

Look to the youth for answers

They need to sit at the same table as the rest of society and engage to build sectors and society that caters for the needs of all living in it

Analysis

VASCO DA GAMA

COMPLACENCY is a dangerous thing, often creeping up just when we think we have made progress, and without quite realising it, we allow our achievements to crumble, leaving us right back where we started with the initial struggle.

I open these thoughts in relation to considering the role of youth and other similar groups in our society, as June 16 approaches.

Over the past two to three decades, much progress has been made with regard to the rights and role of youth within the South African and global communities.

In various sectors, ranging from political parties to religious organisations, a youth division has become commonplace. Similarly, we have seen divisions for women and people living with disabilities become accepted sub-groups.

This has been positive in many ways, allowing these groups to advocate for their specific rights and needs.

I acknowledge too that in many instances there is still much work to be done even at this basic level of creating space for youth to be heard.

But looking forward, I have to question whether the creation of sub-groups is really in the best interest of society.

Jason, a 17-year-old Youth Force member from the Bronx in the US, made some remarks which initiated my thoughts around what role the youth should actually be playing.

He said: "If you had a problem in the black community and you brought in a group of white people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously."

"In fact, there would probably be a public outcry. But every day adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need – without ever consulting us."

His words made me realise that while there is a place for the creation of sub-groups for advocating specific issues, if we aim to truly build a united and democratic society, then the needs of each sector in that society should be represented in the broader group.

Youth for women or people living with disabilities or anyone else for that matter should not be assigned separate spaces in which to discuss their concerns.

They need to sit at the same table as the rest of society, understanding the space they occupy there and learning how to engage effectively in order to build a community which caters for the needs of all living in it.

Some of the projects which the city of Johannesburg has embarked on in order to empower the youth have tried to account for this need to integrate youth into larger societal spaces and to provide assistance in ways

that will be most meaningful to them.

We launched an Opportunity Centre in March which supports about 300 small, medium and micro enterprises per quarter,

and we plan to roll out more of these centres through 2018. We will also begin registering thousands of work seekers on our work seeker's desk database, who will for the first time

begin receiving job opportunities previously reserved for the connected few.

The city will provide artisan training for 300 young people in Johannesburg and from

2016 to date, 29 177 people have been trained through the Expanded Public Works Programme.

It is important for us to remember, however, that while we create opportunities, we do not create unrealistic expectations.

The youth need to understand that although they may be given first preference for training or funds, once they are operational, they will need to compete on a level playing field with other small businesses.

We do not want to unwittingly create youth businesses that are dependent on assistance and preference in order to succeed.

And again, this is why it is so critical to ensure that all initiatives aimed at specific sectors in society are careful not to distance those sectors too much from the reality of how the broader nation and world operate.

In recent years, there has been an interesting and significant shift in global politics, with younger and younger party members pushing for top positions once occupied by only the oldest of members.

And the advent of young politicians in top positions has sparked an interest in politics from younger and younger voters.

The Barack Obama campaign forever shifted the rules of engagement, with social media creating a remarkable new level of communication between a politician and his/her voters.

Justin Trudeau's following is something more akin to a pop star than a prime minister of Canada.

As the age of presidents and parliamentarians begins to drop, youth across the globe are in a better position than ever before to make themselves heard.

But if they are left at the fringes of decision-making bodies, relegated to their separate groups, they will miss the opportunity to be heard where it counts.

Youth Day in South Africa is when we remember the incredibly significant role which the youth once played in moving this country to a brighter future.

While we celebrate how far we have come and the achievements of our youth, let us not become complacent.

We must always be thinking ahead, thinking about where we want to go.

And so let us start reconsidering the ways in which we incorporate the youth into our society.

Let us start building a space for them which is integrated with other groups, rather than allocating them separate spaces and later wondering why they are so misaligned to the overall system in which we all operate.

Let us ensure that our youth are given the opportunity to make the valuable contributions which they most definitely have to make – in every sector in our society.

Vasco da Gama – speaker of the Johannesburg council

KEY POINTS

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