

State must rework its youth strategy

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Youth Month 2017 had as its theme The Year of Oliver Reginald Tambo: Advancing Youth Economic Empowerment. It signified government's recognition of the need to improve the economic wellbeing of South Africa's youth and eradicate poverty and destitution.

However, while challenges facing the youth are plentiful, solutions are sorely lacking.

Government is aware of the need for state intervention to help the youth prevail. To this end, it has promised improvement in three broad categories: job opportunities, education and entrepreneurship.

But there are no convincing policies to ensure sustainable youth development.

Job opportunities are transient. Short-term, on-the-job training is provided, along with short-term employment. This is simply not good enough.

During his Youth Day commemoration address on June 16, President Jacob Zuma said: "Since the launch of the Expanded Public Works Programme Phase 3 in April 2014, over 1.2 million work opportunities have been taken up by the youth out of the total 2.6 million work opportunities created by the programme."

Yet, even this programme has not proven to have reduced unemployment. This is because these job opportunities are temporary. Government should focus on creating decent and sustainable employment for the youth.

Although this can be achieved through entrepreneurship, the state has yet to prove that it is committed to providing capital funding for young people.

Currently, the National Youth Development Agency provides funding for youth start-ups capped at R100 000 per beneficiary. Any organisation that is serious about funding start-ups knows that this amount - in our struggling economy - is grossly inadequate.

One would also expect the agency and government to run innovation competitions. Why? Because you do not necessarily train entrepreneurs. Rather, you unleash their innovation, harness it and institutionalise it, while backing them with adequate resources.

In his Youth Day speech, Zuma also acknowledged innovative young South Africans, some of whom are owners of small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs). However, he did not promise that government would identify two or three of those youths as being worthy of investing in their ideas and scaling up their businesses.

This contradicts the state's comment,

made in the National Development Plan, about seeing SMMEs as the next drivers and enablers of economic growth and diversification, and employment absorption.

A structural problem facing South Africa is that our economy is too consumerist, with scant attention focused on agriculture and industrialisation. Many of our plantations and manufacturing plants have been neglected in the past 20 years. Some have been converted into residential areas.

Government speaks of creating 100 black industrialists, but it is vague about the type of industrialists it has in mind, which sectors it is prioritising and how these industrialists will be supported to compete in global markets. To develop black industrialists, the state should set up an innovation technology hub where ideas can be cultivated. These can then be simulated to gauge their potential and scalability.

The state's focus should not be solely on nurturing industrialists who will compete in existing manufacturing ventures because these are already being upstaged by their global counterparts. We need to rethink the place of South Africa in the world and what we can, and should, offer. Ideas should come first, then a programme can follow.

It is true that for these ideas to proliferate, there must be decent education. While government's efforts at creating access to education, especially through no-fee public schools, are laudable the current system of public education - with its demoralised educators, inadequate infrastructure, disengaged communities and disinterested learners - is a shambles. The result is a high attrition rate.

Even in the higher education and training sector, despite the billions of rands invested by the state through its National Student Financial Aid Scheme, there has been no value for money. Pass rates for its beneficiaries have been worryingly poor for years because of inadequate academic support. Many of these students end up dropping out of university and being unable to repay these funds. The state needs to beef up its support of education by delivering quality inside as well as outside classrooms and lecture halls.

That government lacks a youth development strategy is all too evident. To unleash the potential of South Africa's youth, its immediate focus must be on securing energy for the growth of new industries, on quality education as well as on efficient, reliable and affordable public transport. The success of the latter will enable young people to save on travel costs for work purposes and prevent them from succumbing to the pressure of buying a car for ease of mobility and, in so doing, incurring debt.

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