

Wrong answers to youth unemployment

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Wrong answers to youth unemployment

FIFTY years after 1976, South Africa is still telling its young people to wait for an economy that just isn't working for them. This Youth Month, the numbers are hard to ignore: youth unemployment is at a shocking 45.8% for those aged 15 to 34. In many homes, this isn't just a number on a page; it's the reality of young adults sitting at home, applying for job after job, only to hear nothing back.

President Cyril Ramaphosa told Parliament this week that youth unemployment is one of the country's biggest threats, a statement that acknowledges the scale of the crisis, but also reflects how long it has been allowed to deepen. Most young people would say that threat is already here.

The government's response has been to throw around big figures: a R1 trillion infrastructure plan over three years, expanded public employment programmes, and more spending on the social wage. But what does that actually mean for a 22-year-old in Bo-Kaap, Mitchells Plain, or Khayelitsha? It often means landing a six-month job on a public works project – if they're lucky. Once that contract ends, they're right back to searching for work, stuck in a cycle that feels never-ending.

Sure, infrastructure projects create jobs, but these jobs are mostly temporary. Very few turn into permanent positions. Public employment programmes can provide some initial experience and a bit of income, but they don't lead to stable, long-term careers. Instead, they keep young people in a loop of temporary work with no real future.

Fifty years after 1976, South Africa still talks about its youth as if they have potential. But potential without a clear path to real jobs is just empty talk.

Youth Month should make us ask a tough question: how long can we keep cycling young people through temporary jobs without building a real bridge to permanent employment? At some point, young people will stop waiting for that bridge. They'll start planning their lives without it, and that's a future we can't afford to ignore.

