designed not to add in or add on a community engagement component, but to lead to a redesign of the course curriculum itself. That is how we are beginning to think outside traditional structures. That is how we are beginning to redesign our universities and how they are becoming more responsive.

South Africa has provided but a small example of how difference can be celebrated as strength, and how a new nation can be constructed from many parts. We have started our journey and will hope to continue to travel with you as you set out to establish the network of Arab universities for knowledge sharing purposes and civic engagement on your campuses.

We are currently engaged in a process of HE transformation on the continent and many universities need assistance in developing their relations with communities and the state. I trust that this initiative will eventually involve all African universities and allow them to develop what has proves to be a very positive set of interventions between intellectuals, students and local communities.

I thank you