

New covenant with the youth

OPINION

Mamphela Ramphele

WE need a “new covenant” with the young people of our country as a visible aspect of the new dawn to mark Youth Month celebrations this year.

A new covenant would not only make good the betrayal of the dreams of the 7,2 million unemployed young people, but would also guide our efforts to unleash their energy and talents to spark the socioeconomic transformation essential for our national prosperity.

Inge Beukes, a University of Pretoria LLB student, in an article on June 2 in the *City Press*, makes a plea for comprehensive interventions to end the despair that is destroying the future of youngsters and putting our society at risk.

My comments are also inspired by Marius Oosthuizen’s article in *Business Day* on May 17, which calls for a new systemic approach to overcome the legacy of apartheid and build an inclusive and prosperous future together. Oosthuizen urges us to understand that to undo the legacy of a deliberately designed system to generate and sustain white privilege requires attention to the complexity and systemic interventions.

The past 25 years have seen multiple linear, resource-intensive interventions, from BBEE to education and training, social grants and RDP houses, which have done little to eradicate poverty and inequality. They have, however, yielded

huge benefits for a very few well-connected people, exacerbating inequality.

President Cyril Ramaphosa’s reconfigured national executive has the potential to start weaving together a vision of what a society free of poverty and inequities, and which generates prosperity, could look like in 25 years’ time. This would require reimagining our cities, towns, villages and key infrastructures that link together the physical and psycho-social fabric of our nation.

Imagine if the government identified pilot cities, towns and rural areas where systemic integrated development could be implemented. Tackling such a complex task would enable collaboration between a number of departments: Public Works and Infrastructure, Human Settlements, Economic Development, Land Reform and Rural Development.

Leveraging the wealth of expertise in urban planning, water and sanitation, agriculture and renewable energy to re-design development programmes to undo the apartheid spatial geography could create sustainable prosperity. Such developments would include private-sector investment and become magnets for young entrepreneurs to create clusters of economic ventures.

In addition, our country sits on a huge underutilised asset for the YES programme announced by Ramaphosa last year — our national defence force. Lessons from other countries show the benefits of utilising the defence force to contribute to workforce training and logistical support in non-combat situations. A recent study shows that 18,9% of annual GDP growth from 1949 to 2014 in the U.S. could be attributable to human cap-

ital investments through personnel and education efforts, from entry-level training to technical specialities and higher-level professional training.

We also need to learn from the outcomes of the SANDF recruitment and training of young people from across the population in the former homelands, many of whom are today’s professionals and artisans. It would also be worth following up on the outcomes of a training programme for 5 000 young people announced in 2018 in the Eastern Cape — The Infrastructure Maintenance Youth Programme — in collaboration with the defence force.

Is it not time to consider post-school training programmes held in collaboration with the defence force for 18 to 24 months that could provide basic soft skills such as discipline, self-knowledge and personal mastery, as well as technical competence for millions of unemployed young people? Such a programme would be more successful than the open-ended YES programme outsourced to civil society. The new covenant needs to guarantee every child free high-quality education, including civic education. This would ensure that our schools produce responsible citizens who know their rights and are willing to apply themselves to post-school training to equip themselves for life.

Mr President, you have the opportunity to ride the wave of an energised youth ready to be contributors to a reimagined society free of the dysfunctionality of the legacy of apartheid.

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