

ANNUAL NELSON MANDELA YOUTH CONVENTION

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30 September 2020

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGENCY AMIDST TURBULENCE AND COMPLEXITY: CAPABILITIES AND APPROACHES NEEDED TO BUILD A JUST SOCIETY

Let me start off by thanking the Nelson Mandela University and its partners for the invitation to join you today: it is indeed an honour to take part in this 2020 Annual Nelson Mandela Youth Convention.

I was asked to reflect on the development of agency amidst turbulence and complexity, as well as the capabilities and approaches needed to build a just society. In doing so, I will try to find a synthesis between the temptation to sermonise to the youth and an attempt to posit ideas for debate.

The truism needs no emphasis, that 2020 has brought out in the boldest relief possible, the responsibility on all of us to develop the capacity to confront social challenges in a highly turbulent and complex environment. The standard approach in dealing with a global pandemic such as Covid-19 is to ask such questions as: what are the leaders doing (and by leaders we mean the elderly); and are the youth in particular co-operating! In other words, a cultural ageism tends to inform our train of thought; while we proclaim from the rooftops that the 'youth are leaders of tomorrow'!

I wish, as a starting point, to challenge this notion.

Place and role of youth

In its Strategy and Tactics document adopted at the 54th National Conference, the ANC addresses the place and role of youth in society thus:

A nation's success depends ... on its ability to encourage, harness and incorporate into its endeavours the creativity, daring and energy of youth...

The tonic of youth resides in their capacity to be a lightning rod for positive disruptive change. Their impatience, militancy and imprudence are a disadvantage if improperly deployed. But these attributes can also stand transforming societies in good stead especially during moments of inertia and excessive risk-aversion...

Implied in these assertions is a critical assumption, which is fundamental to the posture that young people need to adopt in their own self-definition and in projecting themselves within society.

It is for this reason that I proceed from the premise that youth are not just leaders of tomorrow, but leaders of today. To believe otherwise is to entrench among the youth a mindset of self-doubt, of timidity, and of reticence to assume responsibility. It should be taken as a given that, if society treats young people like immature children, they will behave like children; they will – as a default psychological state – act irresponsibly in the belief that some adults will clean up after them.

In this way, we deprive ourselves of the elixir of youth which adds energy and daring to the cause of human development.

Young leaders of humanity

Let me elaborate briefly on why this starting premise is important.

We celebrate this month, the legendary Steve Biko and the leadership role he played in a particular phase of struggle. As we do so, what we forget to underline is that already in his 20s, he was a leader of society (not just of the youth) long before his murder by the apartheid police at the age of 30.

There are many other such young trailblazers, from South African and global experiences, who emphatically confirm that youth are capable of being leaders of the age in which they live:

- Charlotte Maxeke, besides her academic achievements and community activism, was in her 30s when she defied traditional restrictions and imposed herself on the patriarchal gathering in 1912 where the ANC was launched.
- Frantz Fanon wrote his many seminal works during his youth, among the first of which – *Black Skin, White Masks* – was published when he was just 27.
- Isaac Newton developed his work on mathematical calculus at 23; Steve Jobs started Apple when he was 21; Siyabulela Xuzi (from your neck of the woods) developed ideas on energy solutions at an early age; and he already has an Asteroid named after him.
- Sol Plaatje was 35 years old when he assumed the position of the first ANC Secretary General in 1912 and, by then, he was already an accomplished author.
- Albert Einstein published the first part of his theory of relativity at the age of 26 in 1905.
- Karl Marx was 30 and Friedrich Engels 28 when they – together with other activists – drafted the Communist Manifesto, one of the most seminal critiques of the capitalist system.

I hope the point is now made: and this is that young people are leaders of today, not just of tomorrow. Respect yourselves and respect communities and the broader society in which you operate. Learn from formal education and through praxis; and make a mark today on our changing society. Yes, in the act of advancing social transformation you will cause disruption; you will create discomfort in the existing order of things. You will also, from time to time, make mistakes – but what defines you should be the capacity to rise and dust yourselves off when you stumble, and constantly to aim for the stars.

