SERI LAUNCHES TWO RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS ON STUDENT PROTESTS

On Tuesday, 31 October 2017 at 16h00 – 18h00, the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI) launches its two latest research publications on student protest. These resources document the misuse of force by police during student protests at the University of the Witwatersrand in October 2016. They also provide information about rights and obligations of those involved in student protests, including students, university administrators, the police and private security.

During 2015 and 2016, students on university campuses across South Africa embarked on large-scale, disruptive protests calling for systemic changes to how universities operate and approach education, as well as how academic curricula are structured. Government, university administrators, police and private security often responded to these protests with force in an attempt to shut them down. Universities approached the courts to obtain interdicts preventing students from protesting on campuses. The police used tear gas, stun grenades, water cannons and rubber bullets against protesting students in often disproportionate and unlawful uses of force.

A Double Harm: Police Misuse of Force and Barriers to Necessary Health Care Services documents the injuries caused by the disproportionate and unlawful use of force by police officers called in to disperse campus-based protest at the University of the Witwatersrand in late 2016. It also deals with the attempts to provide medical assistance to injured protestors, and documents cases in which these efforts were obstructed. A number of particularly concerning misuses of force took place while police tried to enforce a university-wide curfew. In one instance, police officers assaulted and shot a non-threatening student in her leg at close range with rubber bullets in the early hours of the morning because she was in her room watching a movie. The report notes that the University promised to investigate the incident but has, to date, failed to provide evidence that it has done so. This and other examples of the misuse of force raises serious questions about the appropriateness of the deployment of the police to regulate campus-based protest.
Student Protests: A Legal and Practical Guide is a user-friendly guide that explains students’ rights to protest, as well as students’ rights when they are arrested, detained or charged with a crime during a protest. It also explains what laws and policies say about these rights and what legal protections students have. This resource aims to create awareness of the rights and obligations of those involved in student protests to encourage students, university administrators, police and private security officials to respect human rights and mitigate the disproportionate and unlawful use of force.

According to Stuart Wilson, executive director of SERI: “The reports released today show that the police and university authorities have yet to fully appreciate the permissible limits of force in response to student protest. SERI’s research documents injuries inflicted by the police on innocent bystanders or non-threatening protestors. The research demonstrates that more needs to be done to respond reasonably and with respect to student protest, and that the public order police are, at best, a blunt instrument when deployed in response to campus-based protest action”.

The launch will take place on at Holy Trinity Catholic Church, 16 Stiemens Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg.

Both research publications are available on SERI’s website at: [http://seri-sa.org/index.php/research/expanding-political-space](http://seri-sa.org/index.php/research/expanding-political-space)

Contact:

Stuart Wilson (SERI executive director): 011 356 5860 / 072 265 8633 / stuart@seri-sa.org
Mary Rayner (SERI research consultant): 011 356 5860 / 082 370 0462 / mary.i.rayner@gmail.com