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Activities relating to the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage

Task Team On Transformation Of Heritage Landscape

Submitted by South Africa *

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TASK TEAM ON TRANSFORMATION OF HERITAGE LANDSCAPE

COUNTRY: SOUTH AFRICA

AGENDA ITEM: 16 (Activities relating to the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage)

INTRODUCTION

The mandate of the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) is premised on the White Paper (1996) which envisaged the transformation of the arts, culture and heritage landscape in line with the democratisation of South Africa. The past months sporadic incidents of defacing and damaging public statues in South Africa have raised concerns in the heritage sector and this has necessitated that government takes measures to curb what could degenerate into lawlessness and anarchy.

On 17 April 2015 the Minister of Arts and Culture hosted a National Consultative Meeting on the Transformation of the Heritage Landscape which was attended by various sectors including academics, students, heritage practitioners, heritage institutions, interest groups and political parties.

The 20 resolutions adopted at the National Consultative Meeting include the creation of a special purpose task team to assist with the conceptualization, implementation and monitoring as well as impact assessment of the process of transformation of the heritage landscape towards nation-building.

The terms of reference for the task team provides for a lifespan of 12 months with a first report to be submitted to the Minister within 8 weeks of the appointment of the Task Team. This report serves as the task team's first report to the Minister.

DISCUSSION

The heritage sector is challenged by the public expression through protests to immediately seek means of restoring harmony. The national consultative meeting on the transformation of the heritage landscape served as a platform to listen to the concerns of the key role-players, the political parties, the civil society and harness and channel these public views into formal proposals on the desired heritage landscape for current and future generations.

As much as commentators have seen these incidents as symptomatic of deep seated issues within the nation, the heritage sector could not afford to fold its arms and do nothing about this matter since the disharmony has found expression in the heritage sector through the destruction of the national estate.

Since the advent of the post 1994 democratic political dispensation, government has embarked upon transformation that has been characterized by the building of new monuments, memorials, statues and museums in honour of events, epochs and people who have shaped the history of our country.

Similarly, this has been coupled with the transformation and standardization of names of geographical features. The recent demand for the removal of Rhodes statue at UCT and a

demand for the change of the name of Rhodes University have been viewed as a call for the acceleration of transformation. These have been seen as genuine demands for rapid transformation of the very essence of these institutions. However, concomitant with this call for transformation, there have been widespread incidents of unlawful defacing of statues across the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to state that provincial consultative meetings were attended by representatives of political parties, civil society organisations, university students and other interested and affected groups in different degrees. Amongst the emerging issues are the following:

- All provinces acknowledged that the dialogues formed the cornerstone in the making of the new democratic political dispensation in South Africa. Dialogue ushered South Africa into Democracy;
- All provinces condemned the defacing of statues;
- Agreed to selective rather than blanket removals;
- Identify historical and political figures whose profiles are such that they cannot be displayed in public spaces;
- In event that statues are removed, it should be done within the parameters of the law;
- Introducing counter-memories through establishing counter-monuments and counter-memorials – juxtaposing colonial leaders with their contemporaries who fought colonialism;
- Recontextualise and disinvest colonial and apartheid monuments and memorials of their racist and chauvinistic content;
- Reinterpretation and rededication of monuments, memorials and museums to include marginalised historical narratives;
- Selection of public statues and sculptures should be informed by lasting values and principles that the historical figures embodied;
- Shift from the statue and sculpture-based memorialisation to symbolic memorialisation. The latter can be rededicated;
- Provinces encouraged dialogue between all parties involved with regards to the matter;
- Encouraged that we start with the implementing of resolutions which are easy to implement and cost effective;
- All provinces agreed to an audit of what occupies our heritage landscape, and to identify the gaps. Then add what is missing in order to achieve a more inclusive and more diverse heritage of our country.

CONCLUSION

The national debate by those demanding a more radical transformation of the landscape was that these edifices represented a colonial and apartheid past whereas some sections of our society felt that this was an indiscriminate attack of their cultural symbols and heritage – thus perceived as an antithesis to reconciliation and nation building. The dialogue wanted to create a space to reflect on the current state of our heritage landscape and to produce mechanisms of transforming the sector into an inclusive one that reflect the country's diversity, its history and struggles as well as the future symbolic representation that reflect more accurately on our new national identity and aspirations.

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