



# 30

Years of Working for Justice,  
Democratic Governance, and Human  
Rights in Building an Open, Civil, and  
Democratic Society in South Africa.

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# Foreword

## by Alex Soros

**In 2018, I accompanied my father, family members, and Open Society colleagues from around the world to South Africa to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Open Society Foundation for South Africa (OSF-SA). I was honored to present a reflection on the Foundation's journey and to share some of my own memories of previous visits to the country. I recounted stories my father had shared with me regarding his inspiration for opening the Foundation and his early lessons in philanthropy.**

My father established the Foundation in Cape Town in April 1993, almost exactly one year before South Africa's first democratic elections that produced such inspiring scenes of long queues of people waiting to cast their first ever votes. As a child watching from New York, it was the close-up shots that struck me; the euphoria and pride of people who, after years of disenfranchisement and struggle, were finally able to enjoy full citizenship rights in the land of their birth.

South Africa and its people have interested my father since the 1960s and I am proud of the small part he played in the transition to democracy. Though South Africa was a world away from Hungary—his country of birth—having survived the Nazi occupation and communism he knew what it meant to live precariously under an unjust government.

It was our grandfather's prescience of the Nazi threat that helped our family and their friends to survive. Likewise, it was my father's foresight of the apartheid state's intentions that compelled him to establish a bursary allowing around 80 black students to study at the University of Cape Town. He believed that education would enable black South Africans to become leaders of a democratic South Africa, liberated from state-sanctioned racism and exclusion. This compelled my father to anonymously establish his bursary, named for his former teacher Karl Popper, in his first major act of philanthropy and the precursor to what would become the Open Society Foundations.

During his first trip to South Africa my father visited places like Soweto, where few white South Africans ventured, as well as far-flung rural areas like Transkei where his South African friend Herbert Vilakazi was teaching at the homeland's university. They had first met back in New York in the 1960s where Herbert vividly recounted

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life under apartheid, knowledge that my father supplemented by reading and listening to South African authors and musicians, some of whom he supported financially.

Visiting apartheid South Africa in the eighties my father saw a country that was the epitome of a closed society, where those who opposed the state were arbitrarily jailed or even killed. When we visited in 2018, we heard from beneficiaries how the Karl Popper bursaries made such a profound difference in the trajectory of their lives. I'm so glad that my father could hear those stories too, especially since for many years he had regarded the scholarship experiment as a failure.

In 1987, against a backdrop of nationwide protests and escalating state violence, my father was becoming more pessimistic for South Africa's future. But when he was asked by leading anti-apartheid figures to finance a meeting in Senegal between the banned African National Congress and white business leaders, academics, writers, and journalists, he agreed on the spot. The Dakar Conference would prove to be a key step on South Africa's long road to democracy.

Following his release from jail in 1990, Nelson Mandela presided over an impressive political transition even before becoming the country's first democratic president. I have so many priceless memories of meeting the man himself and hearing him talk about the struggle

against apartheid, including his three decades of imprisonment. His generosity and forgiveness went a long way in helping all South Africans recover from the wounds of the past.

When my father opened OSF-SA it was the organization's first foundation on the continent and one of the first outside Eastern Europe. Over its 30-year history it has invested more than \$230 million in the country and supported around 1.000 different organizations and individuals. Other important investments were also made to organizations such as the Joy and Herb Kaiser-founded Medical Education for South African Blacks, the Weekly Mail newspaper, and, in a personal capacity, the Black Sash.

Friend of the family Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert was not only founding chairman not only of OSF-SA but also of the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa. Original board member Alex Boraine played an instrumental role in setting up the Foundation. Mike Savage served as the Foundation's first executive director for many years. In 1993, Aryeh Neier assumed the presidency of the Open Society Institute, the precursor to the Open Society Foundations. His commitment to human rights fueled his interest in reversing the damage of apartheid, and the racism and inequality that preceded it.

