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THE POST-SOWETO GENERATION: BEING YOUNG IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

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ISANDLA INSTITUTE / OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION

About Development Dialogues

Development Dialogues is a joint initiative of Isandla Institute and the Open Society Foundation for South Africa. The aim of the public dialogue series is to create a space for critical reflection and dialogue among key development stakeholders in South Africa. In doing so, the organisers seek to make a (rather modest) contribution to enhancing the quality of debate in the development sector. Through *Development Dialogues*, Isandla Institute and the Open Society Foundation intend to bring about creative and constructive multi-stakeholder meeting opportunities that push stakeholders to think beyond the confines of their immediate interests and theoretical paradigms.

This monograph captures the speakers' inputs and discussions at the *Development Dialogue* on 'The post-Soweto generation: Being young in South Africa today', which took place on 14 September 2006 at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town.

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I am not sure if I am the right person to speak because I do not know if I am still young. In terms of designation I am still young, but in terms of the definition used by the Treatment Action Campaign I am not young. I still consider myself young, though. I am honoured to be here and to be invited to speak.

My impression is that in 1976 young people were organised and united, even though they did not have as many rights as we have today. They did not have many opportunities. For example, they were limited in their choice of study and had limited opportunities to acquire skills that would be useful in the workplace at that time.

If I compare the 1976 generation to today's young people – my generation – I would say that we have better opportunities, because we have a different political context. Today we have a democracy and the Constitution. Today young people can choose what language of instruction they want. There are more opportunities in terms of learnerships to help develop and skill young people, like the Umsobomvu Youth Fund, which develops young people to be entrepreneurs.

But despite the opportunities we have today, with all the rights that are guaranteed by the Constitution, we are facing challenges. One challenge for me as a young person today is relating the struggle of the young people of 1976 to the struggles of today. I think there are many young people who find it difficult to relate to those struggles. Today we are faced with new and different struggles. For example, 70% of young people in South Africa are unemployed and some of the young people who have matriculated do not have the skills they need in the workplace. And,

because of unemployment, there are high levels of poverty in our communities.

Then there is the challenge of HIV. About 40% of young people between the ages of 20 and 35 years – and that includes myself – are living with HIV. So we are faced with the fact that many young people are unemployed and many of them now also live with HIV. Most of the 40% of young people who live with HIV are women. This is because there is a high risk of sexual violence in our communities, including in our own households. Where families have disintegrated, we find that children are raped in their own households, in what is supposed to be their safe environment, because of the gender imbalances and gender violence in our societies.

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Young people today also lack self-esteem and recreational opportunities, so the energy that we have is not always driven towards positive things. This is partly because we live in poor conditions and in poor societies in the townships. What we want is a sense of belonging, a sense of importance and recognition. I think that is a challenge. Young people use drugs, not because they like to do drugs, but because there is nothing else for them to do. Unfortunately, they start exploring dangerous things. So, for example, the





Western Cape has a problem of young people taking 'tik'. They do not have a clear understanding of what they are doing and how what happens today affects their future.

I would like to put people in the shoes of young people today. I did my secondary schooling in Transkei, Eastern Cape, where you walked a long distance to school. Sometimes there was no food at home. When you got to school, there was no sport or recreation centre where young people could go during lunch break. Instead, you found small groups of young children in schoolyards – some smoking dagga in a corner, some smoking cigarettes, some talking nonsense about peer pressure, because young people did not have anything to do at school besides gossip. There are few schools in the townships with the kind of facilities and opportunities that young people can use to keep themselves busy and at the same time prepare them for the workplace.

There is also a need for parenting skills, because we have a high rate of teenage pregnancies. Some children are raped, others want access to social grants to support themselves. Parents should accept responsibility for their children, so education should start at home.

Young people want a sense of belonging, a sense of importance and recognition.

We also need to change the way we are socialising children and young people to reduce the incidents of sexual violence and the youth gender stereotypes about women. When you ask young

men what they think about women, they will tell you what they think. And unfortunately it is not what we like to hear. It is the way they are being socialised that needs to be changed, if we want to address these issues.

