

COMMENT



KHULEKANI NGCOBO

Youth must shape SA

IN SOUTH Africa June is Youth Month. On June 16, we will observe Youth Day, one of our most significant and celebrated public holidays.

On this day, our country pays tribute to the courageous young students of 1976 who lost their lives after they had united towards a common cause: to fight for a better education system.

Indisputably, Youth Day is not only a day of reflecting on the past, but also an opportunity for all South Africans to shift their focus to contemporary issues faced by the youth.

Today, the youth, within the age group 15 to 34, comprise 34.7% - more than a third of the population - in this country (2020 Statistics South Africa Mid-term Population Survey).

Young people continue to face serious challenges, and key among them is the problem of structural unemployment.

Youth unemployment has reached crisis proportions. The StatsSA Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) for the first quarter of 2020 indicates that unemployment, then, stood at 30.1%, which is the highest jobless rate since 2008.

More worryingly, the unemployment rate of youth aged 25-34 is more than double that of the age group 45-54 (37.3% vs 17.5%). It gets worse. The unemployment rate among the youth between 15 and 24 years, which now stands at 59.0%, implies that there are almost six out of every ten young people who are jobless.

The unemployment rate is typically higher for young women, with youth in rural areas facing different challenges from those in urban areas. In addition, young people with disabilities continue to face enormous obstacles in the labour market, as they are more likely to be socially excluded and marginalised.

Put faces to all these numbers and then the problem becomes real. These are people with hopes, dreams and capacities, who could be contributing to their communities and the country. The situation of these young people has been worsened by the outbreak of coronavirus (Covid-19) that threatens their livelihood and survival.

With 63,9% of our country's population, we as young people are presented with a great opportunity, and possibly, a great challenge.

Never has there been such a weighty responsibility on the shoulders of young people. Never have young people wielded as much influence in our society as at present. But, it is up to our generation to make sure that such influence is channelled correctly and directed towards relevant issues that affect not only ourselves, but future generations.

This can only be achieved if we come together as young people and begin to address the challenges we face.

The National Youth Policy (NYP) 2030, proposes various policy imperatives to strengthen youth development, both during and post Covid-19 era. It advocates for the need for key players within the state, government, private and civil society sectors, to intensify their commitment in keeping youth development as a priority.

This policy places the youth as key players in their own development and in the advancement of their communities, the nation, the continent and the globe. It recognises the skills, energy, knowledge and expertise, attitudes and capacities, that, if invested in a well harnessed, can lift South Africa out of the persisting challenges of high unemployment, poverty, inequality, negative education and health outcomes, as well as consistent underdevelopment.

Khulekani Ngcobo is a communicator at the Department of Water and Sanitation