



## **SASA 26<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS, 2021**

### **TO BE HELD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE**

#### **PRESIDENT'S REPORT TO THE AGM**

##### **1. Introduction**

Greetings to all SASA members and all those who work with and support our association. It is a great honour to give a brief report today as the outgoing president. I would like to express my gratitude to all of you for affording me the opportunity to serve in this august position in the organisation. This experience is one that I will one day tell my grandchildren about and hopefully inspire them to love education, research and scholarship. It means a lot to me that I served my term of office relatively successfully despite the challenges of the times. For this I would like to thank the SASA council who were incredibly supportive and focused on 'keeping SASA alive' even as the pandemic wreaked havoc all around us.

##### **2. Council commitment**

The current council must be one of the most steadfast and consistent in the history of SASA. Although we missed one member who never attended a single meeting after election, everyone else was always in attendance throughout the two years of our term of office bar instances of emergencies and unavoidable diary clashes. Hats off to you! I would also to thank the 'backroom' operators who nobody ever sees but are crucial to SASA's existence. Here I am thinking of our virtual office staff, bank account signatories, heads of departments, webmaster, membership officer, etc. I am very proud that we honoured Dr Leila Groenewald, our long-serving membership officer, with a well-deserved SASA outstanding service award. In 2019, this award was bestowed on Professor Eddie Webster. There are many deserving candidates and, in the years to come, their turn will surely come. In her acceptance speech Leila mentioned some of these illustrious scholars who deserve to be formally honoured by SASA.

##### **3. Covid-19**

Since Covid-19 took the world by storm it cannot be business as usual. SASA was not able to hold its annual congress in the year 2020. The general crisis and uncertainty at the time meant that our council did not think a virtual congress was possible then. However, the decision to hold this year's conference online was, on reflection, a wise one as it wasn't clear at the time the decision was made whether and to what extent the pandemic would still be a threat. Fortunately, the University of Free State local organising team was, from early on, ready and willing to take on the challenge of staging a virtual congress.

##### **4. One term or two-term council?**

Our council discussed whether its two years in office amounted to one or two terms in office. This arose because SASA did not have an AGM in 2020. After careful consideration of

the question the council decided that the two years 2019-20 to 2020-2021 should be treated as one term. This position was communicated to the SASA general membership by way of a 'letter from the president'. This decision is subject to condonation or overturning by this AGM today. The reasons this position was adopted were the following: Firstly, the SASA constitution did not anticipate a development such as the Covid-19 crisis and as such does not provide clear guidance on this. Secondly, the council felt that for the sake of organisational stability, continuity and the need to provide strong leadership during a period of crisis, it was important to continue serving the association despite the non-renewal of the council's mandate. Thirdly, and in relation to the way forward today, the council suggests that the two-year period in which it was in office should be treated as one term. This means that, if the AGM agrees, Council members should be allowed to stand again for office as the constitution limits them to two terms in office. Their continuation is subject to SASA's democratic nomination and election process.

### **5. Keeping SASA alive**

The crisis of the pandemic threatened to weaken our association on many fronts. I have already discussed the failure to hold an annual congress. This alone has had the consequence that many members did not renew their membership as they usually do so just before the annual congress. The association arguably also experienced a 'lull' in activity due to no congress. The council's response was to embark on a 'keep SASA alive' programme which included, among other things, holding SASA webinars, beefing up SASA's virtual presence through increased use of media platforms such as website, twitter and YouTube. There was also an effort to engage in some activities normally tied to the congress, thus the annual student essay competition took place in 2020.

Despite these efforts, it is true that the pandemic slowed things down including limiting the extent to which the Council could come out with innovative, transformative and visionary programmes to rejuvenate the association, grow it, strengthen it, making it more responsive to changing conditions. Often most councils engage in such activities during their second term because usually the first term is spent getting to know the ropes. I believe that this Council has gone through a baptism of fire of the pandemic and is therefore well-placed to embark on a trajectory characterised by such transformative activities. Certainly, the SASA deputy-president can take forward the work she has already started enhancing the role of the association's working groups, engaging them in sustained and meaningful activities meaningful in between congresses. This council is ready to move beyond 'keeping SASA alive' and into making SASA the best that it can be.

There are some SASA members who are currently not part of the council who are equally inspired and capacitated to move the association forward in line with this vision. We call on them to put themselves forward and assume positions in the council, the working groups and other structures of SASA.

### **6. Research, teaching and learning**

Academics face certain challenges peculiar to their situation as a result of the pandemic. The council discussed some of these. It also paid attention to certain developments in society

from the perspective of a professional association. For example, the council issued a statement, which can be found on our website, in support of Prof Glenda Grey and academic freedom when it seemed that there were attempts by the government to muzzle her thus violating her right to comment on public issues as a researcher, professional and public servant whether her opinions were palatable to the state or not. The council also shared some concerns about the implications of 'emergency remote education' for higher education, teaching, learning and research. As a professional association, the council felt, SASA must pay attention to the changing employment conditions that the pandemic has wrought. One matter of concern are the forms of exploitation that are accentuated by pandemic conditions such as big teaching loads, online surveillance, top-down managerialism, frozen posts, stagnant salaries, etc. The council felt that some of these issues should find an airing in SASA platforms by way of discussion, research and public interventions. On the pandemic itself, the council successfully recommended the publication of a special South African Sociological Review special issue on Covid-19 which will soon be out.

Sociologists do pay attention to the social ills besetting humanity. It is possible that the pandemic has become a cover and a scapegoat for socioeconomic problems which predated the virus. The global economic crisis of the capitalist system is an example of this. Various forms of the breakdown of the social fabric can be observed as millions of people find themselves trapped in poverty, unemployment and inequality. Bearing witness to corruption, looting of state coffers, price gouging and other economic shenanigans tends to undermine hope that things could be better. It is of concern that xenophobia continues to be a problem in South Africa. As a professional association, SASA will be increasingly called upon to respond appropriately to these issues; this pressure will soon be felt the same way as by fellow sociologists during the height of the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s.

## **7. Conclusion: Sociology without borders**

In the spirit of practicing a 'sociology without borders' SASA faces many challenges in the coming years. The association needs to foster more cooperative work among its own members as an aspect of traversing the borders between us. Similarly, more universities in the country must be encouraged to have a relationship with SASA. A few years ago, there was discussion of SASA reaching out across South Africa's national borders. This project must be revisited. Another border to be scaled is that of disciplines, we need more interdisciplinary work including crossing the natural/social science divide. Inspired by the idea of a sociology without borders, only the sky is the limit for our association.

*Phambili SASA!*