Youth demographics and attributes

Now, before reflecting on how youth can act as ‘a lightning rod for positive...change’, let us examine some of the major indicators that characterise South Africa’s youth today.

I take it you are familiar with the fact that we are referring here to about 37% of the population (aged between 14 and 35 years).

Like most of the African continent, South Africa is still at that demographic phase characterised as the so-called youth bulge with the potential of a demographic dividend. This kind of dividend happens when the labour force grows more rapidly than those who are dependent on the economically active population, which is meant to drive a society’s productivity and improve its

income. But a youth demographic bulge can turn into a curse, if society is unable to ensure that young people are gainfully involved in income-generating and other socially-beneficial activities.

South Africa faces the danger of missing the demographic dividend, because we are unable optimally to utilise the brains and brawn of our youth. The overwhelming majority (71%) of the unemployed in our country are young people. The labour force participation rate is 48% for the youth (compared to about 59% in the total population) and it continues to decline. We can refer to rates of HIV infection, experiences of crime and drug abuse, gender-based violence and levels of poverty; and the situation appears quite grim and hopeless.

However, as Statistics South Africa has demonstrated, young people have, since 1994, experienced an improving quality of life. This is reflected in general access to basic services, including literacy rates that are close to 100%. If we were to take tertiary education as an example, the number of enrolled students has almost doubled since 1994; and while African students constituted less than half of the student population then, this has increased to about 71% now. (*SA Institute of Race Relations, Life in South Africa: Reasons for hope, August 2018*)

It is thus understandable that, in spite of the difficulties that young people in South Africa face, they have consistently been shown in opinion surveys to be more positive about the future than other sections of the population (*Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg, University of Johannesburg*). More young people than any other demographic define themselves primarily as South Africans or Africans, as distinct from seeing themselves through the lens of ethnic, language and other such narrow identities. Even if their levels of registration for elections may be lower, young people have evinced a willingness to use a variety of other platforms to take part in socio-political discourse and exercise their social agency.

Characterisation of the current conjuncture

And so, in the overall, we should acknowledge the weaknesses. But we should not lose sight of the macrosocial progress that has been made in changing South African society for the better, particularly for young people. Beyond access to basic services, this is also reflected in the changing social structure of the nation – with many Black people climbing up the social ladder.

However, we also need to acknowledge challenges such as growing inequality, especially within the Black community as large swathes of young people and women are left behind.

Particularly concerning is the fact that, since the turn of the past decade in 2010, important indicators have shown pedestrian or negative trends. This applies to the rate of economic growth that has not equalled population growth; income poverty that increased between 2011 to 2015; and the hollowing out of state capacity as a consequence of corruption and state capture. Gender-based violence has mushroomed into a scourge of epidemic proportions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has, today, aggravated the situation, exposing the Achilles heels of our society and humanity at large.

We are a global generation with sophisticated weapons and appliances. We celebrate advances in the fourth industrial revolution including artificial intelligence and the internet of things. We pride ourselves on the mastery of tiniest particles through nano-technology, and the manipulation of

natural phenomena through genetics and biotechnology. Our odysseys into space surpass everything imagined by previous generations.

Yet a tiny virus has forced us to cower in terror, making us wonder about the fate of human civilisation.

We thus have to question the logic of a social system that fails to direct resources on scientific inquiry towards protecting the global commons – towards solving the most critical human threats. We have to question the manner in which geopolitics is playing out today, threatening to rend humanity apart and precipitate a destructive global conflagration.

And we have to develop a keener understanding of, and confront, two of the main defining features of the current global social system: growing inequality and youth marginalisation.

Let us start off with social inequality, as aptly summarised by OXFAM with five brief shocking facts from its 2020 publication:

- The world's richest 1% (the billionaires) have more than twice as much wealth as 6.9-billion people – which is about 90% of the world's population – while almost half of humanity lives on less than US\$5.5 a day.
- Almost four cents in every dollar of tax revenue comes from taxes on wealth – and the super-rich avoid as much as 30% of their tax liability.
- Today, 258 million children (one out of every five) will not be allowed to go to school – and for every 100 boys of primary school age who are out of school, 121 girls are denied the right to education.
- Every day, 10 000 people die because they lack access to healthcare – and each year, 100-million people are forced into extreme poverty due to healthcare costs
- Men own 50% more of the world's wealth than women, and the 22 richest men have more wealth than all the women in Africa.

