NATIONAL YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AGENCY
OUR YOUTH. OUR FUTURE.

THE INTEGRATED YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (IYDS) 2026-2029

"The youth are not a problem to be solved, they are a resource to be developed."
Oliver Reginald Tambo, the late liberation struggle leader and the ninth President of the African National Congress (1967–1991)

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FOREWORD BY THE MINISTER

This Integrated Youth Development Strategy (2026–2029) is presented at a moment of historical reflection and policy urgency. The year marks the 50th anniversary of the June 16 Uprising, when young people confronted an unjust system, and the 70th anniversary of the 1956 Women's March, which affirmed the central role of women in shaping South Africa's democratic trajectory. It also coincides with the 30th anniversary of our Constitution, which gave expression to the values of human dignity, equality and freedom for which generations of South Africans had struggled. These milestones draw attention to a consistent feature of the country's history: women and young people have contributed immensely to reshaping the political and social order. The responsibility of the democratic state is to ensure that this agency is matched by access to education, health services, economic opportunities, and participation in governance and nation-building.

This strategy is also framed within a constrained economic context. Growth has been modest, limiting the pace at which opportunities are created. This places pressure on the state to improve coordination, sharpen implementation, and direct resources with greater precision. The government's response, reflected in the Medium-Term Development Plan (2024–2029), prioritises inclusive growth, expanded employment pathways, and a more capable state. Within this framework, youth development is integral to economic recovery and social stability. Global shifts reinforce this position of constraint economic context. Changes in production driven by digitalisation and artificial intelligence are altering labour markets and skill requirements. At the same time, climate pressures, trade disruptions, and geopolitical tensions are reshaping economic prospects. These developments influence how young people access opportunities and how economies absorb new entrants.

The government has begun to respond through targeted structural reforms and sector initiatives. Operation Phakisa has opened areas for job creation and skills development, particularly in areas like the ocean economy, mining, agriculture and ICTs in education. Operation Vulindlela is addressing constraints in key network industries such as energy, logistics, and telecommunications to improve the environment for investment and employment. South Africa is also responding through multilateral engagement, including its participation in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to expand regional trade and market access, and its G20 Presidency in 2025, which provided a platform to advance inclusive growth, digital cooperation, and development priorities relevant to emerging economies and young people. These measures are supported by efforts to expand access to skills development and to strengthen links between training systems and sectors where growth is expected.

This strategy builds on these interventions by focusing on how young people enter and move through the economy. It puts emphasis on the transition from education and training into employment, self-employment, and participation in sectors with growth potential. In addition, it is intended to ensure that young people are physically and mentally healthy, and participate in governance and nation-building. Experience from previous implementation cycles points to a clear requirement: stronger and coherent response across the government. While the principles of mainstreaming and integration are established in policy, their application still has room for improvement. This strategy therefore focuses on improving alignment between policy, planning, and delivery, and on reinforcing accountability across institutions responsible for youth development. The development of the South African Youth Development Bill, currently underway, forms part of this shift. It is intended to improve the functioning of the youth development machinery by establishing a binding framework for mainstreaming youth development across all spheres of government. This will place a clear obligation on state institutions to integrate youth development into their planning and implementation.

The National Youth Development Agency, supported by the Department of Women, Youth and People with Disabilities, is central to these efforts. Its role in coordinating, supporting, and advancing youth development across sectors is essential to ensure that the objectives of this strategy are realised. The recent amendment to the NYDA Act reflects a commitment to strengthening institutional arrangements and improving system-wide coherence.

Lastly, I wish to acknowledge the National Youth Development Agency for its leadership in coordinating the development of this strategy, as well as stakeholders across government, civil society, the private sector, and young people themselves who contributed through consultations. Their inputs have strengthened this work and reflect the shared responsibility required to advance a coherent and inclusive youth development agenda.

Honourable Sindisiwe Lydia Chikunga, MP
Minister of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities

REMARKS BY THE EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON OF THE NYDA BOARD

The Integrated Youth Development Strategy (2026–2029) provides a framework for implementing youth development programmes across government and its partners. The emphasis is on ensuring that commitments to young people are reflected in planning, resource allocation, and measurable outcomes.

