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Francis Wilson: A heart on fire: 17 May 1939 - 24 April 2022

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Professor Francis Wilson, the founder of SALDRU and the chronicler and analyst of over 200 years of Southern African economic history has passed away. He was 82. SALDRU is the administrator and home base of Econ3x3, although it began as an independent publication under the REDI3x3 project. Its aim, as was Wilson's, is to use research to fashion evidence-based policy that can help improve the lives of many South Africans who still burden under the legacy of apartheid.

Throughout Wilson's career, he focused on the injustices wrought by the apartheid system of migrant labour, and land dispossession. He was always meticulous about chronicling the facts.

It was Wilson who calculated, after years of painstaking analysis of the Chamber of Mines' annual reports, that in 55 years – from 1911 to 1969 – black miners' wages had not only not increased, but had actually gone down in real terms. Moreover, the wage gap between white and black workers had widened from 11.7:1 to 17.6:1 in the same period.

The figures, which he had compiled for his first book, "*Labour in the South African Gold Mines, 1911-1969*" and which was about to be published by Cambridge University Press, were so stark, he worried he may have them wrong. So he asked the *Financial Mail*, in 1968, if he could publish an exploratory article to test the reaction. The article was published as a cover story under the headline, "*Gold's Forgotten Men.*"

He held his breath, but the Chamber of Mines did not dispute the figures – although they had asked to "vet" his findings (a request he refused).

So began a lifelong work of exploring the roots of poverty and inequality in the country. He would argue that as much as the mines created immense wealth, so they also created poverty, not only in South Africa but in the region from which miners were drawn, at least until 1973.

"Facts are powerful," he said reflecting on the work last year. Facts matter.

He did not confine his research to the library. For his doctoral thesis at Cambridge University, on the same subject, he went down mines and visited migrant labour barracks that housed up to 90 men in a dormitory. "You can't write about South Africa unless you've been down a mine," he said shortly before his death.

Driven by the need to combat the immense misery caused by apartheid, he established the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit in 1975 to gather facts as a kind of arsenal. SALDRU began by analyzing wage data. A year later, Wilson convened a major conference on farm labour, the first of its kind. "These are the seeds," said Professor Murray Leibbrandt, who took over the directorship of SALDRU in 2001, speaking of the legacy Wilson left to the research community. "Francis' amazing ability to pull together the research and the researchers, and almost forge a community: he was an evidence-based person but he was much more than that." He did not distinguish between surveys and "real lived experience", said Leibbrandt, so whether you had a survey of farm wages or had set up a farm school, there was a place at that conference.

His work and his life epitomised the dictum he urged students to live by when he addressed them at a UCT graduation ceremony in 2016, when he received an honorary doctorate. We need, he told them, "hearts on fire and heads on ice."

Wilson had an extraordinary network, nationally and internationally, that allowed him to tap consciences to raise funds for research. In 1984, SALDRU hosted the second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty. The first, commissioned in 1929, examined the "poor white problem" and the plight of Afrikaans farmers whose farms were failing. In a sense, the findings became part of the justification for the policy of "separate development" and then apartheid. Wilson used this uncomfortable fact to good effect in raising money for the second inquiry in 1984, and a third in the post-apartheid era.

The evidence produced was like a "weather-vane," says Leibbrandt, "like an internal temperature reading of society. Government could say whatever they liked but here was the evidence" about poverty in apartheid South Africa.

"He was an incredible nurturer of talent," recalls Dr Mamphela Ramphele, a former Vice-Chancellor of UCT, and a renown black consciousness activist and doctor. Ramphele worked with him on the second Carnegie inquiry.

Wilson had met her in 1975 on a trip to King Williams Town to visit the banned black consciousness leader, Steve Biko. He was en route to Hogsback, his family home, with his son David in tow, still in the khaki shorts of his Cape Town primary school. "I was very struck by this university professor and his son come to see what we were doing for the community in King Williams Town at the Zanempilo community centre," started by a group of black consciousness people to provide services to the community.