(<https://www.oxfam.org/en/5-shocking-facts-about-extreme-global-inequality-and-how-even-it>)

The International Labour Organisation had observed some time ago (2013 Global Wage Report) that income earned by workers had for the past century been a constant share of national incomes. But this has changed. By 2014, real income for households in the lower part of the income distribution was in fact below that of 2005. (Anu Madgavkar, Project Syndicate, September 7, 2016). The dynamic in the United States is even more dramatic in terms of, for instance, life expectancy: in 1970, blue-collar white workers trailed those of the same age in higher income by five years; but the life expectancy gap is now in the region of fifteen years (*FT*, 2016/10/10, *Edward Luce*).

In many parts of the world, the trend is even more concerning in relation to young people. Earlier, we referred to challenges faced by South African youth. Peter Coy, in his article in *Bloomberg Businessweek* in February 2011, demonstrated how the current global socio-economic system has spawned a phenomenon of youth marginalisation:

In Tunisia, the young people who helped bring down a dictator are called *hittistes*—French-Arabic slang for those who lean against the wall. Their counterparts in Egypt, who on Feb. 1

forced President Hosni Mubarak to say he won't seek reelection, are the *shabab atileen*, unemployed youths. The *hittistes* and *shabab* have brothers and sisters across the globe. In Britain, they are NEETs—"not in education, employment, or training." In Japan, they are *freeters*: an amalgam of the English word freelance and the German word *Arbeiter*, or worker. Spaniards call them *mileuristas*, meaning they earn no more than 1,000 euros a month. In the U.S., they're "boomerang" kids who move back home after college because they can't find work. Even fast-growing China, where labor shortages are more common than surpluses, has its "ant tribe"—recent college graduates who crowd together in cheap flats on the fringes of big cities because they can't find well-paying work...

While the details differ from one nation to the next, the common element is failure—not just of young people to find a place in society, but of society itself to harness the energy, intelligence, and enthusiasm of the next generation. (Peter Coy, *The Youth Unemployment Bomb*, Bloomberg Businessweek, 02 February 2011)

There is no doubt that these stark realities have been multiplied manyfold by Covid-19. And unless something drastic happens, this is bound to worsen social anomie across the globe. But it depends on what the youth and society at large do about this.

Let us therefore come back to the relationship between the objective realities and the question of social agency, which is central to our discussion today.

This relationship arises, firstly, because when the political leadership in many countries is unable to address these fundamental questions of political economy, they try to find scapegoats: they will blame 'radicals' and 'rioters'; they will invoke nationalism and protectionism; they will try to use sanctions as an instrument of industrial policy; they will target migrants and present them as the primary reason behind the nation's social woes. They will even use the fight against terrorism as a platform to corral their societies and other nations into senseless escapades.

We all can see how these tactics of a contrived and skewed identity politics are playing out in the current spectacle that is the United States presidential election. Even those who proclaim a humanist social consciousness, find themselves drawn into that quicksand, and they are unable to mobilise the working people and the poor on the central plank of decisive, progressive social change.

The second reason why these issues are critical for social agency is that the diversionary tactics of narrow identity politics, combined with poor strategic acumen, impact quite profoundly on the youth.

Young people are the ones mobilised as vigilantes to perpetrate violence against those who are of a different origin or do not look like them. They are the ones who are conscripted into military adventures that pit worker against worker across the globe on the basis of right-wing religiosity – whether it is Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism. Young people are the ones who are mobilised to employ the shallow, inhuman and vile ideology of racism and narrow nationalism, ahistoricism and a misguided militancy that, more often than not, is used to mask the ideological bankruptcy, selfishness and corruption of false revolutionaries who, as a rule of thumb, lead the youth to the marshes of defeat. Indeed, we refer to the issue of strategic acumen because, as in Egypt and even Tunisia – which Peter Coy cited – revolutionary sloganeering without appropriate

strategy and tactics can in fact result in a social outcome far removed from the lofty objectives of the activists. These are just a few instances of situations in which youth social agency is misdirected; where a revolutionary slogan actually leads to the defeat of a revolution.

