

An Overview of Youth Policy

Introduction

This year marks 17 years since the development of the first National Youth Policy (NYP) in 1997¹. The second five year NYP (2009 – 2014)² is currently under review. This provides an opportune moment to reflect on youth policy and development.

Of course 5 years is not a very long time in the evolution of public policy but “youth” is a transitional phenomenon, time matters and keeping stock of whether progress has been made is important.

Currently, about 29.2% of the population are aged younger than 15 years, and a further 36.4% are aged between 15 and 34 years, and about 7.8% aged 60 years and older [see Figure 1].³ South Africa has unprecedented numbers of children surviving the first five years of life and, as a consequence, more children are making the transition to adolescence and entering adulthood. This poses both opportunities and risks that have long-term consequences for young people. As the National Planning Commission has pointed out “the extent to which South Africa can take advantage of its demographic profile [is] depend on whether it is able to prioritise policies that improve the capabilities and life chances of its **largely youthful population**”⁴ [emphasis added]. The country’s current demographic profile is a time-limited opportunity for human capital development, which will begin to close over time.



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Figure 1: South Africa Population Pyramid - Mid-2013



Source: Statistics South Africa, Mid-year population estimates, 2013

Even though policy and decision makers express concern about the future of young people, few actions have actually been taken to change the economic, political, and social conditions that shape young people's lives. The failure of current policies and programmes to address important quality-of-life issues for youth remains a substantial barrier to their full development and the development of the country. Those in the forefront of national and youth policy development have been unable to exert effective influence over relevant public policy: consequently the various ways in which young people respond to coercive policies, ineffective institutional practices, and bleak economic conditions in their communities has generally gone unnoticed. To put it mildly, the state of youth development, policy and planning in the country leaves much to be desired.

Youth Policies, Institutions and Legislative Instruments

South Africa has a long history of institutional, policy and legislative instruments that have and continue to contribute to youth development. What follows is a brief overview of key institutions and policies which contribute both to the legislative and strategic process of youth development.

The IYDS strategy identified challenges and opportunities for youth as identified by a cross-section of stakeholders, including professional bodies, government departments, civil society, NGOs and youth formations.

National Youth Development Act (2008). The Act makes provisions for the establishment of the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), an entity which gives resonance to youth development in South Africa. The Act also provides for the functions and objectives; management and governance; regulation of staff and financial affairs; and administration of funds in the NYDA.

National Youth Development Agency. The NYDA is tasked with initiating, designing, co-ordinating, evaluating and monitoring, and providing oversight to all programmes aimed at integrating youth; developing an Integrated Youth Development Plan and Strategy (IYDS); developing guidelines for the implementation of an integrated national youth development policy and making recommendations to the President; guiding efforts and facilitating economic participation and empowerment, and the achievement of education and training; partnering and assisting organs of state, private sector and non-governmental organisations on initiatives directed at employment and skills development; initiating programmes directed at poverty alleviation, urban and rural development and the combating of crime, substance abuse and social decay amongst youth; establishing annual national priority programmes in respect of youth development; and undertaking to promote the interests of youth, particularly young people with disabilities.

National Youth Policy (2009-2014). Aimed at closing identified gaps, addressing challenges and recommending new measures to improve and accelerate the implementation of youth policy under the following four pillars – education, health and wellbeing, economic participation and social cohesion.

Integrated Youth Development Strategy (2011). The IYDS strategy identified challenges and opportunities for youth as identified by a cross-section of stakeholders, including professional bodies, government departments, civil society, NGOs and youth formations. This also involved drawing information from various domestic and international instruments, public and research reports. The objective of which was the development of an integrated strategy that responds to the economic structure as discussed in key national policy frameworks including among

others; National Industrial Policy Framework (NIPF), Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP), National Growth Path (NGP), National Skills Development-South Africa (NSD-SA), National Youth Policy (NYP), and NSDS III.

National Skills Development Strategy III. Aims to increase access to high quality and relevant education and training and skills development opportunities, including workplace learning and experience, to enable effective participation in the economy and society.

Employment Tax Incentive Act, 2013 (“Youth Wage Subsidy”). The objective of which is to encourage employment creation and growth (especially in relation to young work seekers), and is a way of sharing the cost of expanding job opportunities with the private sector.

Youth Employment Accord. Seeks to improve education and skilling of young people, helping them to find jobs or start their own businesses. As part of the accord, government commits itself to increasing the number of people employed in the public sector, while certain industries have set youth development targets. All parties (government, organised labour, organised business, and community and youth formations) agree to implement a coordinated Youth Employment Strategy (YES).

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There are certainly no shortages of structures, policies and plans for youth development. National youth policies signal all kinds of areas for intervention and priorities for development, but like most government policy platforms, serve largely as political symbols of what is worth achieving than concrete, funded planning mandates for how to get there.

The non-delivery on the part of government departments and youth institutions on their mandate with regard to youth programmes is a lost opportunity and represents a failure to fully comprehend the role youth play in society. While national youth policies and institutional structures are only ‘one part’ of an integrated youth development strategy, they ultimately provide a framework for a country to make available resources, support and services that will allow young people to fulfil their potential and contribute to the social, cultural, political, and economic growth of the country. Failure to successfully implement these policies has both short and long-term consequences for the country.

Youth Employment and Unemployment

South Africa’s official unemployment rate is 25.5%, with an expanded definition of 35%⁵. The unemployment rate, based on the expanded definition, are astonishingly higher for black Africans at 43% compared to their counterparts (coloured: 28%; Indian/ Asian: 17%; and white: 7%)⁶.