One of the problems of the high crime rate is that many young people are in jail. I have just read a story of a 14-year-old boy who was raped in jail by 20 men. And that young boy will carry scars for the rest of his life. What happens in jail to make it a centre of rehabilitation and correction? Are there opportunities for young people to change, so that when they come out they have better options? Or will they do worse things than they did before?

Another problem relates to access to technology. Where I live there is no one in our library that has access to a computer and many schools do not have computers. When young people reach the workplace, they are told that if they do not have computer skills they do not qualify. I know that things are being done, but it is not yet enough.

With high unemployment and many young people not having parents because of Aids and heading up households, there are many young people who are not in school. There are children of seven and eight years old in the townships who are not doing anything, because their families do not have money to send them to school. My sister is studying at Cape Technikon but she works from 7.30am to 4.30pm in a clothing store in order to pay her fees. I am studying at Unisa, combining distance education with a full time job and all the pressure and stress. But how many of us have those opportunities? There is not enough information about where to go for financial assistance. ■

It is important that as we celebrate the 1976 generation this year we, as a country, government and society structures, are all conscious of both the opportunities and the problems that young people face today. Vuyiseka said the young people of 1976 were united and mobilised. It is interesting that in society today we are talking about a particular group of youth in society during the apartheid era in 1976 who, based on the challenges and conditions that they found themselves facing at the time, mobilised and ensured that they changed what they felt was wrong.

Even in 1976 there were those who said 'we are comfortable where we are'.

But even in 1976 there were those who said 'we are comfortable where we are'. They were comfortable with a system that negatively affected other young people and discriminated against them, or perhaps they were too afraid to deal with the issues. The young people of 1976, the ones who took to the streets and said 'we are not going to accept what has been done about the position of Afrikaans' were affected not only by this issue. It was only one of a myriad of challenges they were facing. If you go back to that struggle of 1976, there were many other issues like boycotts and general opposition to the government that affected the youth in schools and in their environments.

We all agree that the conditions at that time were really different from the environment of today

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in that there was a clear system of government that was structured deliberately to ensure that a particular grouping in society was marginalised. But what those young people experienced is important for us today. There are books such as 'Our Youth for Life', which was launched by the National Youth Commission in partnership with the June 16 Foundation. Many of the young people of 1976 felt that they needed to collect and speak about their experiences of that time in a series of interviews. One of the key messages that I took from the book was that some of them said they did not have an alternative. To them what was happening at the time was not a matter of 'I want to do it' or 'I do not want to do it'. They did not have an alternative because they were sitting in class expected to learn and to pass in a language they did not understand.

We come to the youth of today informed by the realities of the 1976 generation. I believe that the youth of 1976, within the bigger scale of other struggles that have been taken forward by our young people in South Africa, continue to contribute to the transformation of society.



In the pre-1994 era, during the process of negotiations, there were numerous discussions about how you transform a society. One of the striking features is how women as a group were able to force their way into the negotiation processes to ensure that when the new democratic dispensation was crafted, the views of women were integrated into the process. It was unfortunate that at the time young people did not have that kind of structured engagement in those processes. Having said that, the Constitution clearly defines protection for the rights of children and youth, and of women. In the RDP there is recognition that youth is a sector that must be acknowledged and looked at.

There was a process undertaken by government and informed by young people themselves, which has resulted in what we term a youth development approach that seeks to institutionalise youth development. We now have this institution, the National Youth Commission, as a body that coordinates youth development work in government and that ensures that it provides information and advice to government on youth issues, works towards policy intervention in

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development and promotes uniformity of youth development in the different spheres of government. We also have the Umsobomvu Fund, which was a response to the Presidential Job Summit and the challenge of access to funding for entrepreneurial young people. The Fund contributes to skills development and seeks to respond to the challenges of unemployment, which are affecting the youth sector. There is also a civil society body, the South African Youth Council, which is supposed to be an umbrella body outside of government that is able to harness the inputs of young people and channel them in a structured way to government.

In almost 12 years of our democratic debate, we have had a number of important studies, including the Ten Year Review and the Macro-Social Review which government has just released, dealing with some of the challenges that are faced by the youth. What becomes clear is that we have a diverse grouping of young people. Young people are affected by challenges of HIV/Aids, challenges of unemployment, crime and other things, but these challenges do not affect all young people, and not all of them are affected in the same way.