A recurring challenge has been the gap between policy commitments and implementation. Programmes have often operated in parallel, which tends to limit their collective impact. This strategy responds by clarifying institutional responsibilities, strengthening links between planning and delivery, and reinforcing accountability for results. It is anchored in the National Youth Policy 2020–2030 and aligned with the Medium-Term Development Plan (2024–2029), while positioning the NYDA to support and advance youth development across sectors.

Particular attention is given to the effectiveness of the youth development machinery. This includes better use of existing governance platforms and stronger evidence to support planning, monitoring, and decision-making. The recent amendment to the NYDA Act reinforces this approach by clarifying the responsibility of state institutions to integrate youth development into their work. The Board will place greater emphasis on oversight and system performance, while also championing youth development, strengthening partnerships, and advocating for greater attention to youth priorities across government, the private sector, civil society, and development partners. Through this role, the Board seeks to support the efforts of the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities and contribute to a more responsive youth development system.

The strategy addresses how young people progress across key dimensions of development, including education and skills, economic participation, health and wellbeing, and social inclusion. It recognises that progress in these areas depends on the combined contribution of multiple sectors and institutions working towards a common objective: enabling young people to participate fully in the economy and society. The priorities outlined in this strategy have been shaped by extensive consultation and evidence. As a result, the strategy reflects both the challenges confronting young people and the opportunities that can be leveraged to improve their prospects.

In conclusion, I wish to acknowledge the management and staff of the National Youth Development Agency for leading the development of this strategy, as well as stakeholders across government, the private sector, civil society, and young people who contributed through consultations. Their input has strengthened the strategy and provides a solid foundation for implementation.

Dr Sunshine Minenhle Myende
Executive Chairperson of NYDA Board

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY BY THE NYDA CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

The Integrated Youth Development Strategy (2026–2029) sets out the national framework for coordinating youth development across government in line with the National Youth Policy 2020–2030 and the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) 2024–2029. It is framed by the reality that South Africa has approximately 20.8 million (33%) people aged 15–34 within a total population of about 63.1 million, while 59.1% of the population is under the age of 34. This demographic profile gives youth development strategic weight, but it also intensifies pressure on provision of education, the ability of the labour markets to absorb new entrants, health care services provision, and state capacity to deliver.

Available data shows that socio-economic hardships are especially acute among young people. Most poverty indicators show that the youth are more likely to be living in poverty than all the other population groups. In 2024, 29.6% of youth-headed households had no employed adult member, while just over 12% of household income in youth-headed households came from social grants. Hunger is a direct indicator of deprivation. In 2024, 17.3% of youth aged 15–24 and 14.1% of those aged 25–34 lived in households that reported hunger. Just over 13% of youth-headed households reported hunger. The burden is more pronounced in certain provinces, with youth-headed households reporting hunger at 25.8% in the Northern Cape and 24.9% in Mpumalanga, compared with 7.7% in Gauteng and 3.7% in Limpopo. Youth in non-metro areas were more affected (18.3%) than those in metros (12.2%). In general, race, age, gender, and geographic location are still markers of poverty.

Under education, skills and second chances, the strategy addresses unequal progression and labour-market outcomes. In the first quarter of 2026, unemployment stood at about 37.6% for those with less than matric, 35.7% for those with matric, 22.2% for those with other tertiary qualifications, and 12.2% for graduates, compared to an overall rate of 32.7%. This shows that educational attainment is a strong determinant of labour-market outcomes, although higher qualifications do not entirely eliminate the risk of exclusion. Although access to basic education has improved, it is still mired by high repetition and high dropout rates with data showing that about 40% of the youth who start grade 1 will drop out of school before completing Grade 12. Access to basic education is also unequal with learners from poor households more likely to learn in overcrowded environments and to drop out of school. Education outcomes at basic education level are still below par, especially when measured through international assessments. Limited infrastructure, poverty and school violence are some of the factors that militates against access to quality education. There is also skewed educational outcomes that reflect historical inequalities, with Whites and Indians showing higher levels of educational attainments and participation in tertiary education than Africans and Coloureds. Access to higher education has improved considerably over the years, but it still curtailed by the system's capacity to absorb everyone who qualifies. Funding is also a barrier more so for the 'missing middle'. TVET colleges as an alternative to university education are limited by underfunding, limited internship opportunities, stigmatisation, and the higher likelihood that their graduates will not to find employment compared to university graduates.

