Caption

AGENT FOR CHANGE … Development Studies Professor Jonathan Makuwira will be asking challenging questions about development in Africa in his professorial inaugural lecture.

Headline

**NMMU lecture: Are universities really advancing social justice?**

OVER the past seven decades, foreign aid worth almost a billion dollars has been pouring into Africa to assist with development, focusing particularly on reducing poverty and the issues linked with this in both urban and rural contexts.

So why are these problems not diminishing? Why is poverty growing? Why is the inequality gap getting bigger and bigger? And what role should universities be playing?

These are the questions Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University’s Development Studies Professor Jonathan Makuwira will be asking at his professorial inaugural lecture, titled “Water under troubled bridge: The relevance/irrelevance of development studies pedagogies [teaching methods] in African universities”. The lecture, which is open to the public, takes place at NMMU on 18 August.

He will be challenging the way development studies is being taught at universities not only in South Africa but Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole – and whether students are being adequately prepared to be effective practitioners for social change in Africa.

“My inaugural lecture will pose several questions: What is the role of universities (the ‘troubled bridge’) in addressing issues of social justice and enhancing social change?

“How can a discipline like development studies be taught so that we create space for students to be critical not only of the local issues, but regional as well as global issues?

“How can we teach development studies to the extent where students are made aware of the politics of development? And how can they play a role in closing the inequality gap?”

Makuwira believes the onus for this lies squarely on the shoulders of lecturers.

“Are we teaching content that is not relevant to our African context? Are our pedagogical approaches transformative enough to offer multiple lenses to analyse critical development issues?”

Makuwira said much of the current development theory is Eurocentric and very Americanised. These theories ignore the rich African stories – the real-life stories of those living in poverty in the likes of South Africa’s townships and squatter camps.

He says there is a “war of ideology” in the way development studies knowledge is generated. “Why is it that only 15% of the articles in the top 10 development studies journals are authored by scholars from developing countries and, even less than this this number from African scholars? Whose interests are being served?

“There is a particular (foreign) knowledge pushed on us which, in turn, we propagate through inappropriate pedagogies.

“I’m going to propose a radical pedagogy that departs from the conventional one … one that has not yet been proposed for development studies, but is suited for the current ‘decolonising development studies’ debate.

“We need to question ourselves and how what we teach affects our students who end up as field practitioners,” said Makuwira.

He said a university was expected to be a role model, a leader, and a critical thinker for real change.

“Universities are social institutions that must stand firm against injustice. Development studies, in particular, has a big job to do.”

Makuwira, who started his working life as a primary school teacher in Malawi, spent the last 12 years lecturing in three universities in Australia in the fields of development, peace, and indigenous studies.

He obtained his honours and masters degrees in education at the University of Nottingham, United Kingdom, and completed his PhD in international development studies at the University of New England in Australia.

Asked why he came back to Africa, choosing to leave a good job in Australia, Makuwira said: “Africa is where my heart lies (with thanks to singer Miriam Makeba, who coined the phrase). I owe my continent something.”

* Prof Jonathan Makuwira’s inaugural lecture takes place at 5:30pm on 18 August at the North Campus Conference Centre. To attend, contact: Cleadia.Hartzenberg@nmmu.ac.za.