

Where hearts and minds meet

special feature

Living Rights
Festival



Solidarity for Change

In pursuit of global 'citizen diplomacy'

- By Nazeema Mohamed, Moira Levy, Bernedette Muthien & Zenariah Barends



The festival was a rallying cry for justice and peace, for global accountability, collective action, solidarity and a renewed commitment to human rights. Through creative expression, critical dialogue and cultural engagement the festival gave a voice to those most affected by economic and social injustices.

The Little Giants, a long-standing community initiative, played at the opening night. Photo: Nawawie Mathews



Living Rights are not static; they evolve and are continually reshaped by the forces of equity and justice as society progresses. They refer to the actualisation of constitutional, legal and treaty-promised protections into everyday realities for all individuals. These rights manifest when visionary texts transcend the page to become actionable guarantees that people not only theoretically possess but also actively experience in their daily lives. Living Rights embody the transformation of policy and law into effective practices that safeguard the dignity, freedom and well-being of every person, ensuring that human rights are not just idealistic promises but lived experiences. They bridge the gap between high-minded legal frameworks and the on-the-ground conditions that define human existence, especially for the most vulnerable.

Introduction

In initiating the inaugural Living Rights Festival, the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) has introduced a new term -- ‘living rights’. The term, initially coined by IFAA’s Acting Director Ari Sitas, developed through iterative discussion and was eventually penned by festival organiser Nazeema Mohamed. Once the concept of ‘living rights’ was clear, organisers deliberated on the what, who, how, when and where? The big questions to Sitas from the team were: Why a festival? Was it appropriate in a world in mayhem? What were we celebrating? And should we even be celebrating at all in the face of global crisis?

This was some time in the latter half of 2024, when the world was being assailed by the genocide in Gaza, civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the crisis of famine in Sudan, ongoing assaults by Russia on its neighbour Ukraine, and unbridled hostilities in the Middle East, backed by world superpowers, that posed the spectre of an inconceivably disastrous World War Three. These struggles for global dominance, exacerbated by greed, based on colonisation and expressing deep-seated racism, had resulted in widespread humanitarian catastrophes, predominantly in the Global South.

The 2024 Living Rights Festival was conceived as an act of solidarity in response to a world in turmoil – a world witnessing humanitarian catastrophes in Gaza, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and beyond.

‘Citizen diplomacy’

The festival was perceived as a rallying cry for individuals and communities to stand up for justice, peace and human rights, for global accountability through collective action, solidarity and a renewed commitment to human rights and peace. It was against this backdrop that IFAA mobilised community organisations in Cape Town to embark on ‘citizen diplomacy’. Through creative expression, critical dialogue and cultural engagement the festival sought to amplify the voices of those most affected by economic and social injustices, fostering a shared commitment to justice and resilience.

The Living Rights Festival was conceived with the goal of uniting hearts and minds, seamlessly integrating scholarly inquiry with creative expression. Cape Town, with its vibrant university landscape – home to four distinguished higher education institutions – and its profound history of cultural activism, provided the perfect setting for this endeavour. Central to the festival’s mission was the mobilisation of these two powerful forces: academia and the arts.

By channelling artistic innovation and academic expertise to address societal challenges, the festival aspired to unlock transformative possibilities for equitable and empowering change. This synergy envisioned a future led by enlightened leadership, one that upholds the ideals of justice, transformation and a deeply humanised world, while celebrating the very best of our shared humanity.

For almost 10 weeks, from 24 October to 10 December, music, poetry and theatre events alongside political discussions, debate and knowledge-sharing sessions were conducted at significant venues throughout Cape Town, place with a decades-long association with political activism, in a community-driven effort to mobilise citizen awareness and action in defence of democracy and to promote dialogue, activism and collective action. The festival’s theme, “Solidarity and Justice,” called on individuals and communities to stand together against global human rights crises and to advocate for peace and dignity for all.

At the opening night, Sitas explained: “We are in the midst of a cluster of global crises that transgress borders and demand serious responses at the local and international levels. Our mission is to reflect on the increasing precarity of our planet and humanity, focusing on challenges such as the existential threat of climate change and global warming, murderous actions in Palestine and Sudan, the ongoing conflicts on this continent, the new phases of violent ‘extractivism’ for the great cell phones we cherish, and the fact that the sea that hugs our (Africa’s) northern coastline has become an aquamarine grave for multitudes of our continent’s people searching for a better life.

“We live in hope that the festival will generate learning, critical thinking, advocacy and cooperation. It speaks to our brains and our hearts, it is about thoughtful and critical engagement. We will reflect about rights, in a world full of wrongs that is losing its moral compass, a world where once again might is right, where we have become a human abstract available to be collateral damage, to be targeted, to be drone-infested and to be bombed, violated and displaced.”

