

Ben Turok Memorial Lecture 2024

Face climate crisis with courage, creativity, compassion
– Kumi Naidoo

– By Moira Levy

The president of the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative, Dr Kumi Naidoo, issued a challenging call on civil society, and the broad global left to urgently change its thinking and dialogue if we are to avert a climate and human rights catastrophe.

Presenting the Ben Turok Memorial Lecture in Cape Town he said the world is "on a suicidal trajectory" and spoke about the need to revive a new spirit and language for civil society activism.





Introduction

The world no longer has the time to indulge in pessimism or denialism as we get ever closer to the climate crisis cliff, and the urgent task at hand is to revise -- and revitalise -- the thinking of activists, academics and leftists world-wide who have taken on the responsibility of being changemakers in pursuit of a more just global order. This was the challenge thrown out to the civil society community by decades-long human rights and climate justice activist, Dr Kumi Naidoo, who delivered the fourth Ben Turok Memorial Lecture in Cape Town on 9 December 2024 on the anniversary of Turok's passing in 2019.

Speaking at the Desmond and Leah Tutu Foundation offices in Cape Town, Naidoo said: "In this moment in history, pessimism is a luxury we simply cannot afford. The pessimism that justifiably emerges from our analysis, our lived experience and our observations can, must and should be responded to by the optimism of our thoughts, our actions, our courage, our creativity, our compassion and our sense of humanity.

"How can we speak truth to power, but do it in a way that does not demotivate and depress and immobilise people? We have to find the correct balance between not sanitising the fact that humanity is in a fundamentally deep crisis on the one hand, and on the other hand, doing it in a way that seeks to galvanise and mobilise rather than contribute to despair."

The Ben Turok Memorial Lecture is held annually by the [Institute for African Alternatives](#) (IFAA), which was founded by the late Prof Turok in the 1980s and that he led as its Director until his passing in 2019. The Lecture is held in partnership with the [Institute for Social Development](#) (ISD) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC).

Naidoo said the lecture, titled "Reimagining Activism: Mobilising for Justice in a Fractured World", came at a moment of "ultra-fluidity", which he suggested created opportunities for doing things differently.

Naidoo was former International Executive Director of [Greenpeace International](#) (2009-2015) and Secretary General of [Amnesty International](#) (2018-2019). He served as the Secretary-General of Civicus, the international alliance for citizen participation, from 1998 to 2008.

"I believe passionately today that if we were to frame how we engage with people in a slightly different way, consciously inviting people to come in and help us shape the solutions, that could be much more impactful."

Naidoo was referring to a much-needed shift in political thinking to focus on civil society as an agent of change. He confessed that during his more than 45 years of activism he had made the mistake of devoting a disproportionate amount of time and energy to lobbying those in power instead of organising the powerless "to be able to speak with the eloquence and power that only they can".

He said in the early days of South Africa's democracy the flood of invitations received by civil society organisations for consultation from those in power was seen as an opportunity to impact the new government, but this turned out to be a tick-box exercise; bureaucrats ticked off the box for civil society consultation while activists ticked off government advocacy.

"We have to rethink the proportionality of how much time we spend appealing to those with power and how much time we spend mobilising and organising at the grassroots level. Sadly, we have not done enough of that. Sometimes, unwittingly, we actually end up believing that people have far less agency than they actually in reality have [despite] the legacies of colonialism, slavery, imperialism and so on. People have power as enforcers of transparency and accountability and as shapers of our own destiny."

Naidoo cited missed opportunities in recent times when world super-power leaders had come very close to recognising that the existing global economic system "does not service and meet the needs of the vast majority of people on the planet". After the 1997 'Asian Contagion', the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, Covid-19, the world promised it would "build back better". There had been talk of the need for a "radically different financial architecture". Yet when the crisis was over, the world reverted to those same failed systems and reasserted the status quo.

"When we are in a crisis it's all about system recovery, system protection and system maintenance. But what we desperately need right now is system innovation, system transformation and system redesign."

Referring to the 2011 Arab Spring and the subsequent Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall and Extinction Rebellion mobilisations, he said, "the lesson we have to take from these movements is that they were able to mobilise quickly and [in] much larger numbers than conventional organisations, including trade unions and NGOs.

"If ever there was a moment in history where we have to interrogate what kind of activism we actually need, I believe it is now. And it needs to be done in a way in which we are willing to be very, very self-critical."



Naidoo quoted Einstein's popular definition of insanity as doing the same thing over and over again, expecting to get a different result, and he invited the audience to close their eyes and reflect on their own lives of activism, scholarship and other ongoing efforts to be change agents. "I want to ask yourself: do you think your life meets that definition of insanity? And I want to put up my hand and say, mine does."

"We might have done it in good faith, but now we are at a moment of history where we have to challenge ourselves and say if big international NGOs like Greenpeace and Amnesty International have not delivered the kinds of justice that we want, surely we need to be rethinking."

He quoted Einstein again, who had said we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.

Naidoo also urged the civil society community to urgently stop denying reality, especially with regard to the climate crisis, warning "we are in denial about how close to the climate cliff we are".

Naidoo was due to speak in person in Cape Town, but had to join the memorial gathering online at the very last minute after an unplanned and futile five-hour stayover at O. R. Tambo International Airport. He was stranded in Johannesburg -- after a gruelling more than 48-hour journey from Stanford University in San Francisco, where he is a visiting lecturer, via New York, Abidjan and then Addis Ababa -- because of the jet fuel crisis that brought the airport to a halt for most of Monday 9 December.

He apologised for appearing online somewhat dishevelled, explaining that he had tried to fit in a quick shower before his connecting flight to Cape Town, only to find the water supply at his apartment in Johannesburg had been cut off.

"For five hours, there was no communication [at the airport], just chaos. Everybody was in a state of panic. What happened at the airport [and] what we are seeing with the breakdown of water infrastructure, was the complete lack of systems. And this is going to be the future that we are actually going to confront."

He reminded the audience that "this is what some of us have been saying for more than a decade now. As we move closer and closer to the climate crisis cliff, we will actually see a scarcity of resources of all kinds." He warned that emerging from the predicted contestation over limited resources would inevitably be "a rise of polarisation, fracturing, and the reiteration of fascism".

Naidoo emphasised the danger of treating climate change as a stand-alone environmental problem, saying, "the climate crisis is a cross-cutting issue. It's a failure of our broken and unjust economic system. It's a failure of our energy system, our food system, our agriculture system, our transport system, and so on."

Commending IFAA for giving him the opportunity to present the Ben Turok Memorial Lecture, Naidoo said he first met the struggle stalwart at the age of 22 in London having just fled South Africa into exile. "What I was struck by was how deeply respected he was by fellow Africans from across the continent. I would sit in awe in the audience and to be honest, I didn't have the confidence at first to even go and introduce myself to him because he had such stature."

It was only in 1988, when Naidoo was elected president of the Oxford University Africa Society, that they first worked together, hosting a successful UK-wide conference for about 250 African students on the social responsibility of the African graduate. "Ben responded to it very positively. We worked really closely together."

He said after he returned to South Africa he had the opportunity to me up with Turok, who he paid tribute to for his more than 70 decades as an activist, underground cadre, a founder of the Congress of Democrats and a long-standing ANC member who served three years in prison under the Terrorism Act before escaping to Botswana, mainly on foot. He became a much respected academic and on his return served as an ANC MP for the first 10 years of democracy.

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