**UNIVERSITY GOLD MEDAL: SECTION27**

SECTION27, launched in May 2010, grew from the AIDS Law Project (ALP), a widely celebrated research, litigation and advocacy unit at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) at the University of the Witwatersrand. Closely related to the Treatment Action Campaign (which it co-founded), the ALP was at the forefront of legal strategies and social mobilisation in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Perhaps the most well-known of the ALP’s achievements is its driving role in *TAC v Minister of Health*, in which the Mbeki-government’s restrictive approach to the availability of antiretroviral drugs for the prevention of mother-to-child-transmission of HIV in public sector hospitals was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. The ALP’s remarkable success as a public interest law organisation earned it many accolades and has recently been documented by Didi Moyle in the book *Speaking Truth to Power: The Story of the AIDS Law Project* (Jacana Media, 2015).

The ALP left CALS and Wits in 2007 to become an independent NGO based in Braamfontein. Initially maintaining its focus on the rights of HIV positive persons and the progressive realisation of the right to have access to health care services, the organisation soon found itself branching out to other socio-economic rights and on the strengthening of constitutional democracy more generally. In line with this broadening focus, the organisation renamed itself SECTION27 (after the provision in the 1996 Constitution guaranteeing the right of access to health care services, food, water and social security) with a mission to function as a ‘catalyst for social justice’.

SECTION27 has made great strides towards realising this vision. It remains actively involved in the health sector, seeking to enhance the quality and affordability of health care services in the South African public and private health sectors. Key work in this field has included monitoring the implementation of the National Strategic Plan on HIV, as well as efforts to strengthen the South African National AIDS Council. Crucially, SECTION27 has been at the forefront of efforts to strengthen the severely strained public health care delivery system, particularly (though by no means exclusively) in the Free State and the Eastern Cape provinces.

On the right to basic education, SECTION27’s most high-profile impact has been two successful court battles over the delivery of textbooks to public schools in the Limpopo province. In addition, SECTION27 has campaigned for the improvement of infrastructure in rural schools and the rights of disabled learners, and has been involved in litigation and activism around sexual violence in schools and restrictive school admissions policies. It has worked as mentor for nascent education rights organisations throughout the country, including Equal Education in the Western Cape and Better Education for All in Limpopo.

SECTION27 is involved in many activities aimed at strengthening the institutions of constitutional democracy and ensuring openness and accountability in governance. In this regard, it was instrumental in the founding of CorruptionWatch (an NGO focusing specifically on unmasking and addressing corruption) in 2012, and regularly facilitates and participates in collective action around various issues of constitutional democracy.

Overall, SECTION27’s work has directly advanced the causes of social justice, democracy, accountability and good governance in South Africa. The organisation has been fundamental in establishing and maintaining enabling legal frameworks conducive to the progressive realisation of socio-economic rights and has successfully held different branches of government directly to account for fulfilling their obligations in terms of these rights. Importantly, SECTION27 does not adopt an exclusively adversarial approach to the State in the course of these struggles and seeks to constructively engage and assist the State in understanding and fulfilling its obligations, both publically and behind the scenes. Furthermore, SECTION27 is known for attempting to nurture civil society’s capacity to insist on realisation of the constitutional vision, and attempts throughout to work in partnership with other public interest organisations. It has also been instrumental in the establishment of several other organisations working in overlapping areas.

In addition to its activist work and highly successful litigation campaigns, SECTION27 has maintained a commitment to academic research in all of its primary working areas, and its staff have published highly acclaimed, accredited academic work on different aspects of the progressive realisation of the rights of access to health care services and education, as well as on access to justice. With its origins at CALS, SECTION27 maintains close links to Wits University to this day – its director and deputy director have served on the honorary staff of the School of Law, while both the School of Law and the School of Public Health have ex officio representatives on its Board of Directors

It should be clear that SECTION27 has played a key role in shaping the content, implementation and everyday enforcement of socio-economic rights in South Africa and has, through various activities and initiatives, contributed significantly to the strengthening of constitutional democracy and therefore it is befitting that the University awards the University Gold Medal to SECTION27.