Festival starting point

It was the failure of the international institutions mandated to drive global peace, justice and accountability to intervene in the pervasive violence and injustice that served as the starting point. The festival was launched on 24 October, a date selected for its symbolic value as the 79th anniversary of the United Nations, which had clearly failed to uphold even the very first line of its founding Charter, which commits the nations of the world to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”.

The opening event significantly held at the District Six Homecoming Centre¹ in Cape Town, took the form of a panel discussion titled ‘Sitting on the Precipice: Is There a Future for the United Nations?’ Several prominent speakers lambasted the world body for failing to meet its mandate. They agreed that the UN Charter itself had created the conditions for the inevitable failure of the world body to protect global citizens and act on crimes against humanity by institutionalising the veto power of the five permanent members of the Security Council. This has effectively stymied all attempts by the broader world body to drive global justice and redress.

Speaking online from their different global posts, the panellists argued that the international community had to follow South Africa’s example in its case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and seek alternative routes to justice and redress, including through the multiple satellite and subsidiary bodies of the UN. Panellists lauded South Africa not only for its daring to take on the military might of Israel and its allies but also for its groundbreaking decision to enter the international discourse through a side door, in this case, the ICJ.



Michael Lynk, former Special Rapporteur on the Palestinian Territories, with the panel's Nazeema Mohamed from IFAA and Usuf Chikte from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. Photo: Nawawie Mathews

Panellist Amr Moussa, the former secretary-general of the Arab League and a member of the Panel of the Wise of the African Union, said: “The permanent members have abandoned international law, they have abandoned their commitment and their leadership under the Charter. That the Security Council can veto the ceasefire resolutions while the war is going on and people are being killed and cities are being destroyed has set a very important and negative precedent in the history of the UN. This is a travesty of all that we have built.

Michael Lynk, former Special Rapporteur on the Palestinian Territories between 2016 and 2022, told the panel he found “the biggest hole in the heart of the international system is the question of accountability and the lack of challenge to impunity.”

Zaheer Laher, South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation’s (Dirco’s) chief director: United Nations Political, Peace and Security and Dirco’s acting chief state law adviser

(international law), joined online from Addis Ababa where he was engaged in an international peace initiative. A member of South Africa’s foreign service for 28 years, he indicated that the country’s use of the ICJ in defence of the people of Gaza was a masterstroke in the face of the UN’s paralysis and intransigence. But he emphasised that ultimately the South African government’s decision to act on the world stage was the result of the intense lobbying and pressure by South African civil society.

Panellist Kumi Naidoo, president of the Fossil Fuel-Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative and former international executive director of Greenpeace International and secretary-general of Amnesty International, concurred. “Without pressure from citizens and national governments the international system will do nothing.”

South Africa as catalyst

This theme underpinned the predominant understanding shared by the festival organisers and participants, including the diverse audiences that attended the range of events, from political and economic panel discussions to jazz performances, poetry readings, innovative indie theatre and exhibitions of the work of emerging young artists: South Africa, as the country that defeated the apartheid system of legalised racism, discrimination and prejudice, that found its way from the darkness into the light, has a global responsibility to defend those ideals and principles that drove the protracted and painful struggle for democracy. That applies anywhere in the world where citizens face such threats and worse.

This was borne out of the knowledge that South African citizens’ rights to freely express themselves, gather, speak out, dissent were protected by South Africa’s unique Constitution. With those essential freedoms came the right to demand the same of any country in the world in which they were being thwarted and the responsibility to protect and defend them for the universal good.

Over and above that shared confidence in the principles of South African governance, despite many grave failings and shortcomings, was a sense of the need to face the manifold crises, in South Africa, elsewhere on the continent and indeed further



afield, with the same courage and conviction that secured South Africa's freedom from oppression. South Africans possess a strong sense of achievement and purpose and rarely let go of that lifeline, even during the worst of times. That in itself deserved to be celebrated, and, after all, South Africans have much to celebrate. The timing could not be more perfect. What people needed at that time was to come together and speak to each other in the universal language of culture and the arts.

An expression of 'living rights'

What emerged in due course was an extraordinary expression of unity and solidarity as individuals and different cultural organisations came together in a collaborative initiative. Each partner organisation brought a rich history of activism to the collaboration, channelling their dedicated efforts toward advancing social justice and strengthening democracy. Their initiatives focused on working with young people in all their diversity, ensuring impoverished communities were represented, and providing them with creative platforms for self-expression while honouring and building upon the rich cultural heritage of past generations.

