

■ OPINION

Youth must be invited to be part of the solution

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TWENTY-SIX years into democracy, there is a disconcerting frustration among the youth that they have become social and economic pariahs, as they continue to be locked out of programmes that are aimed at building their lives and the country.

This flows from the staggering unemployment numbers, regarded as one of the biggest challenges facing the youth.

Before the country became a constitutional state, the youth envisioned a society in which they were afforded access to quality education and jobs. Contrary to this, it is common place to see countless young people loitering about aimlessly. Ironically, this is happening while the country is in the grip of pressing challenges that require the youth's innovative ideas.

If not urgently attended to, this could be a perfect storm that will set off social and economic upheaval.

Time and time again, it is said that the future of our country lies in the hands of the youth and that without their active participation, we are doomed to fail. There is a need for fresh ideas in our rapidly changing world. The traditional ways of doing things are becoming obsolete, thus young people are more attuned to solving our challenges.

For instance, improving the management of our limited resources such as water is central towards achieving a better life for all. Among the myriad challenges, water scarcity is a festering problem that we have to address urgently. The fact that every drop of water counts has been highlighted by the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Many communities are in dire need of water to wash their hands regularly in order to prevent the spread.

It stands to reason that we cannot hope to deal sufficiently with the challenge of water scarcity and other equally pressing issues if the youth are not an integral part of finding solutions. The importance of achieving equity in every sector of our economy, including the water sector, will come to nothing. As a developmental state, we would have failed to meet the promise of a better life that vulnerable communities deserve.

Thus, if the perception that young people are being pushed to the sidelines is anything to go by, then we must double our collective efforts to change the situation. A void will be created when young people are not afforded the opportunity to lead and redirect the course of our developmental state.

In as far as the commitments to a thriving future for the youth are concerned, the Department of Water and Sanitation remains married to the ideal of young people as proponents of change. Through its youth programmes, the department has a way of equipping young people with skills commensurate to our challenges to build a world-class water sector.

The department opens opportunities to young people by means of the 2020 Vision for Water and Environment Education Programme. The programme promotes education campaigns about water resource management and the environment, in line with the school curriculum.

The programme includes the South African Youth Water Prize competition, which provides rare opportunities for many young people who would otherwise not have the means to pursue their dreams in further education.

As an annual science and technology competition, it targets grades 10 and 11 learners in the Department of Basic Education's Further Education and Training Band.

The competition, which is held in a collaboration between the Department and the Stockholm Water Foundation in Sweden, woos young people by offering them tertiary education bursaries to find solutions for our water woes, and to build thriving lives for themselves.

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