

YOUTH BOOK LAUNCH

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:

YOUTH IN SOUTH AFRICA: AGENCY, (IN)VISIBILITY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The theme of youth and national development was among the first projects that we identified when MISTRA was formed some eleven years ago. As we later initiated the project, what sub-themes to cover, and who to engage in carrying out the research, were rather an involved process.

This is because, quite often, experiences of young people are viewed through a single lens; with emphases that tickle the researcher's fancy. After much debate, it was agreed to develop a publication that captures the contradictory and multifaceted nature of young people's lived experiences, in this lifecycle phase of transition. These experiences are characterised by success and failure, hope and despair – much like what happens in most of society, but in a more intense fashion.

In this context, the challenges and possibilities that affect the young generation are both signals of danger and beacons of hope about a society's trajectory.

In my view, the democratic government cannot be accused of not introducing policies and initiatives to facilitate the participation of young people in society's development. The problem is that government has often done so in ways that fail to address the totality of young people's needs and aspirations, or the contexts and complexities of their lives. This reflects a failure to appreciate that youth identities and agency are shaped by interconnected challenges and structural conditions.

It is against this backdrop that this book, *Youth in South Africa: Agency, (in)visibility and national development* seeks to take stock of the ways in which the youth navigate their own pathways to adulthood. Formal and informal engagement with politics, as well as protest, entrepreneurship, education, religion, experiences with sexuality and violence as well as a multitude of other life experiences are all interrogated.

The authors, virtually all of whom are youth or activists in the sector, proceed from the understanding that young people are active agents in the nation's development, in as much as they were important catalysts during various turning points in the country's history.

And so, we have emerged with a volume that captures both personal and professional insights, as the authors identify limitations of existing youth strategies and policies and identify interventions that would impact on the youth in an integrated and meaningful way.

In line with MISTRA's transdisciplinary approach, the contributions deal with analyses of socio-economic circumstances and structural conditions; but they extend this to broader engagement with a cross-sectoral treatment of how young people experience the exciting and yet challenging life-cycle period of 'waithood'.

The book casts its net wide to examine issues such as: the policy and structural environment in which young people navigate the transition from education or joblessness to meaningful economic activity; the initiatives, agency and setbacks they undergo as citizens; and their identity formation

and sense of belonging in a transforming society. All these issues are profoundly impacted upon by Covid-19, and special treatment is given to experiences during the pandemic.

What is not in doubt is that, now, more than ever, policy instruments must be informed by the lived experiences of young people, and by the messages they communicate about the limitations of current approaches. The varied participation of policy-makers and other practitioners as the project unfolded and their presence, in today's discussion, give us hope that the insights in this volume will stand South Africa in good stead as we seek to improve youth policy and praxis.

As MISTRA, we wish to thank the authors and do hope that the book will generate strategic reflections not only among the policy-makers; but also youth activists, workers, the business sector and indeed broader society. Gratitude is also due to the donors for their support.

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