

Launch of *Law and Poverty: Perspectives from South Africa and Beyond*,
edited by Sandra Liebenberg and Geo Quinot of Stellenbosch University's (SU)
Law Faculty, at STIAS, 31 May 2012

**Welcoming address by Prof H Russel Botman,
Rector and Vice-Chancellor of SU**

Thanks, Geo [Session Chair, Prof Geo Quinot]. Good evening, everyone. *Goeienaand; molweni* and welcome to this important event. It is heartening to see such a good turnout.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to get right to the heart of the matter straight away by asking: How does one survive on R524 a month? That's what the international 'poverty line' of 2 US dollars a day converts to. And according to *Development Indicators* released by the Presidency, 49% of our population earns less than that amount.

How do you feed and clothe and provide shelter for your family on R524 a month? How do you send your children to school? Or to a doctor when they get sick? It is hard to imagine how all these things are possible with R524 ... not even with double that amount. And yet half the people of South Africa find themselves in this desperate situation 18 years after our country's transition from apartheid to democracy and 16 years since we got a new Constitution.

In its Preamble, the Constitution proclaims it was adopted so as to "improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person". But clearly we still have a long way to go.

Now, it is precisely this disjunction between, on the one hand, our constitutional ideals, and on the other, the brutal realities of life in our country that the Law Faculty of Stellenbosch University has been grappling with.

The vehicle for this investigation has been an initiative called *Combating Poverty, Homelessness and Socio-Economic Vulnerability Under the Constitution*. And the book that is being launched here tonight is a direct result of activities undertaken within this initiative.

Now, the Law Faculty's Law and Poverty initiative forms part of the University's HOPE Project. I mention this because it speaks to the responsibility that we all have for addressing pertinent issues in society. It also speaks to one of the key issues in the book being launched tonight, namely transformation.

We have been undergoing our own transformation here at Stellenbosch University. If 1996 was a milestone for South Africa as a whole, the turning point for us came in 2000, with the adoption of an important policy document – our "Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond".

In it, the University acknowledged that it had "contributed to the injustices of the past"; and committed itself to "appropriate redress and development initiatives." This was a moral decision to break with the past and help build a better future for all. In time, this commitment became the University's HOPE Project.

We realised that we could use our strengths as a university – academic excellence and cutting-edge research – to be of service to society. We looked at the UN’s Millennium Development Goals as well as at local and continental agendas for human development, and we distilled five themes.

We decided to work to:

- Eradicate poverty and related condition;
- Contribute to human dignity & health;
- Consolidate democracy & human rights;
- Promote peace & security; and
- Balance a sustainable environment with a competitive industry.

These themes are pursued in each of the University’s three core functions of learning and teaching, research and community interaction. And the themes find practical expression in various initiatives conceived by our staff and students with a view to making a tangible difference in society.

We know our society is characterised by massive poverty and inequality. The question is how to fix it. Well, I would say you use whatever instruments you have at your disposal; and the law is one of the best tools. The law is not just a sphere of justice; it is also a sphere of hope for the destitute.

A year ago an international Colloquium on Law and Poverty took place in this very venue. The experiences and insights of local and international experts have now been gathered together in the publication that is being launched here tonight.

I am delighted to congratulate the editors, Professors Sandra Liebenberg and Geo Quinot, and all the contributors, on what promises to be a milestone book – not only in South Africa but wherever poverty remains a problem.

Ladies and gentlemen, I attended the Global Poverty Summit in Johannesburg last year, where it was pointed out that “the lives of hundreds of millions” of people worldwide are degraded by “debilitating poverty”; and the “deep deprivation” they face daily “threaten social cohesion, political stability and international order”.

We have been seeing dissatisfied people taking to the streets – in our own country, in the Middle East, in Europe and in the US. That is why this book should be required reading for anyone interested in socio-economic justice and transformation.

Thank you for listening, and again, welcome here. I am sure, like me, you are looking forward to the keynote address by Advocate Wim Trengove, so please enjoy the rest of the evening.