What is important, and this is our message as the Youth Commission, is to go back to what was said earlier on. Given this diversity of experiences, how do you ensure that youth are united and mobilised to participate in resolving their challenges? As we engage with the young people from the different communities, from the different areas of our society, we find young people coming together and raising their own truth and being able to present possible interventions that can be made by civil society and government. ■



The late Percy Qoboza once wrote this reflection on the Soweto uprising: 'If it is true that a people's wealth is its children, then South Africa is bitterly tragically poor. If it is true that a nation's future is its children, we have no future and deserve none, for we have turned our children into a generation of fighters, soldiers who will never know the carefree joy of childhood.' Previous speakers have spoken of the euphoria of that time, of the pending liberation. But I do not think, looking back after all this time, that we have sufficiently understood these words and the impact.

On 8 September, the Financial Mail had a cover story entitled 'A Generation Betrayed'. The story mapped in some detail the continuing crisis in education in South Africa's public schools. It argued that the poor results in education, even when compared with our less advantaged mutual neighbours, are no surprise when most children are learning in conditions of poverty, hunger and poor infrastructure. But, most importantly, the article pointed to the denial of a fundamental fact and that fact is that many teachers lack the skills to teach and 20-30% of those teachers are never going to have the skills.

I want to emphasise this denial when we talk of youth policy or youth development since 1994 and the big question about what it is to be young today. It is the big euphoria, the joy of being born free, but I think it is also to live in the hard space of a serious social policy failure.

For instance, when the Minister of Safety and Security announces *again* that he plans to step up the war on crime, that denies that what we are actually talking about is a sick, violent and traumatised society. The police in particular are not the agency to deal with it. After all, how do we fight a war in our own homes, our schools and with our neighbours and friends? What does that

war look like? What I am going to talk about today is exactly what the results of that war are. Because its victims are in our homes, in our schools and in our neighbourhoods, and most of those victims are young.

I am going to talk to the results of the first national victim survey that has been conducted on South Africa's youth. Field work was conducted between August and December 2005 and sampled

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young people between the age of 12 and 22. That is not our definition of youth, but that sample was chosen particularly because it reflects the age groups in international and local literature who are most at risk of offending or becoming victims of crime. The sample was taken by province and municipal area using the 2001 Census and is directly representative of the South African population. The sample included 4 409 respondents.

The survey found that the overall victimisation rate is 44%, which means roughly that in 2005 4,3 million people between 12 and 22 years old were a victim of some kind of crime. Theft of personal property rated the highest, with 20%; assault was 17%, housebreaking 10%, robbery 9%, followed by sexual assault and car hijacking. If we relate the rate of victimisation of young people to the rate of victimisation of adults, we find a truly harrowing picture. According to the latest victim survey of adults conducted by Stats SA in



2003, the overall victimisation rate of adults is 23%, which is half the youth victimisation rate. One in twenty adults experience theft of property, compared to one in five children and youth; the assault rate for children and youth is almost eight times higher than that of adults, namely one in six compared to one in 45. Similar discrepancies are found in relation to other crimes.

The important point to note is that the primary locations for these crimes, with the exception of robberies, are at schools, streets and their places of residence. Robberies are most likely to take place

Young people are exposed to a very high rate of crime. And these crimes take place in places we think are safe – schools and the immediate home environment.

in local streets in their neighbourhoods. Secondly, these crimes are perpetrated by people known by their victims. It tends to be people that they know in their communities, their school friends, their teachers, or their acquaintances and other relatives. Alcohol and drugs are of course a contributing factor, particularly in the over-18 age range.

One of the more obvious consequences of this rate of victimisation is its impact on people's lives. More than two thirds of all these victims indicate severe behavioural changes including becoming very wary and cautious and introvert. Others have become much more aggressive, very often experiencing difficulty in sleeping and concentrating, lack interest in school and are no longer prepared to go out alone. Less than one third have any access to any kind of counselling service following victimisation.

It is important to know that less than one in seven of these young people report the crimes to police. So when you see police statistics and when we are told that police are winning the war against crime we need to remember those figures are based on reported crime only.

In summary, young people are exposed to a very high rate of crime. And these crimes take place in places we think are safe – schools and the immediate home environment. Experiencing crime leads to significant emotional and behavioural change afterwards, but this is not being dealt with.