This was a collaboration with a number of long-standing community organisations such as the Cape Cultural Collective, founded in 2007, Koko Kalashe's Jazz in the Native Yards, which was founded in 2014 and is based in Gugulethu, Cape Town, and the Little Giants, a grassroots-based band formed in 1999 by Ezra Ngcukana and George Werner. These struggle stalwarts from Cape Town's cultural sector, rooted in decades of expression through music and the arts, are dedicated to mobilising youth around cultural protest action and have been instrumental in developing today's generation of artists, performers and musicians.

Festival partners also included the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign, established in 1998; the Leah and Desmond Tutu Legacy Foundation, founded in 2011; Mary Tal, founder of the Whole World Women Association established in 2013; the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign, founded in 2000; the Institute for the Healing of Memories, established in 1998; South African History Online, founded in 1998; Insurrections Ensemble, which began in 2010 to create interactive, collective poetry, music and theatre; André Marais' Surplus Radical Bookstore, founded in 2021; and the District Six Museum, which opened in 1994.

This coalition of organisations showcased the transformative power of collaboration, merging artistic innovation, academic inquiry and activism on social justice and our transition to a democracy to address some of society's most pressing challenges.

We all agreed that living rights embody the transformation of policy and law into effective practices that safeguard the dignity, freedom and well-being of every person, ensuring that human rights are not just idealistic promises but lived experiences. They bridge the gap between idealistic legal frameworks and on-the-ground reality that define human existence, especially for the most vulnerable.

Festival organisers formed a steering committee of organisations who provided oversight and guidance on the programme and its implementation. A call for volunteers to assist drew a strong response. Clearly the concept struck a chord because finding volunteers was easy. Ordinary citizens were reeling from the onslaught of multiple global crises and felt the need to come together as a collective. They wanted to have their say, and many said they felt like they were actually doing something in a context where one felt completely helpless. Most of the work for the entire festival was done by volunteers who gave freely not only their time but also their many valued and varied cultural creations. We publish a poem presented by poet, writer and storyteller Diana Ferrus and share some of the artwork on display (see below).

The concept and draft programme of the festival rapidly gained momentum, even though there was no budget or organisational infrastructure in place. Core funding came later, from the Heinrich Boell Foundation, an international funder who was enthusiastically supportive with the limited funds at their disposal.

The festival's activities were hosted at remarkable venues, each contributing their own unique history and ethos to the event. Generously providing space at no or minimal cost, these included:

- The District Six Homecoming Centre, which was selected for the launch of the festival as an expression of solidarity with the people of Gaza and homeless and dispossessed people globally.
- Bertha House, a dynamic multi-purpose space where activists, educators, community organisations and other social actors gather to collaborate and learn together, generously contributed their whole building for two days of rich cultural activities. They also provided catering and transport to and from the venue for communities in outlying areas enabling more inclusive participation in the events. This contribution had profound effects on diversifying our audience.
- Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation whose premises are used to foster courageous conversations to nurture healing from discrimination, prejudice and conflict across societies worldwide.
- The Guga S'Thebe Arts and Culture Centre, a vibrant community hub in Langa, Cape Town -- the first African township established by British colonial rulers in 1927. The beginning of apartheid style group separation that later was to be consolidated under the Group Areas Act.

- Community House, an activist haven that houses non-governmental organisations, trade unions and the Labour and Community History Museum, centred on the Trade Union Library and its archive.
- The University of the Western Cape, with its legacy of activism against apartheid.

These spaces, each deeply rooted in activism and community engagement, provided more than venues – they embodied the festival’s mission to unite art, academia and social justice. Sitas described the festival as a “partnership of so many great initiatives, hundreds of volunteers, cart-loads of friends and organisations and institutions that believe in solidarity and social justice”.



At a performance at the Guga S'Thebe Arts and Culture Centre, top left, Keyboardist Charles Louw of the Rosa Choir, right is Operation Khataza Jazz Band, bottom left is Koko Kalashe and his son Ndax Kalashe of Jazz in the Native Yards and bottom right is Traditional Drummers with the Cape Cultural Collective Poets Chris and Vusu.

Festival highlights – the core themes

The festival dissolved the daily divisions that coalesce around age, status, sexual orientation, race, class and so on. There was something for everyone. Most importantly, though, was the festival’s appeal to the youth. This had been carefully cultivated; it was agreed that a platform for young people was critical, and at times it took centre-stage.

Struggle veteran Bernedette Muthien facilitated an open-mic, multi-genre session titled “Youth Speak Truth to Power”. She was supported by comedian Goldie Shevlane. The young participants were asked: “What does the state of the world say to me?” In their challenging and insightful responses they drew on poetry, music, comedy. Poet Lisa Lily Julie opened with what she

called “a punch to the stomach”, a wakeup call. Another poet, Jerome Coetzee, in a piece called “Seven Minutes of Silence,” stood unmoving and silent for an agonisingly long stretch. His only action in the end was to hold up a poster bearing only one word, “peace”. He followed this with a poem dedicated to his childhood friend who was killed by gang crossfire in Lavender Hill.

