

Remarks by Khwezi Mabasa, Associate

25 February 2021

Programme Director, I will present four essential points that illuminate the significance of this launch. These inputs all relate to embedding the Polisee Space in reimagining research and public policy approaches in South Africa.

The **first** point is based on the lessons drawn from the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which has challenged orthodox knowledge production and methodologies. It has highlighted the limits of hyper specialisation in research and confining policy development to compartmentalised areas of speciality. The pandemic has society-wide effects that permeate different human development areas. These include, amongst others, health, economic development, food security and ecological sustainability. Government responses across the globe have been compelled to deal with this multi-dimensional pandemic using various measures. The successful interventions factor in holistic analysis that borrows from different disciplines. Several scholars, researchers and scientists have been calling for inter, multi and transdisciplinary approaches over the past years. This advocacy appreciates that society cannot adequately comprehend human development trends within the prism of segmented disciplines. Covid-19 highlights this observation in several ways, and the Polisee Space research team is well-suited for assisting South African public policy makers to implement a different research approach. The team of associates is comprised of young South Africans with diverse training and policy skill sets. In addition, most associates have an appreciation for the nuances in public policymaking as result of their activist backgrounds. The policy incoherence and poor coordination observed in the past twenty-six will not be resolved with hyper specialisation. It requires new methodological approaches that highlight innate connections in human development.

My **second point** relates to the task of creating young public intellectuals with a pan-African orientation. South Africa's think tank industry is largely focused on national policy issues, with minimal appreciation for regional and global trends. There are some outliers, but these institutes confine themselves to security, good governance and diplomacy. The largely inward or parochial approach in the industry deprives South African society of grounded and futuristic analyses. The country's public policy challenges are intertwined with Africa's development. It is, therefore, imperative to understand how our society's development intersects with the region and world. An equally concerning trend is an emphasis individualism and

corporatisation in the research sector. It is exemplified by a narrow preoccupation with occupational mobility, competitive publishing, and disembedding research from matters of public interests. This trend has delegitimised the role of research in addressing contemporary human development issues and, in some cases, eroded the base for evidence-based policymaking. The Polisee Space provides a platform for resolving the challenges mentioned above. We want to answer the epistemological and intellectual questions posed by the late Professor Thandika Mkandawire (1995) in his seminal article entitled: ***Three Generations of African Scholars***. He reminded society about the connection between producing various generations of scholars and Africa's development. The emphasis on repositioning the university and other sites of knowledge production so they serve Africa's reconstruction is articulated sharply in Mkandawire's article. The Polisee Space must produce public policy interventions that place primacy on Africa's ongoing renaissance.

Thirdly, the Policy Space should anchor the major structural transitions in its research agenda. The generational, digital and low carbon economy transitions are shaping political economy structures in several ways. These effects are not homogenous or uniform in all societies because of global inequalities. South African policymakers need to study the socio-economic, political and psychosocial impacts of the shifts. This requires an innovative research agenda, which responds to contemporary global technological developments while appreciating the peculiarities of the local context. For example, there is an international debate on algorithm-driven platform economy business models and regulatory mechanisms in the political economy. South Africa's research and public policymaking in this area is not adequate.

Fourthly, the interface between research and deepening participatory citizenship in policymaking is important. Research ought to support interventions aimed at improving citizens' comprehension of major public policy debates. This is essential for ensuring informed and free consent from the public in legislative deliberations. Yet, there is a glaring challenge in the area because of information asymmetry and inaccessible policy information dissemination. The Policy Space is well positioned to initiate research and critical thinking on this matter. A good starting point is the recent debate on rethinking publishing in light of the digital transition. Additionally, there are several participatory methodologies across the globe on empowering and engaging citizens meaningfully in policy formulation processes. The Polisee Space should lead South Africa's contribution towards democratising knowledge in the public policy field.

I thank you.