Under economic transformation, entrepreneurship and job creation, the untransformed economy present as set of challenges for young people that increases the likelihood of their exclusion. Exclusion seems to be more pronounced among rural and township youths. The South African economy is still largely concentrated and monopolistic. This create anti-competition environment, which tend to suffocate small businesses. Ownership of the economy is still largely excluding Black people, women and youth and people with disabilities. Young people are more likely to be unemployed compared to those who are 35 years and above. Current figures show that unemployment among youth aged 15-24 years was 60.9% and at 40.6% for those aged 25-34 years. At the provincial level, unemployment ranged from 42.5% in the Eastern Cape, 37.2% in the Free State, and 35.1% in the North West, to 18.1% in the Western Cape, against a national figure of 32.7%. In addition to acute unemployment, about 3.9 Million youth are not in employment, education or training (NEET). While young people are underrepresented in many sectors, the underrepresentation is more pronounced in sectors like, agriculture, mining and ocean economy. Agriculture added about 30,000 jobs in quarter 4 of 2025 and another 10 000 in quarter 1 of 2026, bringing total employment to around 960,000. Mining contributes about 6% to GDP and employs approximately 473,000 people, with a further 400,000 jobs supported through value chains. The ocean economy is projected to contribute up to R177 billion to GDP and create up to one million jobs by 2033. In terms of youth participation in business, there are still challenges like the high likelihood of failure, access to funding, fierce competition from established businesses, access to markets (including through public procurement), and capacity to bid for bigger projects.

Under physical and mental health promotion, including pandemic preparedness, the strategy focuses on the specific risks and conditions that affect young people's health and wellbeing. The pillar also addresses broader issues including mortality, morbidity, HIV prevalence, substance use, and access to health services. Young women are the more vulnerable to being exposed to HIV than young men and the general population, with those aged 20 to 24 years twice as likely to contract HIV than young men in the same age category. Available data shows that the use of condoms has declined between 2017 and 2022, which increase the risk for HIV spread. On the positive side access to ARV treatment and circumcisions have increased. Young people are more likely to be affected by mental challenges such as depression and being suicidal. Research shows that young people's mental health quotient is lower than that of the general population. Food insecurity is directly linked to mental health outcomes, including depression. Obesity is also identified as serious health challenges as it is linked to other health challenges like cancer, hypertension, diabetes and heart diseases. Over and above healthcare spending, it also has negative economic consequences including reduced productivity and early death. Data shows that girls were more likely to be obese than boys with 31.3% of 15-19-year-old girls being overweight or obese compared 9.6% boys in the same age group. Mortality figures show that the youth aged 15 to 34 years are more likely to die of unnatural causes than any other population group. This is mainly attributed to accidents, violence and risky life styles. While HIV is the number four underlying cause of natural death for the general population, it is the number one underlying cause of natural death for the youth. Available data indicates that young people constitute a considerable proportion of those involved in substance abuse. While NHI promise to

improve access to health care service to the most vulnerable, some aspects are still in dispute, delaying implementation.
Under social cohesion and nation-building, inequality is a defining feature of South African society, with a Gini coefficient of approximately 0.64. Poverty and inequality were ranked as top obstacles to reconciliation and social cohesion. While the youth tend to shun official participation platforms (like elections, ward committees) for participating in governance and civic activities this is not a reflection of apathy. They tend to have alternative participation platforms such as protests and social media, which policy makers need to find a way to use to maximise youth participation. Multiple forms of unfair discrimination are still prevalent in the country. Intervention to curb these include legislated prohibition of unfair discrimination and putting measures to redress the past imbalanced caused by unfair discrimination. Equality courts play an important role in protecting individuals against unfair discrimination. However, the courts are underutilised mainly because of lack of awareness. Youth with disabilities are still exposed to multiple forms of discrimination. On gender-based violence, 35.5% of women reported lifetime exposure to physical or sexual violence compared with 20.5% among men. Youth in conflict with the law is still a challenge, manifesting through overcrowded prison facilities (currently 19% above capacity). While sports, art, and culture play an important role in social cohesion and nation-building, their support from the government is still limited. These sectors are also important because they create economic opportunities for the youth. The National Youth Service (NYS), which has a strong element of social cohesion and nation-building, was revitalised in 2022, enabling it to absorb more youth, but there is still room for improvement.