The second part that the survey looked at was the home environment and exposure to crime and violence in the home and the community. We tend to think of being victimised out there by other people, strangers, 'them', and the people that we fight the war against. When the survey asked young people about exposure to crime in general terms in their immediate community, their block of two streets, 49% responded that they knew people who committed crime, 44% said that adult members of their family were in prison, one in four knew people in the community who made a living from crime (career criminals, in other words) and one in ten had an adult member of their family who made a living from crime. So that is the home environment of young South Africans.

With respect to exposure to community violence, two thirds said they had witnessed somebody being hurt outside of their place of residence. Most importantly, one in four young persons had seen their parents or caregivers in violent situations – in other words, domestic violence.

In summary, what the statistics suggest is that South African young people are experiencing significant rates of crime and violence in their homes and communities. They are raised in homes and neighbourhoods with risk factors that make



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them vulnerable to criminal victimisation and, importantly, offending as well.

Another area the survey looked at is victimisation and violence experienced in schools. It is interesting that, given the South African law and Education Act, corporal punishment remains a common experience, with over 50% indicating that they have experienced corporal punishment. Technically in South African law that constitutes assault, although in the survey it is not reflected as assault. In schools, young people experience stigmatisation, bullying and a lot of fear. In short, young people are under constant threat at school of physical and verbal attack. This undoubtedly compromises the learning process.

The survey also focused on perceptions of crime. Of course, perceptions of crime are not an accurate reflection of the actual rates of crimes. These are feelings which can be influenced by dinner table discussions, reports in the media and so on. But they are important because they impact on the quality of life and the ability of individuals to engage in everyday activities. One in five young people indicated that they are scared of walking in their community and scared of the places that they live in. One in eight are scared of being at school and one in twelve are scared of being at home. We need to remember that behind these statistics and numbers are young people aged between 12 and 22, individuals, who are basically petrified of where they are, where they are living, going to shops and going to school. I think that is staggering. They are afraid most obviously of violence, rape and murder, and then assault.

In summary, there is a fairly constant exposure to crime and violence and it forms young people's perceptions, but what is important is that in all

three realms of young people's lives – their homes, schools and communities – there are very few safe spaces where young people can go and relax. What this suggests is that crime and violence are normalised. You do not need to go for counselling, you do not need to report it, because it is everywhere and all around you and it is happening to your friends too.

So what can be done? The previous speaker has mentioned some of the structures that have been developed to address some of the issues that Percy Qoboza was writing about. But to my mind, what has happened in our country is that standard mistake bureaucracy makes to put structures before strategy. Institutions are developed, computers and people are put in, but nobody knows what it is exactly they are supposed to do. And often they are at odds with each other about what action should be done. The discussions that I understand are underway between the National Youth Commission and the Umsobomvu Fund are prime examples of that.

Looking at what actually should be done, we should urgently prioritise youth safety and social quality, not in the sense of youth development, but safety as a core issue just simply because of the implications of continuous trauma. Continuous trauma means you do not concentrate at school, you do not pass, even with the new national curriculum and the qualification framework that has put the pass rate fairly low. And you do not make the connections, social bonding becomes very weak, you mistrust those people around you. You are unsafe at home and you do not feel safe at school. The social fabric starts to fray and that creates problems. ■



AFTER THE INPUTS, THE FLOOR WAS OPEN FOR QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS. ISSUES THAT WERE RAISED INCLUDED:

- How is the National Youth Commission seeking to reflect and ensure broader participation by young people?
- What can municipalities and other organs of state do to ensure that young people feel safer?
- There is a perception that today's youth is apathetic and not interested in politics, which is borne out by the recent elections. Is this a factor of lack of education?
- The focus on Soweto and 1976 is not helpful because many other areas of South Africa participated in the struggle. We need to de-brand 1976 and let other communities hold their own events to celebrate the memories of young people and what happened in their communities.
- The picture painted is very bleak, but there are young people who are making it and overcoming their circumstances. Do we know enough about the factors that help some people succeed in spite of the challenges?
- We are ignoring powerful cultural movements, such as kwaito and hip-hop, which are expressions of youth culture in their own right, and today's young people are far more active in finding their own ways to give voice to their struggles. The same can be said for a wave of new young black writers whose works are being published.
- Speakers raised issues of huge challenges, including lack of parental guidance and inadequacy of teaching. Perhaps the answer is to reach out to families as a whole in finding solutions.

