Coffee and tea break

Panel 2 | 11:30-13:00
Archives and the Fight for the Past
Chair | Niemomar Zende (Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa)
Agnes Magnien (Director of the Collections Department, INA)
International and national responsibilities in the struggle to speak about human rights violations and questions of social justice. Finally, the act of collecting, digitising and restoring the archives raises ethical questions that, in turn, become historical questions. These processes also shed light on the technical challenges of heritage management which hamper accessibility to such heritage for future generations.

The colloquium is organised by the Wits History Workshop and IFAS-Research, in partnership with the French National Audiovisual Institute (INA), the Institut Français, the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC), the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA), the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research).
On the Rivonia Trial Sound Archive

The Rivonia Trial (1963-1964) was a defining moment in South Africa’s history and liberation struggle. At the time, the trial was carefully recorded on Dictabelts, a now obsolete audio recording format. Nearly 250 hours of the trial proceedings were recorded on 591 Dictabelts, kept by the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA). In the 1970s, Dictabelts had fallen into disuse and, consequently, countless Dictabelt recordings of other apartheid-era trials—irreplaceable records of history and heritage—were not accessible to researchers and the general public.

In 2012, NARSSA approached the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS) and the French National Audiovisual Institute (INA) to start a process of digitisation and restoration of the entire Rivonia Trial sound archive, which is now complete. At the same time, INA has been offering ongoing training to NARSSA sound technicians, so that South Africans may have their own agency over thousands of Dictabelts dating from the apartheid era, which are yet to be restored and studied. These archives—treasure troves of memory—should therefore not remain hidden away. Efforts to regain access to historic records is a process that revives the universal impetus of archives for research, art, culture, the law and beyond.