I grew up knowing the importance of South Africa's history and that its hard-won freedom and pillars of democracy deserved to be protected—a role so expertly performed by the Foundation for so many years. South Africa remains a key player in the continent, and the world, and I look forward to seeing what role the country will continue to play going forward as we transition to a new operating model.

We acknowledge our grantees and partners who have made such great strides in advancing the social and economic rights of South Africans. We also pay tribute to colleagues who spearheaded and oversaw these initiatives over the decades.



“South Africa was a closed society with all the institutions of a first-world country, but they were off limits to the majority of the population on racial grounds. Where could I find a better opportunity to open up a closed society?”

– George Soros







# Introduction

## by Binaifer Nowrojee

**South Africa's democratic trajectory has always been fascinating to the world, particularly those interested in human rights and equality. Its racially riven and unjust society compelled our founder, George Soros, to learn more about the country during the 1960s by making friends, listening to people's stories, and doing what he could to help.**

It is fitting that South Africa is regarded as the place where, in the late 1970s, George's major philanthropy began. The Open Society Foundation for South Africa was the first foundation to be established on the continent, and one of the first national foundations to be set up outside of Eastern Europe.

I was inspired to learn how George's largesse and acts of kindness touched so many people's lives even before there was OSF-SA. Some of these stories are contained within these pages, like how George would arrange performances in his home for South African musicians trying to make a living in New York. Or the many scholarships and stipends he provided to black South Africans studying in the United States, long before he set up a bursary for black students at the University of Cape Town.

In 1987, George helped finance a conference between a contingent of largely Afrikaans South Africans and members of the banned African National Congress (ANC) in Dakar, Senegal, with the goal of dismantling the apartheid system. This practice of bringing conflicting parties together to promote dialogue and foster pathways to peace, is one that the Open Society Foundations have supported ever since.

I was recently reminded about the "miracle" of South Africa's peaceful transition and how the country had, for a time, teetered on the brink of civil war until acceptable compromises could be reached between warring political parties.

George set up the national foundation after the release of Nelson Mandela and the repeal of several apartheid laws, calling upon former opposition leader Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert to help him.

OSF-SA's establishment and Frederik's contributions are recounted further in this text, but I want to share one quote from his book, *The Other Side of History: An Anecdotal Reflection on Political Transition in South Africa*:

"Through my association with George Soros over the last 18 years, I have learned that philanthropy can be constructive and self-correcting. I am still learning a great deal from this association."

Frederik sadly passed away in 2010 but his words still resonate with me. I too have had a masterclass in philanthropy and open society through my own decades-long association with George and I was privileged when he sought out my help to start the Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa, which I led for many years. I am further privileged that he has entrusted me to run these very foundations as we transition to a leaner, more joined-up structure to address some of the issues confronting us today.

Throughout my career with the Open Society Foundations, I've been asked what exactly we mean by this term *open society* beyond the values of justice, equity, and democracy that we espouse. Over the years, George himself has written and spoken about what he understands it to mean. At the first "Open Society" lecture held in Johannesburg in 1994, he noted that Karl Popper, (who expanded on the term first coined by Henri Bergson), did not like to provide exact

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definitions to concepts, fearing that rigid definitions may lead to inflexible philosophical systems impervious to change.

Echoing these sentiments, George said he believed that open society "is not governed by any doctrine but is based on the recognition that no one possesses the ultimate truth." Such a society, George continued, "needs institutions which allow people with different views and interests to live together in peace."

In addition to education, early endeavours by the Foundation focused on supporting South Africa's new democratic government to deliver on the ANC's election promise of "a better life for all." This included support for housing, small businesses, and governance. The ANC's 1994 election manifesto called for "an open society that encourages vigorous debate." It added that people needed to "be free to express their views without fear, including criticising the government of the day," and that media freedom was "essential for a flourishing of democracy."

