

UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REMARKS

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QWAQWA CAMPUS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
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Free State University Graduation Ceremony

The acting Vice-Chancellor Professor Naidoo,
Distinguished leaders of this great university,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Fellow graduands,

I would like to thank very much the University of the Free State Sciences for this honour to be conferred with an honorary doctorate from this great university. I know that through me, you are recognizing the work of all those around the world who advance social justice, particularly who advance the right to health for all. I stand before you humbly and I am proud to join the Kovsie community!

The hall we are in bears the name of a fearless and wise man. Madiba told us that, and I quote, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". I could not agree more. I was humbled to learn that this university bestowed an honorary doctorate on President Mandela in 2001.

Both my parents were teachers. One was a primary school teacher, the other a secondary school teacher. They were unconventional. They challenged and they encouraged us, their children. They taught us that what matters most in the world is being part of your community and standing up for justice.

For me, as for so many across the African continent, your struggle here for equality in South Africa—a struggle that we all can see is unfinished—is an inspiration. In the awful era of Apartheid even your province's name, Free State, was itself a bitter irony. Today, whilst the long walk continues, the destination you are working to reach makes your name Free State as beautiful as those words deserve to be.

I wanted to share with you three reflections on freedom. These reflections are themselves inspired in large part by the insights of people from your country, including from the students' movements of the past and today.

The first is that real freedom is so much more than the freedom to vote or, in the case of your country, the freedom not to be banned. Real freedom comes when every one of us is able to flourish. Central to that is education—which must be a right for all and not a privilege for a few. Every time I visit my home village in Uganda, Ruti, I meet friends of mine who did not have the opportunities I had, whose education was abruptly cut short because of an early marriage, because they had to tend to a sick family member or because they had to work for the family to survive, or they didn't have school fees. All girls and all boys must be supported to complete a full schooling, and schools must be places of quality learning, of safety, and of empowerment—and, may I add, of joy, of enjoying oneself, one's youth! The push that you students have made for tertiary education to open up, to reform, to reject the bad from the past, to include all, has been challenging for you, challenging for your institutions—but you have won many important steps forward and you should be congratulated for the progress that you have brought about. Congratulations! Yes, we've been following your movements, Rhodes must fall, fees must fall, and you inspired other students around the world to fight for inclusion and equality.



The second reflection is that none of us is free whilst anyone of us is not free. That is why the struggle for freedom needs always to be intersectional. Across the continent and across the world, South Africa has been a beacon for movements that are joined up, resisting racial inequality, embracing gender equality, and embracing equality for LGBTQ people. It is these inclusions that make a world free. So, continue to be that beacon—as a country and as a student and alumni community. Challenge stigmatization, challenge criminalization. Wherever you see anyone who's put down because of their race, because they are a woman, because they are gay, or trans, stand up for them. Tolerance is not enough—be an ally to all who are marginalized, not only on their side but by their side.

The third reflection is that freedom is never given, it is only ever won. And it is never permanently or fully won in one moment—it must be won again and again and again. All progress has been won through collective movements, through the organising of extraordinary ordinary people. I've been part of the women's movements in Africa, in the world. We've made a lot of progress through organizing, through holding hands, in all our diversity. The most important heroes are not those in history books or on podiums like myself, they are you—you working together, forming collectives.

Use the power that your education has given you. And use it to demand accountability and rights, for yourselves and for others. Education enabled me to go from that rural village of Ruti in Uganda, where we had no electricity, no running water, and it led me to serve in our national parliament. I was a member of parliament. It led me to lead an iconic global organisation, Oxfam International, and it led me now to lead the United Nation's work globally to fight AIDS. From my little village.

But that power that education gave me cannot, never makes me proud in itself. It makes me responsible for what I must do to lift others, to make this world equal and just. My pride is in what I am able to do with others to make the world more just. The qualifications are mere tools to achieve a purpose.



Today is your day. You have achieved so much in getting to this day. I know you are going to celebrate as indeed you should. But let me challenge you. Let me challenge you as you leave this beautiful campus to go into the world to make a difference:

Go out there and work to build a society where every girl and boy gets the full and quality education they deserve.

Go out into the world to build a society that guarantees equality for everyone. That no one should ever again be discriminated for their gender, for their race, for their sexuality. Equality for everyone.

Go out to build collective power, I believe in the power of people. Change only happens through the power of people. Never wait for the right leaders to come and lead, you are the leader who must lead.

A more equal society will be better for everyone—for the rich, for the poor, for the able, for the less able. A more equal society is good for all—it is safer, it is more prosperous, it's more sustainable, it's healthier, it's happier.

At heart I am an optimist. I want to tell you a story. This is my last challenge. You are shaped by the history of your country. The rest of us in Africa, particular of my generation, are shaped by the history of our continent including the history of your country. We watched, we followed what happened in this country and we waited for your independence, because it was going to be the independence of our entire continent. Let me tell you, when you were free, we all came rushing to see South Africa and South Africans, because for many, many years our passports had a stamp that said: "Valid for all countries except the Republic of South Africa". We were not allowed to step here while there was still Apartheid. That was the resistance from the rest of Africa. So, when you were free we came rushing to see the remaining part of our continent come free. When my turn came and I arrived at the airport Johannesburg, it wasn't even yet called O.R. Tambo airport, it had another name, when I arrived, I saw many young women at the immigration desk and I brought my passport to one of them. And she looked at me with a big smile and said "Welcome to South Africa" and I said "thank you". Then she said "How is it out there in Africa?" I said "Africa?" "Yes, out there where you're coming from, how is it in Africa?" It hit me that this young woman had not yet had consciousness that South Africa was part of Africa. And of course, I got into a discussion with her that this is Africa where you are. And she said "Ok, I know, but I mean there where you are." So, this is my last challenge to you, my fellow graduands, you are coming from a history that cut you off from the rest of your continent. But what I leave with you is this—it's a challenge and it's a blessing: go out there and be proud Africans. Embrace your whole continent. Go out there knowing we have one history as a continent and we have one destiny as a continent. And serve your continent and make the most of it.

So, it's not only an honour for me to receive this honorary degree and I thank you so much for it. It's an honour for me to share this day with you, graduands, and to bless you as the future, or maybe let me say, the present of Africa.

I thank you.

