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COMMENT



SHOKI MALEPE

SPACE SHOULD BE CREATED FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

AFTER scenes of youth insurrections, which became a turning point in our political landscape 45 years ago, one of the greatest ironies of our democratic dispensation is the staggering levels of youth unemployment while the country faces a chronic skills deficit.

In spite of the impressive numbers of youth completing their matric and entering institutions of higher learning, the country is still not in a position to plug the gaping hole of skills shortages. Instead of replenishing the skills to counter the chronic shortages, the challenge is continuing to fester into a serious problem. This plays itself out as increasing numbers of youth unemployment are getting out of control.

Every day we are confronted by disillusioned youth who are complaining about the inability of the job market to create enough work opportunities to absorb them into employment. Compounding this challenge, countless others claim to be excluded from opportunities to further their studies to acquire relevant skills that will open up prospects for them to be gainfully employed.

For example, the unemployed youth hopes that the investment in infrastructure development would translate into an obligation and a commitment to create jobs. This is also seen as the case with the Department of Water and Sanitation where direct job creation takes place through the development, operation and management of water infrastructure. Through investment in infrastructure development, the youth sees opportunities for employment for them to attain equitable social and economic benefits.

As the country observes another Youth Month throughout June, there should be a glimpse into a gathering of pace to channel the energy of the youth to the acquisition of relevant and useful skills. These should not just be skills that only allow them to land jobs but should be skills that are a catalyst for the development of the country.

In order to cope with the requirements of a developing state, there should be considerable certainty about the skills that are needed. Anything to the contrary would amount to slipping into shambles and setting the country's development trajectory back by many years.

Through exposing the youth to relevant skills that are commensurate to the demands of the national development agenda, the country will be in a position to deal with the high levels of youth unemployment. This will also help to deal with the perception that youth unemployment is merely an irritation and a side-issue that is not treated with the urgency it deserves.

In this regard, the department is of the firm view that young people should be targeted at an early age.

At the heart of this view is the department's aim of advocating for the promotion of long-term human resource planning, skills retention strategies and the creation of an enabling environment. To this end, the department is restarting the Youth Water Prize Competition, which was put on hold because of Covid-19 tightening its grip on the country. The competition targets Grade 9 and 11 pupils to come up with innovation projects to address challenges in the water and sanitation sector. Additionally, the competition is a direct response to dwindling critical skills in the sector.

To translate its commitment to imbue cutting edge water-related skills amongst the youth, the department is offering annual bursaries for full-time pre and post graduate studies. The bursary applications opened on Tuesday, June 1, and will close at the end of August this year.

Malepe is the assistant director for skills development at the Department of Water and Sanitation.