Dani Petersen performed a song on gender-based violence in Afrikaans and English, comedian Sacre (mononym), who grew up on the Cape Flats, a child of Congolese migrants, regaled the audience with tales about his experiences, his self-deprecating humour delivered in Afrikaapse English. Comedian Alexander Henry demonstrated a spirit that transcended the confines of his wheelchair, including shamelessly flirting with Goldie, the comedian. He later wrote on Whatsapp, “The role of a standup comedian is sometimes to antagonise the audience, to make them think. In my performance I shared shades of what I want people to see about me and other people with disabilities. There is a definite line between the medical model and the social model on disability. And that is why the flirtatiousness between myself and Goldie is so important.”

According to Muthien: “it was important for youth to take the struggles for realising intersectional and non-negotiable constitutional rights to heart and action, to embody these rights and quests for justice, prosperity and peace, so that rights do not become static, paper rights, but realisable rights in action. The young performers and participants were so alive with kinetic energy.”

Twenty-one-year-old artist Zara Newman and fellow artist John Barrow engaged in a thought-provoking conversation with art historian Nomusa Makhube about their artworks. Newman, an artist living with disabilities and health challenges, shared insights into her collection titled *Colours in Grayscale!* Reflecting on her journey, she remarked, “I’ve found that the easiest path to healing is by accepting and acknowledging a situation for what it truly is. When you’re depressed, the world can quickly lose colour, and everything turns to grayscale. Deep down, there is a part of you that hopes for better days, and that part is beautiful – colourful. You may want to move forward without confronting what you’ve been through, but that’s not how it works. The only way out is through.”

Barrow, meanwhile, explained that his work consistently seeks to expand diversity and celebrate what it means to be human. The discussion, expertly facilitated by Makhube, spurred insightful conversations among the audience, touching on topics such as inequality and the lived realities of township life in South Africa. A community activist, known for her efforts to establish community kitchens during the Covid pandemic, shared her struggles with the public health system and the desperate attempts she made to secure care for her sick infant.



Artist Zara Newman (at the front) in conversation with participants attending her walkaround, at Bertha House.

The session concluded with artist walkabout tours, where attendees had the opportunity to engage with the works more intimately. For many young participants, it was their first opportunity to connect with artists and discuss the meaning and inspiration behind their creations.

The launch of the book, *Gandhi's African Legacy, Phoenix Settlement 1904-2024* by Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, provided a critical reflection on the achievements and failures of Gandhi. The book launch provided a powerful backdrop to the Insurrections Ensemble's innovative and moving performance of *Must Gandhi Fall*, a profound exploration of multi-media historical and contemporary narratives. It explored the complexities of Gandhi's legacy, engaging with questions about his role in anti-colonial resistance while critically examining the contradictions and contested aspects of his ideology and leadership. Through its combination of powerful storytelling and musical excellence, the performance challenged audiences to confront questions of decolonisation and justice, leaving a lasting emotional and intellectual impact.



Addressing their workshops during the Living Rights Festival, Professor Crain Soudien (left), at Community House) and Professor Fred Hendricks at the Leah and Desmond Tutu Legacy Foundation offices in Cape Town.

The *Unbroken Spirits: Concert for Humanity* poignantly paralleled the resistance struggles of Palestinians and South Africans, reminding audiences of the enduring fight against apartheid and colonial oppression. Cultural performances and art exhibitions underscored the urgent need for solidarity in confronting global injustices. Panel discussions and seminars spurred lively debate – for example on how [African citizens can mobilise to assert their agency](#), ultimately contributing to sustainable transformation across the continent and at on [critical questions on the Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), bringing the discussion back to its starting point: the role of the United Nations and international agendas.

At the heart of the festival was the recognition of art and scholarly work as an intrinsic form of human expression and a safeguard of our shared humanity. Through critical discussion and debates, performances, exhibitions and poetry, creative expression blended the brain and the heart to illuminate injustice and inspire action. Art forms were recognised and celebrated as important tools for liberation, of the mind as well as of the person and the state, in a multi-faceted and innovative narrative that challenged conventional Left thinking and suggested a new way forward towards transformation and a better world.

¹ District 6, with its vibrant, diverse community, situated in the heart of the City of Cape Town, was impacted by one of apartheid's most brutal laws, the Group Areas Act. Its implementation in 1966 meant forcefully removing over 60,000 people from District 6 into areas in the underdeveloped Cape Flats. After the bulldozers had gone through the area and destroyed everything in its wake, all that could be seen was dirt, rubble and the desolate churches and mosques.