After Biko was killed in detention and Ramphele banished to Tzaneen, then part of the Eastern Transvaal, he would visit her regularly. When her banning order was lifted, he recruited her to come to SALDRU to work on the second Carnegie Inquiry.

"He shaped my professional life," she said, teaching her to write and integrating her into the Cape Town community, then riven by apartheid.

Another whose life he shaped was Ebrahim Patel, now minister of Trade and Industry. Patel had left the University of the Western Cape without getting his degree because of two long spells in detention.

He was "very comfortable" that Patel support the trade union movement as long as he provided the relevant papers. "He stressed evidence-based engagement."

Patel and a SALDRU team worked on inflation and wage trends in Cape Town, among other things, and when the tri-cameral elections took place in 1983, "we put to him the idea

that we needed to do an analysis of socio-economic trends that informed the election,' which he readily agreed to. They also produced a paper on the real voting proportion to counter government propaganda that calculated the percentage of voters out of the proportion of people who had registered, rather than out of the population.

"He was a deeply compassionate human being and brought a lucid mind to policy analysis," said Patel.

"Everything that Francis did," says Leibbrandt, "was about capacity building and empowerment."

It was under Wilson that SALDRU began the series of panel surveys in the period of the transition to democracy to establish a kind of 'base-line' of living conditions at the start of the democratic administration.

In late 1992 the World Bank spoke to SALDRU about undertaking a Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) for South Africa, wrote late Dudley Horner, who at the time was Wilson's deputy director, in a document marking 30 years of the unit. Normally, explained the document, "such initiatives are Bank to government engagements. In the special circumstances of the time the Bank was unable to break sanctions which were in place and the Central Statistical Services were thus excluded as a major partner in such an endeavour. There seems little doubt that SALDRU's involvement in the second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development inclined the Bank in our direction."

Thus began an era where SALDRU established itself as a leader in the field of national panel surveys. Previously there had been successful provincial surveys in KZN and in the Cape. But the Project for Living Standards and Development (PSLSD) began shortly before the first democratic elections with a national sample of 9000 households.

It was out of this experience that government decided in 2006 to undertake a regular national panel survey and entrusted SALDRU with its administration and analysis. Known as the South African National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS), it has become a mainstay of information about the dynamics of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. Wilson also founded DataFirst, a research data service, after stepping down as SALDRU director in 2001. Its current director, Prof Martin Wittenberg, described Wilson on DataFirst's Facebook page as "a towering figure in South African social science. His work on migrant labour and on the gold mines shows what socially engaged research looks like."

Initially founded to improve access to data and to improve quantitative skills among UCT researchers, it has become a "a crucial national player in making data more readily available to policy makers and social scientists," says Wittenberg.

Wilson was born in Livingstone, Zambia on 17 May, 1939 to two prominent anthropologists, Godfrey and Monica Wilson. His father died when he was just five, and his brother Tim a toddler. They were raised at Hogsback in the Eastern Cape but he came to UCT to study physics in 1958. He decided, he said, that he did not want to spend his life "counting electrons" and moved to economics. Inspired by the words of John Maynard Keynes, he argued that economics is a "method rather than a doctrine"- a way of understanding and explaining the world.

He was also a devoted Anglican, whose Christianity impelled him to combat injustice. A regular attendee of the early Friday morning services at St George's Cathedral (which the late Archbishop Tutu used to frequent), he was also a consultant to the the World Council

of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) in the '70s and '80s. At first, recalled its former director Boudewijn Sjollema, he was wary of the WCC's active support for the liberation parties but "he gradually understood and supported" the policy, especially after meeting some of the liberation movement leaders, "notably Oliver Tambo, who was, like Francis, an Anglican."

He married his wife Lindy Serrurier, whom he had first met as an undergraduate at UCT, in 1964 and had three children, David, Jessica, and Tanya. Lindy developed a successful career in both education and documentary filmmaking but was a stalwart support of Francis throughout his career and work.

He passed away in a hospital in Cape Town on April 24th, after being ill for several months.

In a note to Lindy after his death, Professor David Lam of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan summed up his life's work: "Francis epitomised the view that research, data, and an open exchange of ideas can help address the biggest challenges in the world".

About the author

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