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UCT champion of urban poor and city improvement honoured with prestigious award

University of Cape Town Professor Susan Parnell is the 2010 recipient of the Alan Pifer Research Award, for her work in urban poverty reduction and environmental management.

The annual award honours a UCT researcher whose outreach work has contributed to the advancement and welfare of South Africa's disadvantaged people. It highlights UCT's strategic goal of promoting socially responsive research.

Parnell works in the Department of Environmental & Geographical Sciences and the African Centre for Cities. "Susan's immense contribution to research has helped inform government policy," said Professor Anton le Roex, the Faculty of Science dean. "Her work has set the social responsibility benchmark for the faculty."

Parnell's many accomplishments include her involvement in welfare policy debate in the post-apartheid period. She contributed to the South African NGO Coalition's Poverty Hearings by helping define how the apartheid past impoverishes current urban residents. Parnell also served on the Advisory Board of Isandla Institute, a think-tank NGO focused on addressing the lack of policy research on the growing urban poverty problem. She is currently a member of the Board of Sustainable Energy Africa.

Parnell's academic work reflects her involvement with a number of key studies for the Cape Town Municipality. These academically rigorous policy reports centre on a common theme – the idea that reducing poverty is not an abstract notion, but "can and should be mainstreamed into the specific roles and responsibilities of the government", said Parnell.

She also worked on the urban dimensions of poverty reduction that fall under national government departments. She helped develop key studies to assist in poverty reduction strategies with the treasury, the presidency and other sectoral departments. She said: "Having a historically informed understanding of past injustices is essential for civil society groups seeking to build better cities for future

generations of South Africans. Understanding the technical detail of how cities are financed and run is essential to being able to protect the poor.”

As the first director of the African Centre for Cities CityLab programme, Parnell champions the co-production of new knowledge that is directed at solving entrenched urban problems. She chairs the Cape Town Climate Change Think Tank, a partnership group of university, city and civil society intellectuals working on the urban implications of global environmental change.

Upon receiving the award, Parnell said: “It is important for universities to recognise and encourage research-led social engagement.”

Dr Alan Pifer, in whose name the award was established, was the president of the Carnegie Corporation and the founding chair of the UCT Fund. He died in 2005. The Alan Pifer Award was established by the UCT Fund in 1992 with an endowed gift from American scientists Dr Caryl Haskins and his wife Dr Edna Haskins. There are 17 previous recipients of the award; the most recent was Professor Dan Stein in 2009.

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