

18th Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture tackles inequality pandemic

The 18th Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture was delivered by United Nations secretary-general António Guterres on the theme 'Tackling the inequality pandemic: A new social contract for a new era'. Hosted by the Nelson Mandela Foundation in partnership with the UN, the event took place virtually on Saturday, 18 July.

Dedicated to the memory of Zindzi Mandela, daughter of Nelson Mandela and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who passed away earlier in the week, the event also featured contributions from President Cyril Ramaphosa, Graça Machel and Professor Njabulo Ndebele.

Guterres argued that inequality has become the defining attribute of the early 21st century, something cruelly laid bare by the Covid-19 pandemic. The latter, he insisted, has exposed “the myth that we are all in the same boat. Because while we are all floating on the same sea, it’s clear that some of us are in superyachts while others are clinging to the floating debris.”



UN secretary-general António Guterres presents 18th Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture virtually from New York City. Image: Nelson Mandela Foundation

And while humanity can rise to the challenge of the coronavirus, what it will find in the longer term is that “inequality sinks all boats”. To understand this harsh reality, and overcome it, Guterres said we must reckon with the destructive resilience of colonialism, racism and patriarchy. And we must build a new world order dedicated to the task of dismantling them.

This call was strongly endorsed by Sello Hatang, chief executive of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, in his closing remarks. He described a global social contract which would draw on ancient human knowledges, be rooted in respect for the Earth, and dedicated to ending inequality and white supremacy in all their manifestations: “What a challenge! What a task! It is in our hands.”

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