Under an effective and responsive youth development machinery, the strategy focuses on coordination, implementation, and data limitations. The NYDA's role is reinforced by the National Youth Development Agency Amendment Act, 2024, which provides for state organs to assist the NYDA in performing its duties. To further strengthen the functioning of the youth development machinery, the DWYP is in the process of developing the South African Youth Development Bill. Financial and institutional limitations constrain the NYDA's ability to undertake research and policy analysis. As a result, the youth development sector relies heavily on external data producers, particularly Statistics South Africa. The NYDA's involvement in programme implementation further thins its capacity. Ideally, the NYDA should be involved in research, policy, lobbying and advocacy. Important platforms such as Forum of South African Director-Generals (FOSAD) are not adequately used to advance youth development. The national budget, as an important policy tool to support the machinery, is not maximised.

The totality of the evidence shows a large youth population, largely concentrated in three provinces, and significantly affected by poverty, unemployment, limited participation in entrepreneurship, unsatisfactory educational outcomes, limited education funding, inequality, and limited youth participation in public platforms. The purpose of the IYDS 2026–2029 is to align institutions, resources, and implementation to respond to these conditions and to ensure that outcomes are measured against the actual profile of youth exclusion.

Mr Ndumiso Kubheka
NYDA Chief Executive Officer

ABBREVIATIONS

4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
ADP	Artisan Development Programme
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AGOA	African Growth and Opportunities Act
AGSA	Auditor-General of South Africa
AGYW	Adolescent girls and young women
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AIDS	Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome
AIM	AIDS Impact Model
ANA	Annual National Assessment
AP	Annual Report
APAYE	African Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment
APP	Annual Performance Plan
ART	Antiretroviral Therapy
ARV	Anti-retroviral
AU	African Union
BBBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
BELA	Basic Education Laws Amendment
BIG	Basic Income Grant
BRICS+	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa plus
CAGE	Cut-Annoyed-Guilty-Eye
CBDA	Co-operative Banks Development Agency
CDA	Central Drug Authority
CDR	Crude death rate
CEE	Commission for Employment Equity
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CIHET	Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training
COGTA	Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CPI	Consumer Price Index
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DEFF	Department of Environment, Forestry & Fisheries
DFI	Development finance institution
DHA	Department of Home Affairs
DoH	Department of Heath
DoJCD	Department of Justice and Constitutional Development
DPME	Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NYA	National Youth Authority (Ghana)
NYC	National Youth Commission
NYDA	National Youth Development Agency
NYEA	National Youth Employment Accelerator
NYP	National Youth Policy
NYS	National Youth Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PanSALB	Pan South African Language Board
PEP	Post-exposure prophylaxis
PEPUDA	Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act
PFIP	Policy Framework for Integrated Planning
PGDS	Provincial Growth and Development Strategy
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PLP	Prevocational Learning Programme
PMO	Project Management Office
PPGI	Public-Private Growth Initiative
PPUS	Programme for Graduate Entrepreneurs
PSET	Post School Education and Training
PYEI	Presidential Youth Employment Intervention
QLFS	Quarterly Labour Force Survey
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
RESEP	Research and Socio-economic Policy
RISDP	Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (SADC)
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SABC	South African Broadcast Corporation
SABSSM VI	Sixth South African HIV Prevalence, Incidence, Communication, and Behaviour Survey
SACENDU	South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use
SACMEQ	Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SADAG	South African Depression and Anxiety Group
SADC	Southern African Development Community