Even as the government sometimes veered from the ideals of that manifesto, OSF-SA remained a partner of government where necessary, while supporting civil society to hold it to account. And later during the pandemic era, we partnered with government and civil society to counter the scourge of COVID-19, whether through the provision of funds for medical research, campaigns to address vaccine hesitancy, personal protective equipment, and food gardens in stricken communities.

This account of OSF-SA's history in South Africa shows the breadth and variety of projects it has sustained. The nature of our support may have changed over the years, but while the national office is closing, Open Society Foundations will continue to support South Africa's democratic project.



# Born in South Africa

George Soros established the Open Society Fund in 1979. It was in South Africa, through this fund, that his first formal philanthropic act took place, and, in the same year, he established the Karl Popper Bursary Fund to support 80 black South African university students at the University of Cape Town.



*“To put this in historical perspective, George’s decision to pay for 80 African scholarships helped break the back of segregation at South African universities. It inspired University of Cape Town and three other universities to gain the confidence to defy the government and admit more and more high-potential African students like me. The four universities, University of Cape Town, Wits, Rhodes, and Natal University, became known as the, “open universities”, and George’s original philanthropy leveraged many more millions in donations that were used to educate a whole generation of black African scholars—people like me who are now successful lawyers, judges, corporate leaders, architects, medical doctors, artists, journalists, government officials, and civil society activists.”*

— **Mary-Jane Morifi**, OSF-SA chairperson from 2019 to early 2022, and one of the students who benefited from Soros’s bursary fund.







# From Dakar to Democracy

**Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, former opposition leader in South Africa's Parliament in the mid-1980s, together with fellow former parliamentarian Alex Boraine, would convince George to help finance a conference between 61 largely Afrikaner South Africans and members of the banned ANC in Dakar, Senegal.**

While this was not the first such gathering between the two disparate groups, the historic Dakar Conference on Gorée Island in Senegal in July 1987 was the largest and most public. It paved the way for further dialogue between the ANC's leadership in exile and internal interest groups.

More importantly, it allowed for a sharing of the common humanity and aspirations of the different parties.

This practice of bringing conflicting parties together to promote dialogue and foster pathways to peace is one that the Open Society Foundations have supported ever since. It is commonly accepted that the Dakar Conference contributed to the unbanning of political parties and the release of political prisoners, and eventually to a negotiated political settlement, in South Africa.

# Opening Doors

**George Soros officially opened OSF-SA's doors in Cape Town, South Africa, in April 1993, with a budget of \$15 million—mere months before the country's first democratic elections were held on April 27, 1994.**

Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert became the organization's first chairperson and University of Cape Town sociology professor Michael Savage, one of the Dakar Conference attendees, was appointed the first executive director, supported by board members Alex Boraine, Fikile Bam, Mamphela Ramphele, Anthony Heard, Rhoda Kadalie, Peter Sullivan, Khehla Shubane, Helen Zille, and Leah Gcabashe.







**Frederik van Zyl Slabbert wrote in the first OSF-SA annual report:**

*"Soros is not a benefactor or do-gooder in any conventional, or other sense of the word. ... With extraordinary clarity of purpose, without sentimentality and melodrama, he funds and pursues the achievement of the overall philosophical goal of an 'open society.' And he does this on an extraordinarily generous and wide scale in many countries worldwide."*

*"The Foundation sees its overall task as institution building for South Africa in transition. Particularly those institutions and areas related to them that sharpen the self-critical capacity of a country and assist it to be open and reflective to a dynamic and changing environment."*

**The Open Society Foundation for South Africa is committed to promoting the values, institutions and practices of an open, civil, and democratic society. It will work for a vigorous and autonomous civil society, not dominated by the state, in which minorities and divergent opinions are respected.**

— OSF-SA's first mission statement

OSF-SA initially contributed to the new South African democracy by supporting the state, directly or through civil society, in a range of areas, including local government capacity, elections, education for local government, and criminal justice reform. OSF-SA also provided support for civil society institutions, promoting freedom of expression and access to the media and facilitating access to legal advice. The Foundation supported rural community development, including youth skills and voter education training.



