

NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY

Opening Remarks
Professor Sibongile Muthwa
Vice-Chancellor, Nelson Mandela University

Sport Africa 14th Annual Conference
“African Nations and World Competitions: State of Play”
17:15 – 18:20 (CAT) 24 June 2021

<https://sportsafrica.org/conferences-2/participant-registration/>

I wish to offer warm greetings to all conference delegates at this 14th Annual Conference of Sport Africa.

In particular, I wish to recognise the Conference Co-ordinators:

Prof. Simon A. Akindes – University of Wisconsin, Parkside

Dr. Martha Saavedra – University of California, Berkeley

Dr. Tarminder Kaur – University of Johannesburg

Bose Maposa – Ohio University

Dr. Gerard A. Akindes – Sports Africa Network, Doha, Qatar

Prof. David Bogopa – Nelson Mandela University – Prof Bogopa, I am sure that it is in no small measure thanks to you that we are able to be the proud hosts of this conference this year as Nelson Mandela University.

I am aware that international conferences of this scale take significant work and collective effort. And so I would also wish to acknowledge the members of the Scientific Committee; the IT Committee; and the Local Organizing Committee for this impressive conference that awaits us.

I also wish to greet the three keynote speakers who will share insights and perspectives which will challenge our thinking and push us to new levels of endeavour. Thank you in advance to:

Professor Ashwin Desai

Monsieur Aziz Daouda

Advocate Daryl Newton

The Conference Programme is diverse, wide-ranging and provocative. I am particularly pleased to have noted the contributions from young academics. These fresh voices are necessary and most welcome.

I must confess that I am a bit of a novice in the world of sport. At best I would say that I am an appreciator, rather than a top team-player or fervent fan. So you can imagine that it is a bit daunting for me to be in your midst today. I certainly stand to learn much from these august conference proceedings.

The discussions over the next three days will traverse the spectrum of the sports eco-system. The richness of ideas will shine a light on existing knowledge and surely also generate new ways of thinking. The global ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a particular onslaught on sport. There has had to be a fundamental re-imagining of contact sport. It is encouraging to see the innovations and determination with which the re-start of sport has begun to happen. But beyond the physical aspects of the inability to compete and play sports during the pandemic, the longer term implications of the psychological impact of the absence of sport in the initial phases of the pandemic and the social aspect of sports more generally are yet to fully manifest. Given the inherent nature of sport as social and interactive, I have witnessed how the inability to maintain an active recreational or competitive lifestyle has affected the mental and emotional wellbeing of students here at Nelson Mandela University. This would no doubt be true at the different institutions at which you teach, research and work. I look forward to hearing more about ways to respond and overcome these manifestations from the research that this conference will generate, as well as the intellectual work that is to come from sports scholars such as yourselves.

As you would be aware, the African Agenda 2063 recognises sport as an element of culture and a major contributor in human development and strengthening national cohesion and rapprochement of people. Countries are called upon to campaign against all forms of racial, religious and political discrimination in sports because the African Union regards sports as a fundamental human right. How though, do young people on the continent actualise this right when material conditions are prohibitive? How does a hungry child have the stamina and energy to compete at peak level? How does a girl-child have the time to participate in sport activity when the responsibility for household chores and fetching water are still gendered and rest only on female shoulders? What if there are cultural and religious beliefs that are prohibitive? How do schools implement sporting activities when there is no funding for basic

equipment? How are talented young people able to hone their performance when there is no supportive infrastructure and no sponsorship? The barriers to realising sport as a human right are numerous and place a cap on achieving the full potential of the sports dividend on the African continent. But with determined collective effort, boundaries can be rolled back. I have noted that during the course of this conference, a number of enabling aspects will be discussed, such as policy; sports facilities; and participation dimensions such as health and doping. Indeed, the impressive span of papers encompasses the multi-dimensional and inherently political nature of sport, traversing historical-political; socio-cultural-political; economic-political debates. The centrality of inclusion from both gender and differently-abled perspectives is critical if sport is to fulfil its developmental, social role. And whilst I note that this important work will be discussed during the conference, I believe that more needs to and must be done on the scholarship of inclusion in sports.

At Nelson Mandela University, we have a vision of changing the world - and deliberately improving the one we have inherited - through bold scholarship, innovative research and transformative engagement. This requires confronting the challenges of our shared past of inequality, exclusion and discrimination in different sectors of our society, including in sports. This uneven playing field is not unique to South Africa and Africa. The world is still an unequal place. It is our collective responsibility to change this and create a more socially just, humanising socio-political dispensation across the globe. To do so, as scholars we must ask the right, difficult and sometimes even counterintuitive questions that not only help us better understand what we are confronting, but also enable us to imagine the freer society and world we want to create and live in.

As sports scholars, you will be familiar with the words of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela when he said:

“Sports can create hope, where there was once only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination. Sports is the game of lovers”.

Thank you for trusting Nelson Mandela University as the host of this 14th Annual Conference. May your deliberations break new ground.

I thank you.