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# SA youth need less talk but more budget to open real pathways to work, income, and dignity

by Clotilde Angelucci, Matshidiso Lencoasa and Liso Mdutyana

Every year, government promises “reform”, “inclusive growth”, and “prosperity for all”, especially around Youth Day. Yet, the outcomes for young people are not getting better: youth unemployment is at 46%, job prospects are low, and more than 3.8-million young people are locked out of education, employment or training.

Put differently, almost one in two people aged 15 to 34 don't have stable jobs. But it's not for a lack of trying. Youth Capital's 2022 research shows that young job-seekers spend up to R1,000 looking for work with slim prospects.

To make matters worse, those that do find work are losing them at an alarming rate: youth accounted for 76% of all job losses in the first quarter of 2025.

Let's put a face to these numbers for a moment, because we don't want to fall into the trap of talking about people as if they were statistics. They are not.

Lesego\* has been actively applying for jobs without success for the past three years. Making it harder is that she's unable to finish her degree because it costs too much.

Despite endless talks of inclusive growth, young people like Lesego are being asked to wait for work and economic recovery that may never come.

Instead of recalibrating priorities and listening to South Africans' concerns about the impact of continued cost cutting on social spending, government delivered a budget that reflected difficult trade-offs,

but didn't deliver enough for young people. Social protections like grants, and social spending like public employment programmes, are forced to compete for limited funding, despite playing complementary roles in young people's lives. Both are needed.

Take the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) – SA's largest youth employment programme. Its latest phase attracted 1.9-million applicants for just 200,000 positions – that's more than a quarter of all unemployed youth chasing one short-term programme.

In 2024, the programme was not implemented at all – this wasn't an anomaly. Our state is under-investing in interventions that could offer young people their first work opportunity.

Last week, Lesego was one of the young people who started work as a teacher assistant in the BEEI. While this is a short-term opportunity, it's a valuable springboard, but Lesego, like millions others looking for long-term income-earning opportunities, will need more than a few months of work to build a sustainable future.

Without an ecosystem of support, clear employment pathways, mentorship, and funds to kickstart small businesses or side hustles, the BEEI risks becoming yet another temporary fix. This is where state investment and solutions are needed.

The South African economy has stalled, and is not growing fast enough to absorb even the young people who are already in the labour market. And even when growth does occur, it is concentrated in sectors that are not labour intensive, like finance.

Over the past 17 years, we have seen the construction, trade and manufacturing

**We call on the government to centre young people, not just in words, but in real spending**



Thousands of people queuing up to apply for EPWP jobs. /Eugene Coetzee

sectors contract. These industries once offered millions of young people a way into the economy.

Government's next move is not just technical – it's generational. We cannot talk about “inclusive growth” while cutting off the very tools young people need to participate. Public employment and social protection must be properly resourced, and that means making the bold decisions young people have been calling for. This also means reconsidering existing corporate incentives such as the Employment Tax Incentive, expanded also during the pandemic.

But given the insufficient evidence on its impact, it can be repurposed to scale public investment in these programmes, and ensuring they are linked to training, mentorship, and pathways in the economy. This isn't a radical idea – it's practical and overdue.

In 2024, government successfully drew from the Gold and Foreign Exchange Contingency Reserve Account to reduce government borrowing, proof that bold and responsible funding choices are entirely within reach.

As the next budget cycle begins, we call on the government to centre young people, not just in words, but in actual spending. A just budget must invest in us, rebuild public systems, and open real pathways to work, income, and dignity. Anything less is business as usual.

\*Not her real name

\* Angelucci, Lencoasa and Mdutyana are members of the Budget Justice Coalition, a group of civil society organisations working to ensure that SA's budget is people-centred, transparent and just