# Early Years

The Mandela era saw the Foundation initially supporting the state, directly or through civil society, in various areas, including education. OSF-SA identified education as fundamental to South Africa's transformation to an open society. Thus, the Foundation prioritized improving access to education as a lever for advancing broad socioeconomic rights and social change.

About a year and a half after Nelson Mandela's inauguration, South Africa held municipal elections in most of the country. A crucial need identified during the new dispensation was voter education among all South Africans, particularly youth and rural communities. OSF-SA supported a range of initiatives aimed at informing communities on how to participate in elections and local government. These initiatives were complemented by the Foundation's Community Radio program, which supported new and emerging community radio stations.





# Holding the State Accountable

After the ANC won another landslide victory during South Africa's second democratic elections, President Thabo Mbeki opened Parliament in June 1999. His two-term presidency would see Mbeki presiding over a country for which the rainbow nation myth was rapidly starting to fade. Crime rates would soar, and the HIV and AIDS epidemic—including Mbeki's open denial of the causative link between HIV and AIDS—would peak under his watch. Fierce internecine rivalries in the ruling ANC would emerge amidst a climate of still massive developmental needs among the population. This was when OSF-SA would recognize that working with the state would have to be balanced by holding the state accountable.

A key area in which OSF-SA challenged the state from the late 1990s was in the battle between the government and activists for the provision of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs. The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) was launched in December 1998, to fight for the distribution of ARVs. The battle would last at least a decade.





# Holding the line

OSF-SA responded to what was happening in the country by supporting and enabling flexible funding to a range of its grantees who in turn supported the protest movements, including #FeesMustFall, in different ways. The Foundation bolstered its funding of independent media and support for work on access to information and freedom of expression for citizens' access to justice.

OSF-SA's considerable contributions to the country's media landscape remained a key focus throughout the Foundation's involvement in South Africa. As new power dynamics emerged, and with the understanding that citizen participation in democratic processes depends on access to information, OSF-SA wanted to ensure that freedom of expression and access to information remained cornerstones of their work.

In 2017, the GuptaLeaks scandal saw more than 200,000 emails released exposing the Gupta family as the masterminds behind numerous state capture projects, with the involvement of state officials, including ministers, and implicating Jacob Zuma and his family. Several multinational companies were also accused of being complicit in state capture. OSF-SA supported the whistleblowers behind the GuptaLeaks to safely leave the country before the emails were released.

It is common cause that South Africa's strong, independent judiciary, active civil society, and free, independent media were the bulwarks against more aggravated capture of the state.







# Things Fall Apart

The ascendance of Jacob Zuma to the presidency of South Africa in May 2009 ushered in an era of significant change to the country's political landscape. Zuma's almost nine years in office were characterized by state corruption, dramatic setbacks to service delivery, and eventually, by what came to be known as full-on "state capture."

At the beginning of Zuma's presidency, OSF-SA focused its work on freedom of expression and oversight of state institutions. To strengthen advocacy and law reform, the Foundation supported organizations that aimed to strengthen oversight and accountability in respect to penal reform, legislative monitoring and reform, and budgetary monitoring, as well as support parliamentary portfolio committees, the convening of civil society dialogues, and research on the nature of public-private partnerships.

OSF-SA funded human rights-based, public interest litigation work for vulnerable groups (such as sex workers, asylum seekers, refugees and prisoners), including advancing access to health services through community-based budget monitoring of service delivery and providing legal services for vulnerable groups.

It also supported the launch of the Right2Know Campaign, initially a coalition to challenge the Protection of Information Bill (Secrecy Bill) and partnered with the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper to set up the *Mail & Guardian* Centre for Investigative Journalism (amaBhungane)—the first South African nonprofit center mandated to develop investigative journalism in the public interest.

