

# Invest and empower the youth with meaningful skills for a better country

OPINION PIECE



As we celebrate Youth Day on June 16 and Youth Month throughout the month of June, we really need to take a closer look at youth development and invest in meaningful skills development to empower young people for meaningful economic involvement. We are experiencing high youth unemployment in the country but on the other side there are certain skills shortages critical in the economy. We cannot continue talking about shortage of skills in a country with free education when our tertiary institutions are overflowing with students year in and year out. This means there is something we are doing wrong somewhere as a country.

We need to sit down and assess the required skills and encourage our youth to prioritise the fields of study to close those gaps and meaningfully contribute to the socio-economic development of the country. If we can encourage our young people to get the skills required by the economy, we definitely will reduce the high youth unemployment in the country.

I am encouraged by this year's theme for the Youth Month, "Skills for the changing world – Empowering youth for meaningful economic participation", which emphasizes the importance of equipping young people with the necessary skills and education to thrive in a rapidly evolving global economy. Let this theme and message be a call to action to empower our youth with the necessary and relevant skills to address the skills shortage in the market, reduce youth unemployment, and also equip them to compete in the dynamic global economy.

The Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) through its Water and Sanitation Education Programme is doing its best to develop responsible young people and empower them with the necessary education and skills to be employable and thereby reduce youth unemployment. The programme entices young people from primary and high school levels into the water and sanitation sector. The programme exposes learners to the water and sanitation business, encourages innovation, and provides bursaries for excelling learners to pursue studies and careers to address the skills shortages in the water and sanitation sector. The Water and Sanitation Education Programme also develops responsible young people and communities as it encourages the participating young people to be water ambassadors in their communities and spread the messages of water conservation, protection of water resources, protection of water and sanitation infrastructure from vandalism, and the promotion of proper sanitation and hygiene practices. Responsible communities are crucial for water security, especially as South Africa is a dry and water scarce country.

We need to encourage the youth to acquire marketable and sustainable skills. In this evolving economy, the youth also needs to be flexible and adapt to the changing marketplace. The youth also needs to be innovative. Government and businesses need to encourage and support youth innovation. With the right skills and support, the youth can become entrepreneurs and assist in reducing youth unemployment by employing other young people.

In as much as the conditions can be made conducive, the onus lies with young people to take charge of their lives, take advantage of available opportunities, and develop themselves for a better life.

Let us empower the youth through relevant skills development, empowerment programmes, and financial support to ensure that our young people are well equipped to compete and play a significant role in the world economy. Let us invest in the skills development and empowerment of our youth to reduce youth unemployment and create a better country for all. The youth is the future, so let us take care of our young people.

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