**Nomination for Zayed Award**

**Nominee: Nelson Mandela Foundation**

**Introduction**

The Nelson Mandela Foundation (Foundation) is the not-for-profit legacy institution of the globally renowned late South African statesman Nelson Mandela. Established in 1999 when Mandela retired from political office after selflessly serving only one term as President, the Foundation works to mobilise Mandela’s spirit and legacy by building a society that embraces all voices and aspires to social justice. The Foundation which initially served as Mandela’s post-presidential office solemnly continues his work through dynamic peace and reconciliation interventions, conducting research and convening dialogue on critical social issues. It also supports various charitable projects, among others, HIV/AIDS and education initiatives. In advancing its slogan of “living the legacy”, the Foundation undertakes the decisive role of maintaining the legacy of arguably the greatest global figure in modern times. Guided by Mandela’s fraternal principles the Foundation continues to perform this task with distinction. For its enterprising work pursuing justice and for the ethical, bridge-building principles it preserves, the Foundation presents itself as a worthy candidate for the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity.

**The bridge that unites diversity**

The Document on Human Fraternity and the Zayed Award recognises those who strive towards enabling freedom and dignity for all; those who create breakthroughs and connect divided people; those who lead by example. No modern individual has pursued these momentous ambitions and has achieved the unity of a divided people quite as Nelson Mandela did. Pursuing the seemingly impossible task of bringing justice to the suppressed black people under Apartheid, Mandela not only delivered freedom and democracy to one group but did so for all the peoples of South Africa. Mandela famously did not choose revenge or hatred when released after 27 long years in prison. Instead, in the spirit of his compatriot Sheikh Zayed who united the United Arab Emirates, Mandela chose the path of reconciliation and nation-building. Like Sheikh Zayed, also born in 1918, Mandela brought extensive wisdom to leading and shaping his country towards becoming a modern nation. As it remains impossible to understand the United Arab Emirates without Sheikh Zayed, so too the story of South Africa is intimately intertwined with that of Mandela. Akin to Sheikh Zayed, who was guided by faith, hard work and generosity, so too Mandela enacted the seemingly impossible vision of peace, justice and dignity for all.

Mandela, along with other political leaders, guided South Africa from a path destined for perpetual conflict to one that would be globally recognized as choosing to build its future, together. The new nation founded on the ethos of justice and reconciliation would see peaceful coexistence and human progress eclipse punishment and retribution. By establishing the new, non-racial South Africa on the motto of *unity in diversity*, Mandela would become and remains today affectionately known as the father of the *Rainbow Nation*. Mandela’s charismatic commitment to unite and serve all South Africa’s people was no public relations front. Instead, it advances the invitation of the Document on Human Fraternity, for all people to unite and work together. At the time of democratic transition, there was a considerable threat that conservative whites, many of whom were militarized, would reject a black president. Mandela’s approach and subsequent actions recall the words of both inaugural recipients of the Zayed Award. It evokes the message from Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, when he called “for cooperation and an end to all wars and promoting tolerance and harmony, rejecting intolerance, hatred and power politics[[1]](#footnote-1)”. As it recalls the message from Pope Francis, that “today fraternity is the new frontier of humanity. Either we are brothers or we destroy each other. There is no time for indifference now”[[2]](#footnote-2).

Mandela who saw God’s hand in human action, said that “we were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us, it is in everyone”[[3]](#footnote-3). He accordingly chose to treat his enemies as brothers. He proceeded to engage them in their own language, Afrikaans. Mandela’s deep awareness of our shared humanity is expressed in his comment that “when you speak Afrikaans, you know you go straight to their hearts”. The President’s humility, his willingness to recognise others in their own language stems from an ethos that recognises the appeal in the Document on Human Fraternity, for “reconciliation and fraternity … among all people of good will”; and for all people to “spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace”[[4]](#footnote-4).

**Foundational work**

Through its various initiatives, the Foundation pursues the bridge-building, conviction-led leadership of its patron. In doing so, it has become a respected change agent in South Africa and beyond. Through its core work in the dialogue-memory nexus, and through advocating for the embodiment of Mandela’s ethos, the daily work of the Foundation cautions of the immense challenges that remain unfulfilled. It warns that South Africa’s Constitution, the embodiment of Mandela’s dream, which calls for dignified livelihoods, for equity and equality, for non-racialism and non-sexism, does not represent the lived reality of most South Africans. Through its work it implores average citizens to comprehensively enact Mandela’s ethos of integrity, justice, solidarity and transformation. To pursue the social justice envisioned in the Constitution. And to remember its patron’s warning, that “as long as many of our people still live in utter poverty, as long as children still live under plastic covers, as long as many of our people are still without jobs, no South African should rest and wallow in the joy of freedom”[[5]](#footnote-5).

Nelson Mandela entrusted the Foundation’s board and staff to pursue a mandate that promotes and develops the cause of peace, human rights and democracy. Through its various projects and over its many years of operation, the Foundation has become a trusted source. An influential organization that is taken seriously and one that shapes public perception and policy debates. Thought leadership and leadership development are cross-cutting endeavours of the Foundation. It regularly runs workshops on Mandela’s teachings on good leadership. In 2020 with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Foundation sought to expand its thought leadership to advance an innovative approach to emerging from the pandemic. It postulated new thinking regarding social thinking and praxis.