Social agency amidst turbulence and complexity

The question, therefore, is whether humanity and South Africans, in particular, are steeled enough to face challenges of this nature! Herein resides the fundamental challenge about prudent exercise of social agency, informed by a firm grounding in science.

Let us look at some of the areas where such agency can manifest, especially on the part of the youth.

Quite clearly, tackling human challenges, amidst turbulence and complexity, cannot succeed in an environment of hyper-specialisation in the production of knowledge. Covid-19 has again confirmed the maxim that natural sciences can only have optimal impact if they are undertaken in combination with humanities and social sciences, and vice versa. We have learnt over the past six months, for example, that the coronavirus cannot be tackled effectively without an understanding of health sciences, mathematical modelling, artificial intelligence as well as an appreciation of politics, the political economy and social psychology. And so, transdisciplinarity in education and research, is critical as an underpinning to social agency.

How then do we, in the context of decolonising education, ensure that we deal not only with historical misrepresentation and native relevance – but also take the production, dissemination and application of knowledge to new levels of intersectionality, across and beyond disciplines and vistas of human achievement?

The current situation precipitated by Covid-19 may have worsened the complex macrosocial dynamics that we have to manage. But, like any other crisis, it also posits opportunities for intensified and focussed efforts to attain social justice.

The capacities that the youth and their institutions of learning command should stand society in good stead in identifying and operationalising solutions to current social challenges. This applies to programmes that are being crafted to put the economy on a higher growth and development path. It applies to a conceptual understanding of the dynamics unfolding in the global economy, including off-shoring, re-shoring and shortening of supply lines and how South Africa and all of sub-Saharan Africa can take advantage of the situation. It applies to the challenge of addressing the transition to a low-carbon future in a manner that is just and inclusive. It applies to the task of ensuring the widest possible social inclusion, with women and youth not just footnotes in social compacts that are being crafted everywhere.

Pursuing equity and social justice

Given that inequality is an equal opportunity disease that ultimately affects the poor and the rich alike, to paraphrase Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson (the authors of *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*), what are the kinds of interventions that we should consider as part of the social compact for reconstruction and recovery, in the South African context?

Critical in this regard is the fact that social cohesion depends not only on the reduction of absolute poverty; but also, on reducing inequality or relative poverty. And in our society in which social status is still defined according to the racial fault-lines inherited from apartheid colonialism, this task is fundamental to the nation-building that all of us cherish.

Firstly, I think we will all agree that the pursuit of greater social equality cannot be likened to a desire to share poverty. In other words, as already emphasised, at the core of our endeavours should be the effort to grow the economy and create employment and other economic opportunities. In this regard, besides skills required in various economic and social establishments, does our education system sufficiently prepare young people themselves to become entrepreneurs? This again foregrounds the issue of transdisciplinarity that we underlined earlier.

Secondly, the broadest possible access to education and training is fundamental to promoting social justice. Armed with the necessary skills from universities and technical colleges, children of even the poorest of the poor are able to extricate themselves and their families from poverty – making education the great liberator. But there should be accordant return to educational effort, reflected in opportunities for employment and self-employment. Without this, we may end up merely creating an army of educated but unemployed young people.

Thirdly, the social wage generally is critical in reducing inequality. In this regard, progressive taxation and the utilisation of these resources to provide housing, electricity, water, refuse removal, roads, public transport and other basic services demand that the state should act as an instrument of redistribution. But for the state to play that role, it has to be capable; and for it to persuade society to contribute the taxes necessary for such redistribution, it has to be ethical.

Fourthly, the minimum wage is an important intervention to reduce income inequality. Combined with the social wage, this needs to be pegged at a level that increasingly guarantees all South Africans a decent quality of life.

The fifth area in reducing inequality and promoting a socially just society pertains to opportunities for the poor to acquire meaningful assets that they can call their own. Besides, housing, land and other such assets, serious consideration should be given to employee share-ownership schemes, profit-sharing and other arrangements across the economy – thus ensuring that the beneficiaries of economic empowerment are not only the elites; but also ordinary workers.