Youth unemployment is sitting at a staggering 36.1%, compared to 16.3% amongst the adult population, with absorption rates of 30.7% and 57.6%, respectively⁷. To say these figures are disappointing would be an understatement. These high unemployment numbers amongst the youth have been described as “toxic” and a “ticking time bomb”. While there is no ‘silver bullet’ to address this crisis – government is failing to deal with it effectively. The question is: Whether there is sufficient political will to deal with this?

Statistics South Africa also reports that out of a total 10.1 million individuals in the 15-24 age cohort, 32.7% (or 3.3 million) are neither employed nor attending an education institution.⁸ This means South Africa is not creating enough opportunities for young people to sustain their livelihoods. As has been pointed out, employment is “crucial to most people’s sense of dignity, self-esteem, independence and social usefulness”⁹, failure to create jobs “reflects a tragic loss of potential not only at the individual/ household level, but – on account of the foregone contribution to national output and welfare”.¹⁰

The image of ‘youth as a resource’ prevails in periods of stability, economic growth and societal reforms. When youth is considered as such they represent the idealised future, are the receptacles of the values that each generation transmits to the next, and, therefore, they are a societal resource which are given the best opportunities for development and growth.¹⁴

The introduction and signing of both the Youth Employment Accord¹¹ and the Employment Tax Incentive Act, 2013 (“Youth Wage Subsidy”)¹² were seen as great leaps in addressing the challenge of youth unemployment. These showed great commitment by different stakeholders (in government, organised labour, organised business, and youth formations) to create five million new jobs by 2020. Since, the signing of the Youth Employment Accord it has been reported that approximately 420 000 new jobs have been created¹³, but this is just not enough.

Images of Youth

The country’s perceptions of its youth is an important factor both at the policy making level and as a view of how society responds to youth issues.

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Youth can also be perceived with a contrasting image of ‘youth as a problem’ which prevails in periods of economic crisis, political instability, and when youth in society and in the media are presented as “dangerous”, “deviant”, “criminal”, “violent”. With this image youth is perceived as a source of danger or a period of vulnerability in response to which protective measures must be devised.¹⁵

It is important to be mindful of how a country views its young people. This largely has an impact on how it deals with its youth.

Conclusion

The sheer number of young people in our country is significant. This coupled with their growing interconnectedness means that they are part of a larger constituency with local, regional and global roots. The mere factor that the current youth cohort is the best educated, the healthiest sector of the population, are technology savvy, have high hopes and aspirations for the future, and have the ability to influence political processes and civic life makes them a powerful force in our society.

The lack of evaluation and monitoring of current youth policies is a major obstacle, in itself. This not only hinders the correction or reformulation of youth programmes, but also perpetuates errors currently being made in addressing youth issues. This lack of reporting makes it impossible to discuss the effectiveness of youth policies/

programmes. There is a need for an independent set of annual evaluations on youth programmes which would not only provide policy and decision makers with useful information on the degree of fulfilment of intended aims and objectives, but also reinforce transparency and public accountability. This would do a lot to restore young people's trust in public policy and youth institutions.

NOTES

- 1 National Youth Policy, 1997. See <http://www.polity.org.za/polity/govdocs/policy/intro.html>
- 2 National Youth Policy (2009 - 2014). See <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/pebble.asp?relid=656>
- 3 Mid-year population estimates 2013. See <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/p0302/p03022013.pdf>
- 4 NDP 2030 – Our future – make it work. See <http://www.npconline.co.za/MediaLib/Downloads/Home/Tabs/NDP%202030-CH2-Demographic%20trends.pdf>
- 5 Quarterly Labour Force Survey: Quarter 2, 2014. See <http://beta2.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02112ndQuarter2014.pdf>
- 6 Youth employment, unemployment, skills and economic growth. See <http://beta2.statssa.gov.za/presentation/Youth%20employment,%20skills%20and%20economic%20growth%201994-2014.pdf>
- 7 The employment-to-population ratio: portion of the working-age [youth] population that is employed. See <http://beta2.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02112ndQuarter2014.pdf>
- 8 Smith, JM (2011) Connecting Young South Africans to Opportunity: Literature review and strategy. Cape Town: DG Murray Trust. Accessed at <http://www.dgmt.co.za/files/2011/05/Literature-Review-Strategy.pdf>
- 9 Blumenfeld, J (2012) Youth unemployment in South Africa and the wage Subsidy 'Debate'. HSF Focus. Accessed at <http://hsf.org.za/resource-centre/focus/focus-67>
- 10 *ibid*
- 11 National Employment Accord, 2013. See <http://www.economic.gov.za/communications/publications/youth-employment-accord>
- 12 Employment Tax Incentive Act, 2013. See <http://www.treasury.gov.za/legislation/acts/2013/Act%2026%20of%202013%20-%20EmployTaxIncent.pdf>
- 13 <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-03-02-zuma-government-is-investing-in-education-skills-for-youth>
- 14 Schizzerotto, A; Gasperoni (1999) Study on the State of Young People and Youth Policy in Europe. European Commission D.G. for Education and Culture - IARD. Access at http://www.iprase.tn.it/alfresco/guestDownload/direct/workspace/SpacesStore/fc61b6d7-026f-47ae-b66b-e8f15c563482/eurogiovani_17.pdf
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