The Foundation undertakes several focal areas. These include:

1. Poverty and inequality

Poverty and inequality are some of the greatest concerns the world faces. “We just have not found a way of overcoming what is a growing inequality globally. Inequality is the underlying cause of so many of the ills that we see”[[6]](#footnote-6). The Foundation provides leadership in the battle against poverty and inequality. It has a strong and expanded focus on early childhood development, urban land development and food insecurity. These are three of South Africa’s most urgent concern areas and deal directly with unresolved issues of its Apartheid past. It facilitates and commissions critical research that avoids simple or populist approaches. The Foundation, furthermore, continues with its various initiatives to relieve hunger through feeding schemes, supports HIV/AIDS caring schemes and assists in the building of houses and schools throughout the country.

1. Combatting racism

The Foundation confronts the scourge of racism through its various intercultural dialogues. Uniquely situated to reach out between different groups, its work contributes towards peaceful coexistence and building fraternity. Before COVID-19 struck, the Foundation hosted or supported more than 70 annual dialogue interventions across South Africa. Its work on dialogue allows it to play a convening role, creating spaces for people who might not otherwise agree or listen to one another.

Through its *Atlantic Fellows for Racial Equity*, the Foundation partners with Colombia University on a North-South basis to search for more effective strategies to combat racism. In the spirit of collaboration, this partnership sees fellows addressing further shared concerns such as climate and technology justice.

As part of its work on *Memory*, the Foundation hosted the *Mandela Dialogues* (2013-2017). Together with the *Global Leadership Academy* (Germany), the Foundation brought together participants from 10 countries to explore how peoples from different countries can learn from each other in dealing with their painful past. By sharing their stories in Mandela’s reconciliatory spirit, the participants helped ensure that his legacy live on. They also afford expanded meaning to Mandela’s famous quote that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.[[7]](#footnote-7)"

1. Recognising the past - moving towards the future

To move on from the past, one must first recognise it. South Africa’s painful past remains ever-present in the lives of millions of its citizens who have not achieved the dignity promised in the Constitution. Apartheid, which translates to separateness from Afrikaans, undertook a determined socio-structural strategy. Through remembering the past and acknowledging its resilient patterns of privilege, the Foundation commits itself to being a bridge-builder for the Constitutional promise.

The Foundation maintains a physical as well as a digital archive of Mandela’s artefacts, collections and documents. It uses these materials in its various resources (books, documentaries, etc.) and in the development workshops it organizes, to preserve the spirit and ways undertaken by Mandela to transform the past towards human progress. According to the Foundation, sustainable change hinges on a robust and meaningful *Theory of Change*. It is, therefore, that the Foundation is busy working on the formulation of a theory that will advance social praxis as a social contract for the 21st century.

1. Legacy and memory

A major undertaking of the Foundation is in maintaining the legacy of the great man. Ensuring pathways to have young people engage and to make it relevant in the hearts of a diverse audience. It works with myriad individuals and organisations, including the United Nations who have declared 18 July, Mandela’s birthday, International Mandela Day. In South Africa, 18 July has become the eponymous day of service. On this day each citizen is encouraged to serve others for 67 minutes, thereby emulating the 67 years Mandela spent fighting for justice. The yearly Mandela Day is an enormous success, with millions of citizens contributing in various ways and supporting innumerable initiatives to the tune of billions of Rands. With its foresight and understanding, the Foundation has highlighted four focal areas (shelter, literacy, food and security, and active citizenry). It now seeks to expand the Mandela Day method to a be a more sustained approach. Making every day a Mandela day.

The Foundation continues to explore the life and times of Mandela through various publications and documentaries. It is currently involved with major streaming service, Netflix, on a series called *I Know This To Be True*. The series is guided by Mandela’s thinking. It interviews prominent individuals from around the world who demonstrate the same commitment to selflessness, kindness and service.

The sterling work the Foundation does to rejuvenate Mandela’s legacy has seen it garner an enormous social media audience. The Foundation has 10 million social media followers; in 2018 when Barack Obama delivered the annual Mandela Lecture, 1.2 billion people tuned in globally.

1. The effects of and responses to COVID-19

The onset of COVID-19 has dramatically affected the work of the Foundation. It had to rework many of its programmes as donor money dried up. Cognisant of its responsibility as a respected thought leader, it sought to critically make sense of the pandemic. It developed a response strategy that called for a new, equitable social contract based on the enactment of Mandela’s thinking. This message was supported by United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres during his 2020 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture: “The response to the pandemic, and to the widespread discontent that preceded it, must be based on a New Social Contract and a New Global Deal that create equal opportunities for all, and respect the rights and freedoms of all”.

Beyond its thought leadership, the Foundation has sought to address the immediate needs of the most vulnerable. It expanded its feeding scheme, *Each1Feed1*, to offer food security to many communities not served by the government’s programmes. With its respected social position, it was able to garner significant donor support, delivering invaluable food parcels to rural areas in all of South Africa’s provinces.

**A deserving recipient**

The Zayed Award celebrates those who lead by example. It is undeniable that Nelson Mandela is unrivalled in doing so. He paved a new path for South Africa, he inspired the world and through the efforts of his Foundation, he continues to do so. While Mandela was able to achieve the unthinkable, his work remains incomplete. Today his Foundation continues to strive to make his Constitutional dream a reality for all South Africans. It is guided and driven Mandela’s decisive words:

“The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road”.

1. Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, 2021. “Message from the Pope and Grand Imam of Al-Azhar”. Online at YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zm9afi4N8WA> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pope Francis, 2021. “Message from the Pope and Grand Imam of Al-Azhar”. Online at YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zm9afi4N8WA> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nelson Mandela [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Document on Human Fraternity [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nelson Mandela [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Quoted in interview with the Nelson Mandela Foundation [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nelson Mandela [↑](#footnote-ref-7)