

Reflections on youth

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In 2016 South Africa will commemorate the 40th anniversary of June 16. As a nation, we will reflect on this historic day. We will compare our past to our present. That is inevitable. In doing this we must remember that context matters.

The message was clear on June 16, 1976: “Young people do not matter. They are a threat.” There was no youth policy and even if there were a youth policy, Black youth would certainly not have featured in it. South Africa is a very different place today. We see young people as resources and our National Youth Policy (NYP) 2020 characterises youth as assets whose power must be harnessed for the betterment of society.

The NYP 2020 recognises that young people need a hand-up and not a handout. The policy is inclusive of all youth while giving priority to the most vulnerable.

The brave, heroic activism of the youth of 1976 and the young lions of the 1980s paved the way for a youth voice. The voice of the youth has broken through. Today, young people are consulted on key government policies and initiatives. Their voices matter and their views must be heard.

Unacceptably high youth unemployment rates persist today. In addressing the high levels of youth unemployment, we need innovative youth entrepreneurs and youth co-operatives. We need fresh ideas that must propel young people to find a niche in the economy and transform it. The levels of entrepreneurship uptake among South Africa’s youth are still far too low compared to our BRICS’ counterparts and other middle-income developing countries.

As a result of early drop-out, low school completion rates and poor quality schooling, too many young people are not transitioning into the labour market and thereby falling into the poverty trap. We must make education fashionable. We have to improve the access to education. And at the same time we have to improve the quality of education. What should young people be studying? Are young people studying towards the qualifications that are needed



by labour market? Are we persuading young people to study towards the needs and opportunities of a changing economy? Social commentators have described today’s youth as depoliticised and apathetic. They are characterised as a selfish generation that demands everything on a silver platter without ever having to work for it. But how do we explain the Rhodes Must Fall Campaign and other progressive initiatives across the country?

Their youthful energy in challenging the powers that be over racist symbols is inspiring. It opens up opportunities for a constructive racial discourse. It opens up opportunities to redefine the future. Their brave actions have dispelled the notion that South Africa’s youth are depoliticised and

apathetic. Young people should take advantage of this momentum. Let’s take the transformation discourse beyond symbols. Let’s lead this discourse towards the transformation of the economy and beyond.

In our NYP 2020 consultations across the country, young people told us in no uncertain terms that they do not want a handout. They do not want to be seen as a charity case. They want access to opportunities and they will make a success of it. They want a hand-up. They want to be partners in their own development.

The NYP 2020 and the soon to be released Integrated Youth Development Strategy is anchored around giving young people opportunity with a hand-up. Our youth development policy is centred on building youth agency with young people at the centre of their own development.

I welcome the *South African Child Gauge 2015*. The research presented will help us to better understand the situation of youth in present day South Africa so that our policies and programmes can be relevant to their needs and aspirations. I urge policy-makers and youth development practitioners to read this publication for a better grasp on our work with young people across South Africa.