Lastly, programmes to reduce inequality should also focus on the cost of living for the poor. Besides the high mark-ups in South Africa's product markets which is in part a consequence of levels of concentration of ownership and monopoly conduct, the democratic state should pay more attention to addressing the apartheid spatial inheritance, reflected in the distance between centres of economic opportunity and residential areas. Through transport subsidies and diversifying locations of economic activity, we will eliminate what is in fact an apartheid tax on the poor.

We posit all these proposals proceeding from the perspective that South Africa cannot rise from the quagmire of pedestrian growth and deepening inequality if we do not re-engineer the economic structure inherited from colonialism. It is a system that, without strong interventions, will tend towards reproducing inequality and thus entrenching the fault-lines of race and class.

In this regard, we should aim to construct social relations that combine the best attributes of social democracy which has a strong redistributive character, and the positive elements of a developmental state that builds compacts among all social partners in pursuit of industrialisation and modernisation – all this, in the context of the current age of the fourth industrial revolution, transition to a low-carbon future and the threat of diseases, old and new.

Social agency across the board – but especially among young people – should be directed at attaining these objectives. This should be inspired by an outlook to improve one's individual condition of life at the same time as each strives to contribute to the commons. Young professionals should strive to excel in whatever they do, proceeding from the understanding that Africa and Africans are capable of contributing the best to human civilisation.

Frame of reference and self-critique

Unlike before, today's generation of youth in South Africa has a frame of reference that is no longer an abstract wish in a distant horizon. The ideals of social justice and an ethical society are enshrined in the basic law of the land. Our task is to ensure that, progressively and with the necessary speed and impatience, we turn those lofty ideals into lived experience on the part of the majority of the population.

In my view, there is nothing in the objective environment that prevents young people from playing this role. But this demands a conscious attitude of mind: to eschew a youth dependency which is commonly reflected in the impulse to hang onto the coat-tails of the established leadership; and which finds expression in the tendency to present youth as victims rather than conscious actors in changing society for the better.

This attitude of mind should also manifest in deliberate self-criticism that young people must exercise, especially in the current situation of political incumbency, with ethics and value systems under serious strain. As we all know, South Africa has experienced a terrible decade in terms of the direction of socio-economic development as well as corruption and state capture.

The youth has not been spared the malignant impact of these tendencies. Many young leaders in the political arena have fallen foul of ethical sensibility. Pursuing celebrity lifestyles, they live above their means and seek to accumulate wealth by fair means or foul. Even within the student movement, the resources that go with leadership positions have corrupted many young activists.

The culture of impressing peers with material achievements and the use of social media to flaunt ill-gotten gains underline how money and decadent lifestyles are increasingly being associated with the privilege of leadership. Many young activists are being acculturated into a phenomenon that is inimical to the values of social justice. This, in my view, is one of the greatest dangers to the ability of young people to exercise social agency and of their capacity to act as 'a lightning rod for positive...change'.

Conclusion

And so, my central message is: objective conditions and the country's development trajectory present opportunities for young people to act as leaders of today. There are many difficulties; but those who have access to these opportunities can help reconfigure the system and lift all of society

onto a higher development trajectory. This can only succeed if young people broaden their knowledge base; if they pursue a transdisciplinary approach to the generation and dissemination of knowledge; if they are inspired by the humanism that defines our constitutional order; if their value systems are based on a strong ethical foundation; and if they continually learn by doing.

Thus, in the manner of young Newton and Einstein; Marx and Engels; Maseke and Platje; Biko and Fannon... young people of today shall become the lightning rod as humanity strives to manage turbulent and complex times; they shall optimally exercise the social agency required decisively to change stultified ideological and socio-economic paradigms.

As Nelson Mandela said, we should not allow the sun to set on so glorious a human achievement that is South African democracy and pursuit of social justice.

In other words, perhaps even more than the outstanding young leaders of generations past, today's youth can excel in crafting the theories and in realising the praxis that can lift South Africa and humanity onto a higher trajectory of economic growth and development.

END