**Khanyiso was killed by a lightning strike, but also government’s ineptitude [South Africa]**

By Zak Essa  May 3, 2021

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On a Monday afternoon in March, angry clouds rolled in over the hills of Xhora Mouth in the former Transkei homeland. They dimmed the sunlight and turned the sky an eerie shade of grey. In no time, rain was pouring, thunder rumbling and white streaks painted the sky.

At the same time, a group of high school students were traversing through the villages and hills on their way home. The previous week, the students had just celebrated reaching matric with a socially distanced, tie ceremony attended by their parents, teachers and elders. From a community where 95% of adults do not finish high school, these courageous learners embody the light of hope within the darkness of poverty.

Among them was a young man named Khanyiso. Coming from one of the poorest families in the village and being the first person in his family to reach matric, Khanyiso was a beacon of light and inspiration to his kin. To get him to this point, his mom, Zukiswa, sold packets of chips for R1 each and shared in a small portion of her father’s old-age grant.

Each day, Khanyiso walked four hours between Nqileni to Folokhwe to get to school and back – a ritual of resilience practised by so many young learners in the area.

On this Monday afternoon, reaching the final steep incline, his home in sight, Khanyiso was struck by a bolt of lightning and died. The light he represented was cruelly extinguished by light itself.

In the weeks following his death, the grief in Xhora Mouth was so fierce that the sky remained grey and the sun hidden from sight.

In some ways, Khanyiso’s devastating death was a freak accident. A case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But it’s also true that Khanyiso died because he was born into entrenched poverty.

Nqileni Village, his home, is in one of the poorest districts in South Africa. Here, there is still no access to electricity and the only way to get to the village is to navigate the long and treacherous gravel road.

In reflecting about the death of Khanyiso, the injustice strikes like a dagger in the heart of optimism. It also compels us to ask questions about our policy and development prerogatives.

For instance, after formidable lobbying from Equal Education, the National Scholar Transport Policy was approved by the Cabinet in 2015. Under its guise, learners walking long distances to schools in rural areas would be provided transport by a collaboration between the Department of Basic Education and Department of Transport.

Yet as Nokolo, a resident of Nqileni, tells with exasperation, the last time she saw a government bus enter Xhora Mouth was in 2014 – a year before the policy was signed into law. A bus has never come all the way to Nqileni.

What is even more frustrating is the dearth of empathy between policy and reality. In likely preparation for Tito Mboweni’s austerity budget, the Department of Transport slashed spending, leaving 37 000 leaners in the Eastern Cape that live “close” to school stranded. Close in this case is defined as 10km or less.

In Xhora, walking 10km over the rolling hills can take up to three hours. This implies that the government considers it perfectly reasonable for a student to hike up to six hours a day just to get to school and back. Young learners, who already have to fight the ills of poverty, should not bear the burden of austerity and budget cuts.

On the Friday before that awful Monday, when Zukiswa presented Khanyiso with his matric tie, she proudly proclaimed in isiXhosa: “Khanyiso, my child, I don’t have clothes, I don’t have anything, but I have hope that when you are done school, I will have everything.”

Zukiswa did everything she could to kindle and protect the light Khanyiso brought into her world. The government’s ineptitude abandoned the carefully crafted flame and left it to the elements.

There are so many other children in the rural Eastern Cape who are left to fend for themselves – as South Africans, we must mobilise our humanity and demand that their fires are cultivated and protected at all costs.

\* Zak Essa is a recent graduate in Economics from UCT and currently works at the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship and the Bulungula Incubator. He writes in his personal capacity.

\*\* The views expressed here are not necessarily those of IOL.