In August 2012, police opened fire on striking workers at Lonmin plc in Marikana, Rustenburg, killing at least 34 people, with over 70 workers injured and more than 200 people arrested. The Marikana Massacre, as it became known, was a watershed moment in South Africa's new democratic history. In response, the government set up a judicial commission of inquiry (the Farlam Commission) to investigate the role and complicity of several high-ranking police officials and cabinet ministers, including Lonmin plc board member, Cyril Ramaphosa, and the police commissioner. The report into the killings was released two years later. While Ramaphosa was largely exonerated, the commission questioned the fitness of the national police commissioner and said that those responsible for the killings should be investigated. OSF-SA supported survivors and family members of the deceased to participate in the public hearings through the NGOs that supported them.





# Protests and Challenges

Shortly after President Zuma was sworn in for a second term in 2014, he became embroiled in additional cases involving corruption allegations against him. Public Protector Thuli Madonsela found that upgrades to the president's home were not permissible and that he should "pay back the money."

In 2015, opposition parties disrupted Zuma's State of the Nation Address, questioning when he would repay the money spent on the inessential upgrades to his homestead.

Access to higher education was a key part of South Africa's body politic in 2015. In March, the #RhodesMustFall Campaign was launched by students at the University of Cape Town, and by October, students from across the country were marching to Parliament and the Union Buildings to share their funding demands under a new movement, #FeesMustFall. They were arrested, shot at with rubber bullets, and dispersed with tear gas. Some were charged with treason.

In 2016, Deputy Finance Minister Mcebisi Jonas revealed that months previously, members of the Gupta family, close associates of Jacob Zuma, had offered him the finance minister position in return for a \$32,413,200 million bribe. These allegations led to complaints and an investigation by the public prosecutor—the results of which were published in the State of Capture report. The report detailed the conduct of Jacob Zuma and other officials, including the removal and appointment of ministers and directors of state-owned enterprises and state contracts being awarded to Gupta-linked companies.

The State of Capture report dominated news headlines and flooded social media, bringing home the scale of corruption in South Africa. Furthermore, it highlighted the vital role civil society and the media play and had played in exposing corruption and seeking accountability.

In the aftermath of the report's release, numerous protests by angry South Africans across the spectrum of society arose, culminating in a nationwide march in April 2017 where ordinary people again repeated the call, "Zuma Must Fall."



# New Dawn

In February 2018, Jacob Zuma resigned as South Africa's president after his own party threatened to mount a vote of no confidence in him in Parliament. He was replaced by Cyril Ramaphosa, who promised to investigate corruption and state capture. To this end, the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector including Organs of State (Zondo Commission) was established. The report would be released in multiple parts in 2022. Key findings included that Jacob Zuma had played a central role in state capture and corruption. The Gupta family's collusion with senior government officials to loot state resources was further detailed.

In 2018, OSF-SA hosted Chairperson George Soros, Deputy Chairperson Alexander Soros, members of the Global Board and the senior leadership of the Open Society Foundations, along with more than 100 grantees and colleagues from the OSF network to celebrate the Foundation's 25-year anniversary in November.

To commemorate the first major act of philanthropy by George Soros, OSF-SA issued a commemorative set of scholarship and fellowship awards to young African students to pursue work that advanced the values of an open society. A special three-year Investigative Journalism Fellowship Program was launched in partnership with the School of Journalism and Media Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand and Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies. Ten Democracy Fellowships were also launched.

During this time, OSF-SA began working on climate justice, including through supporting work for South Africa's just energy transition, which aimed to ensure that the country's inadequate and polluting coal-powered electric power stations were transitioned to renewable sources responsibly, by minimizing loss of jobs in mining-dependent communities.







# Responding to COVID-19

In 2020, South Africa and various parts of the world went into lockdown as COVID-19 spread. OSF-SA was able to provide emergency funding aimed at reaching the most vulnerable people and to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 across all of South Africa's provinces. The Foundation worked with new and existing grantees, the government, fellow philanthropists and the private sector in a coordinated response to COVID-19. During this time, the independent media and civil society remained vigilant to the policing of the country's lockdown laws; COVID-19 procurement; and the treatment of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in South Africa.

