

Nelson Mandela

Former President of South Africa and Nobel Peace Laureate; a leader who dedicated his life to the anti-apartheid struggle, democracy and equality; founder of The Elders.

- First President of post-apartheid South Africa, 1994-1999
- Nobel Peace Laureate, 1993
- Founder of The Elders, 2007
- Imprisoned for 27 years for his role in the anti-apartheid struggle

"The Elders can speak freely and boldly, working both publicly and behind the scenes. Together they will support courage where there is fear, foster agreement where there is conflict and inspire hope where there is despair."

- Nelson Mandela

Founder of The Elders

Nelson Mandela founded The Elders in Johannesburg on his 89th birthday, 18 July 2007. With the help of Graça Machel and Desmond Tutu, he brought together the 'Elders' – independent, progressive leaders committed to building peace and advancing human rights – to work together on solutions to global problems, from climate change to violent conflict.

In his [speech launching The Elders](#), Nelson Mandela called on the group to act as “a fiercely independent and robust force for good, tackling complex and intractable issues, especially those that are not popular.”

Nelson Mandela remained an Honorary Elder until his death in December 2013 and continues to be the inspiration behind The Elders' work.

Anti-apartheid hero

One of the world's most revered statesmen and perhaps the world's most famous political prisoner, Nelson Mandela was at the forefront of the struggle against South Africa's apartheid

regime. Mandela joined the African National Congress (ANC) in 1943 and led numerous national anti-apartheid activities until his long imprisonment in 1964.

During the Rivonia trial that sentenced Mandela and many other ANC members to a lifetime in prison, he made one of his most famous statements:

"I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison but remained an influential leader of the anti-apartheid struggle throughout his time in jail. As international pressure on the apartheid government increased during the 1980's, Mandela was able to begin a dialogue with the apartheid government in 1985 before negotiating his release in 1990.

Freedom and presidency

After his release from prison, Mandela stepped up to lead his people's liberation struggle, becoming leader of the ANC in 1991. In 1993, Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk, then President of South Africa, were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "for their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime, and for laying the foundations for a new democratic South Africa."

In 1994 he was elected President in South Africa's first non-racial elections – the first time that Mandela himself was able to vote in his own country. He served a five-year term.

67 years working for a better world

After stepping down as President in 1999, Mandela continued to work to advance peace, health and human rights in Africa. He was particularly active in campaigning on HIV/AIDS, and facilitated peace negotiations in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi.

In 2009 the United Nations adopted [Nelson Mandela International Day](#) in celebration of his life and legacy. Mandela Day takes place on 18 July – Nelson Mandela's birthday – each year. The aim of the day is to encourage all of us to spend 67 minutes of our time giving back to our community, just as Mandela spent 67 years of his life working for a better world.

Nelson Mandela remains an inspiration to people around the world fighting injustice and oppression, and his mandate for The Elders continues to drive our mission and vision.

At the [launch of The Elders](#) in South Africa 2007, Nelson Mandela said: “I believe that in the end it is kindness and generous accommodation that are the catalysts for real change,” This spirit of hope and empathic leadership remains at the heart of our work on peace, justice and human rights across the world.