IN RESPONSE, THE SPEAKERS MADE SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS:

Nomi Nkondlo

The National Youth Commission is committed to diversity. It has commissions in each province representing diverse groups of young people. There is a lot that still needs to be done to ensure that we broaden the participation of young people. In our programmes we are working to ensure maximum participation from different communities. This dialogue and others like it are important, because if there is one thing we can learn from the 1976 generation, it is to involve the various civil society youth structures, conscious of the fact that

we are not a homogeneous group. Some people say young people are apathetic, but youth participation today takes place in many different ways, which shows the shift from pre-1994 from participating mainly in politics to now participating in sport, culture and church activities. We tend to overlook participation in these spheres. The challenge is to ensure that there is a national youth development policy in place and that we advocate for young people at all spheres of government and ensure that the issues facing young people, whether it is health or skills development, are prioritised. We also need to look beyond government, and take this discussion into our communities because that is where young people are engaging to find solutions.

Vuyiseka Dubula

The biggest difference is that today there is no one single issue that unites a majority of young people, though if there is one I would say it should be HIV. Crime could also be a unifying issue, but not everyone experiences it that way. But we also need to remember that our generation lives in a democratic society. We voted for the government. So when there are problems it is difficult to blame the government because the government is me. We need to relate the struggles of the past and unite as young people around our common problems and move forward. There are many commonalities and we need to explore them.

Eric Pelser

As a society we have not adequately dealt with what the 1976 uprising meant in terms of social fabric. It is the children of yesterday's soldiers who are today's victims of crime. We need a coherent implementable programme that specifically de-links crime and poverty. I am uncomfortable with a direct causal relationship between poverty and crime, because it criminalises the poor. Yes, socio-economic status has some limited impact on criminality, but there issues of norms and values, and what family structures look like, that are not impacted by hard-core poverty, that keep people out of crime. At this point we do not know what the resilience factors are that pull young people through. A national study of risk and resilience is underway, which will hopefully give some answers. I suspect the issues I have raised will be there. We have become an incredibly acquisitive culture in the way we demonstrate our status, with ostentatious displays of wealth, but at the same time we do not have the means for everyone to get there. The President has already alluded to that. But there are resilience factors that keep the majority of people out of crime and we must build on those. ■



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14 SEPTEMBER 2006

CENTRE FOR THE BOOK, CAPE TOWN

ABOUT THE PANEL:

VUYISEKA DUBULA is a third-year psychology student at UNISA. She was diagnosed with HIV in 2001 and has been on ARVs since 2004. She started working for the Treatment Action Campaign in 2002 as a Treatment Literacy Coordinator and is currently the acting Provincial Coordinator for the Western Cape. Vuyiseka is also a representative of the People Living with HIV at the Western Cape Aids Council and is the Chairperson of the TAC Treatment Project. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Aids Law Project and of Sonke Gender Justice.

NOBULUMKO 'NOMI' NKONDLO has recently been appointed Chairperson of the National Youth Commission for 2006 to 2009. Nomi is an activist who hails from Gugulethu, who started her activism in primary school as a class representative in the Learner Representative Council. Nomi has occupied different leadership positions in the youth, women and student sectors. Nomi has been a Provincial Secretary of both the ANC Youth League and the South African Youth Council in the Western Cape province. She has participated in different international missions to study and represent the country on youth development issues. She is a gender activist and Founder member of the Western Cape Young Women Network to be launched soon.

ERIC PELSER is the Executive Director of the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. He has worked in the field of safety and security in crime prevention since 1996. Between 1996 and 1998 he was at the National Secretariat for Safety and Security, working with the policy teams that developed South Africa's policy on community policing and the White Paper on Safety and Security. Eric subsequently worked as a Senior Researcher for the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria for 3 years before taking up the post of Resident Advisor: Crime and Justice Division of the national statistics department in Lilongwe, Malawi in January 2003. He holds a Master Degree in Public Management.



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