

The use of the liberation struggles' documentation in stimulating new knowledge: International activism and change

Jónína Einarisdóttir, University of Iceland

Abstract

The Documentation Initiatives on the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa contains a rich data that can be used to initiate new research and contribute to new knowledge. Through examination of the interviews with the Icelandic activists, I will propose following three themes worth further research. Firstly, I will pay attention to the activists themselves. In Iceland, some of the individuals crucial for the anti-apartheid campaign, that finally led to ban on importing South African goods to the country, had lived abroad and there become involved in anti-apartheid groups in the 1980s. After returning to Iceland they contributed to the establishment of the South African Committee against Apartheid (SAGA) in 1988. In addition, the activists took with them particular traditions of advocating, such as singing South African songs, arranging concerts, as well as emphasis on information distribution. Another part of the activists were young individuals, even teenagers, without any personal relations with South Africa (or Africa). These young individuals entered SAGA and spent their free time and resources supporting populations personally unknown to them and living in locations they had never visited. Why did they become active? How do they look at their past experiences and how did their involvement influence later life? The second theme I will highlight, somewhat related to the first one, is international networking. ANC had a good international set of connections with representatives based in the Nordic countries and Western Europe. Their visits to local anti-apartheid groups were enormously important to enforce the work, get media attention and for recruitment of new members. In the fall 1985, one such visit encouraged the dockworkers to stop unloading goods from South Africa into the country. Although this action was later ruled as illegal, it was noted in media. The role and type of international networking for activism to be successful need to be better examined. The third theme relates to factors that contribute to rapid changes in public opinions and creation of images. In much of the Icelandic media at the time, apartheid was treated as acceptable political system and ANC was labelled as a terrorist organisation with its jailed leader Mandela. Within short from Mandela's release from prison, common Icelanders started to regard Mandela as of the worlds most respected leaders and apartheid became classified as an inhuman system that should not be accepted. How comes this rapid change?