

## **Emeritus Professor Francis Wilson**

Emeritus Professor Francis Wilson's exceptional achievement lies in his contributions to scholarship and the manner in which he has used scholarship to fight for social policies that are evidence-informed. He has offered UCT and South Africa an exceptional example of the practice of engaged scholarship.

After returning UCT from his PhD in Cambridge he published three immensely influential pieces of research: in 1971 *Farming 1866-1966*, a chapter in the Oxford History of South Africa; and in 1972 *Labour in the South African Gold Mines 1911-1969* was published by Cambridge University Press out of his PhD. Finally, he published a book, *Migrant Labour in South Africa*. These works describe the terrible social consequences of the story of the migrant labour system. Over time his contribution broadened to a focus on understanding how these processes and others underwrite South Africa's poverty.

"I was trying to write a history that is relevant to all South Africans," said Wilson.

In 1974 Wilson launched the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU). In 1982 the Carnegie Corporation decided to fund the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty & Development in South Africa as a massive independent research process, and Wilson was asked to direct this, with SALDRU serving as the base institution. This collective effort presented a formidable and graphic documentation of the impoverishment black South Africans endured under apartheid.

"I'm a senior scholar and economist," he said. "One of the most necessary conditions for long-term political stability is a large reduction in South Africa's level of inequality, which is one of the highest and most visible in the world. Easier said than done! To deal with these complex issues, academics have to get mud on their boots and learn from others in government and elsewhere about the problems involved in scaling up successful projects in agriculture, education, housing and others."

In 1993 Wilson and SALDRU, in partnership with the World Bank, worked on a survey to produce baseline evidence of the state of the nation, which was widely used in the 1990s for policy formulation. He has served as a zealous missionary for the cause of the public release of survey data. While the 1993 data set was used intensively in the 1990s for research and policy purposes, there were few South Africans with the skills to do so. Wilson flagged it as an imperative to build the capacity of South Africans to analyse their data and to undertake their policy analysis. With others he set up capacity building initiatives that run to this day.

Wilson's influence and reputation has endured into his post-retirement. In 2012, he was appointed Acting Pro Vice-Chancellor for Poverty and Inequality at UCT, tasked with organising a conference to launch a national Inquiry into Strategies to overcome poverty and inequality. This event was subtitled "Towards Carnegie 3" and there could not have been a more appropriate launch for the initiative.

For over 40 years Wilson has made a unique contribution to documenting and analysing key social issues affecting South African society. Even more unique though is how he has used his research and that of others to promote social change for good in South Africa. He has been an academic pioneer, embodying the vision of UCT, to produce rigorous, relevant, critical research promoting engaged scholarship and social justice. Through his academic teaching, scholarship, mentorship and national convening power, Wilson has brought great credit and honour to this institution.