



# The young and the discontented: youth views on unemployment

Between February and October 2012, a group of HSRC research interns embarked on a study entitled the Youth-Driven Development Project. The study sought to bring together unemployed graduates to express their views on current development challenges and provide alternatives that could help foster inclusive economic growth, as well as highlight the perspectives of South African youth on current development challenges. *Lizzy Mabotja* and *Hlokoma Mangalaza* share their initial findings.

**T**he study aimed at finding new ways of expressing how young people saw their own development. From this, we drew some principles that could form the basis of an alternative development model that would reflect the aspirations and hopes of the younger generation.

Current development challenges have led to various issues facing the youth, including increased income inequality and persistent poverty and stagnation in labour markets, which have resulted in high levels of youth unemployment. A change in current thinking as to what constitutes development is needed.

The persistent increase in unemployment and inequality is one of the country's biggest socioeconomic challenges, of which young graduates are bearing the bigger part of the brunt. Since the 2008 global economic crisis, the employment rate among South Africans aged 18-25 decreased by more than 20% between December 2008 and December 2010. South Africa has the highest long-term youth unemployment rate among medium income nations; people between the ages of 15-24 account for 48.2% of those unemployed.

An account on Facebook, a popular social media platform among young people, was used as a tool for data collection, and provided a comfortable space to conduct virtual focus groups.

The target group was youth aged 18-35 who were active on social media networks. By allowing a group of young interns to play a leading role in this research, the study was able to maintain a meaningful understanding of what young

people thought about current development challenges. This also enabled it to recognise the knowledge that young people had of the world around them and their place in it.

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## Findings

The study's most exciting finding was the youth's willingness to participate in issues regarding their own development, which was contrary to the general view that youth are not interested in participating in development issues in society. Development in this sense constituted improved quality of life and the youth being able to be part of their country's progress.

Through this innovative medium of communication, the study attracted more than 150 participants of a diverse group of youth from rural and urban backgrounds, both unemployed and employed. The study gathered youth perspectives on

the current education systems, their access to the labour market, skills development, employment policies and inclusive participation. The majority of the participants were discontented and largely disappointed in the government's efforts towards addressing the country's development challenges.

The study showed that the South African youth perceived the current system of education as poor, corrupt and misaligned to labour-market demands, making it difficult to find suitable employment. Lack of skills suitably matched to labour market demands came forward as one reason for unemployment, and participants believed that the role of employment creation should not lie only with the government.

### **According to participants, current job-creation programmes did not cater for their needs, nor did they address their aspirations.**

'Not a single department is responsible for creating employment... the private sector should work with the public sector for development to happen' one respondent said. Numerous respondents made reference to the need to channel funding to skills development. Without proper skills 'many of us are unemployable' another said.

According to participants, current job-creation programmes did not cater for their needs, nor did they address their aspirations because of the limited participation and consultation with youth in the planning phases of these development projects. As one participant put it, 'Employers are fussy; they want decades of experience and prefer "mature" employees. Policies should force employers to hire us'.

The research also showed that young people believed that the government's role in employment creation needed to be more effective and insistent. Young graduates felt marginalised, and expressed a lack of trust in the government to make decisions that were in their best interests. The sentiment shared by many of the participants was that the government needed to research and consult with the youth on job creation programmes.

### **Corruption emerged as a recurring theme, and was believed to be a key challenge to development.**

One respondent mentioned that 'development is not an easy process, but made worse by politics, corruption and greed'. Corruption emerged as a recurring theme, and was believed to be a key challenge to development. Despite the

discouraged and negative tone that dominated most of the discussions, a few participants responded positively. For example, two participants had embarked on a partnership to develop their business ideas, expressing the need to make a change in their communities and champion inclusive development from their perspectives.

Access to resources, such as proper education, health care and political freedom, were seen as necessities in attaining development.

### **Principles for youth development**

The study suggested an alternative development model from a youth perspective in the form of six principles, drawing on some of the challenges and ideas that the respondents expressed. These could function as a starting point towards providing a youth perspective in existing development models. These include:

- Closing the micro-macro gap by making a connection between people's developmental concerns, their daily lives, and the general developmental thinking at the broader social level. A crucial element is understanding how a society's grander development model affects and effects the more immediate and local experiences of people.
- Promotion of equality through a pro-poor, pro-gender and sexual orientation equality and pro-youth agenda that could discern where some of the most pertinent marginalisation of young people occurs.
- Environmental awareness and sustainability that includes co-dependency of human development and the environment by constantly rethinking and conceptualising development, branching into diversified sources of attaining economic growth and social cohesion, which ultimately leads to overall development in all spheres.
- Social and civic responsibility, grounded in democratic values of citizen participation in political processes. In its broader sense it includes participation in community projects, charity work and other activities that promote social cohesion. Development is not only about economic well-being; it is also about creating the environment that enables a better quality of life for all.
- Emphasis on quality and accountability, which includes functional and reliable state institution and quality services, which are essential for any development model. This has to be coupled with the strict accentuation on civic duty and accountability among those who occupy positions within state institutions. ■

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*This article is based on a paper entitled Youth-Driven Development by Lizzy Mabotja, Hlokomang Mangqalaza, Fezile Mdluli and Molemo Ramphalile.*