South Africa's Solidarity Fund was one of the initiatives that OSF-SA supported during this time, with a nearly \$270,250 donation. Established by the government, business, and civil society, the Solidarity Fund enabled all those willing and able to pool resources to fight the pandemic. The fund, which collected \$162,148,138 in four months during 2020, became the world's largest non-governmental COVID-19 relief fund, with South Africans being hailed for their resilience and commitment to working together and helping each other.



# Legacy in South Africa

In 2021, OSF-SA committed to becoming part of a continental Open Society structure called Open Society–Africa. This entailed the merger of the five Open Society African entities into one Foundation. OSF-SA’s staff transitioned to working continentally, while some staff members held dual roles—making grants in the name of Open Society–Africa and managing the transfer of OSF-SA’s open grants to a continental Reassigned Grants Unit. In 2023, Open Society announced a further transformation stage, in which all the disparate foundations across the world would be amalgamated into one organization. OSF-SA, therefore, wound up its activities in South Africa pursuant to this merger.

OSF-SA leaves behind a legacy on which a leaner Open Society can build globally. OSF-SA was uniquely positioned as a bold and sophisticated donor in South Africa’s philanthropic landscape. It established itself as a trusted and valued partner to democratic causes, primarily through its grant making and increasingly as an open society advocate, multi-sectoral connector, convener, and commissioner of research.

From 1997 to 2023, Open Society invested \$238,635,789 in South Africa. This figure excludes the initial endowment of \$15 million by George Soros to get OSF-SA up and running.





# Photo Credits

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Alex Soros. Credit: Open Society Foundations

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George Soros meets with Nelson Mandela in Cape Town in 1994. Credit: Greg Marinovich

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Binaifer Nowrojee. Credit: Open Society Foundations

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Mary-Jane Morifi. Credit: Open Society Foundations

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A large meeting of professors and students at Cape Town University on September 19, 1985. Credit: Bernard Bisson/Sygma/Getty

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Frederik van Zyl Slabbert (center) arrives in Accra, Ghana, following the Dakar Conference in July 1987. Credit: University of Stellenbosch/Jannie Gagiano

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Board members of the Open Society Foundation for South Africa pose for a photo during meetings in the late 1980s. Left to right: Alex Borraine, Michael Savage, Khehla Shubane, Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, Anthony Heard, Fikile Bam, Rhoda Kadalie, Helen Zille, Peter Sullivan. Credit: Stellenbosch University

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Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert gestures during an interviews in Sydney, Australia, on November 03, 1985. Credit: David Porter/Fairfax Media/Getty

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A worker from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) teaches potential voters how to cast a ballot in Johannesburg on April 15, 1994. Credit: Walter Dhladhla/AFP/Getty

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Children attend a memorial service for a child AIDS activist in Johannesburg on June 6, 2001. Credit: Lori Waselchuk/AP

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Activists protest government corruption and call for the ouster of President Jacob Zuma in Pretoria on April 7, 2017. Credit: Brent Stirton/Getty

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People commemorate the one-year anniversary of the Marikana Massacre in Marikana on August 16, 2013. Credit: Stephane de Sakutin/AFP/Getty

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Students and supporters attend a “FeesMustFall” protest in Pretoria on October 23, 2015. Credit: Zhai Jianlan/Xinhua/Newscom

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George and Alex Soros in conversation with Open Society President Patrick Gaspard at the 25th anniversary celebration of Open Society Foundations’ grant making in South Africa on November 29, 2018, in Cape Town. Credit: Open Society Foundations

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Volunteers distribute food in a Cape Town community experiencing record high unemployment due to the coronavirus pandemic on June 25, 2020. Credit: Dwayne Senior/eyevine/Redux

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Community-based paralegals join staff from the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) for outreach work in Cape Town, South Africa, on May 15, 2014. Credit: Sven Torfinn/Panos for the Open Society Foundations