DPW Department of Public Works
DSA Diabetes South Africa
DSAC Department of Sports, Arts and Culture
DSD Department of Social Development
DWYPD Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities
ECD Early Childhood Development
EDHE Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education Programme
EEA Employment Equity Act
EELC Equal Education Law Centre
FOSAD Forum of South African Director-Generals
FP&M Fibre Processing and Manufacturing
FSCA Financial Sector Control Authority
G20 Group of 20
GBVF Gender-Based Violence and Femicide
GDP Gross Domestic Product
GEAR Growth, Employment and Redistribution
GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor
GERA Global Entrepreneurship Research Association
GESI GEM Entrepreneurship Spirit Index
GHS General Household Survey
GPI Gender Parity Index
GRPBMEAF Gender-Responsive Planning, Budgeting, Monitoring, Evaluation and Auditing Framework
HCT HIV Counselling and Testing
HIV Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus
HRDC Human Resources Development Council
HSRC Human Sciences Research Council
ICASA Independent Communications Authority of South Africa
ICTs Information and Communication Technologies
IDC Industrial Development Corporation
IDF International Diabetes Federation
IDPs Integrated Development Plans
IEA International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
IEC Independent Electoral Commission
IGR Inter-Governmental Relations
ILO International Labour Organisation
IYAFP International Youth Alliance for Family Planning
IYDS Integrated Youth Development Strategy
JET Just Energy Transition
KCG Khula Credit Guarantee Limited
SADHS South Africa Demographic & Health Survey
SADTU South African Democratic Teachers' Union
SAHRC South African Human Rights Commission
SAICA South African Institute of Chartered Accountants
SALDRU Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit
SALGA South African Local Government Association
SAMRC South African Medical Research Council
SAMSA South African Maritime Safety Authority
SAMYA South African Mining Youth Association
SANAC South African National AIDS Council
SANCA South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
SAPS South African Police Service
SAQA South African Qualification Authority
SARB South African Reconciliation Barometer
SARS South African Revenue Service
SAYC South African Youth Council
SAYCC South African Youth Chamber of Commerce
SDGs Sustainable Development Goals
SEDFA Small Enterprises Development and Finance Agency
SEFA Small Enterprise Finance Agency
SEND Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SETA Sector Education and Training Authority
SMMEs Small-, Medium- Macro-Sized Enterprises
SOHRR State of Human Rights Report
SONA State of the Nation Address
SRH&R Sexual and reproductive health and rights
SSP Stop Stockouts Project
STATS SA Statistics South Africa
STIs Sexually Transmitted Infections
TAC Treatment Action Campaign
TALIS Teaching and Learning International Survey
TB Tuberculosis
TEA Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity
TIMSS Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TVET Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN United Nations
UNAIDS Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

LGBTQI+ Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexual plus
LGYDF Local Government Youth Development Forum
LPI Lived Poverty Index
MICT SETA Media, Information and Communication Technologies Sector Education and Training Authority
MPI Multidimensional Poverty Index
MQA Mining Qualifications Authority
MSMEs Micro, small and medium enterprises
MTDP Medium-Term Development Plan
MTEF Medium-Term Expenditure Framework
MTSF Medium-Term Strategic Framework
MYDE Ministry of Youth Development and Empowerment (Ghana)
MYSC Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sports and Cultural Development (Botswana)
NDMP National Drug Master Plan
NDP National Development Plan
NEET Not in Employment, Education or Training
NEIP National Entrepreneurship and Innovation Programme (Ghana)
NEPF National Evaluation Policy Framework
NGP New Growth Path
NHI National Health Insurance
NPC National Planning Commission
NPMN National Pathway Management Network
NSFAS National Student Financial Aid Scheme
UN CRPD United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNDP United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime
UYF Umsobomvu Youth Fund
WHO World Health Organisation
WPAY World Programme of Action for Youth
YCCISA Youth Chamber of Commerce & Industry South Africa
YCF Youth Challenge Fund
YEA Youth Employment Agency (Ghana)
YES Youth Employment Service
YIA Youth Impact Assessment

SOUTH AFRICAN PROVINCES
EC Eastern Cape
FS Free State
GP Gauteng
KZN KwaZulu-Natal
LP Limpopo
MP Mpumalanga
NC Northern Cape
NW North West
WC Western Cape

Vision

A credible, capable, inclusive and activist development agency that is responsive to the plight of South Africa's youth.

Mission

- To mainstream youth issues into society through stakeholder coordination
- To facilitate and champion youth development with all sectors of society

Values:

The IYDS promotes the following values articulated in the National Youth Policy (2020-2030):

- **Change agents**: Young people are instruments and agents of their own development, and as such they should be considered as agents of change, not passive recipients of government services.
- **Inherent worth and dignity of the youth**: The provision of services should reflect respect for the worth and dignity of young people. So, youth should be treated as partners and supported to develop their inherent strengths and potential.
- **Moral regeneration**: The promotion of moral and spiritual regeneration in line with the values of Ubuntu and the ethic of care.
- **Social beings**: Young people are social beings who belong to a range of significant networks at local, national, regional, continental, and global levels. These networks must be strengthened since they serve as essential support systems to young people's development and empowerment. The networks should also be intentionally youth-focused to effectively address the needs of the youth.
- **Youth empowerment**: Interventions should empower young people as assets for national development, raising their confidence so that they can contribute meaningfully to their own development and that of the broader society
- **Equity**: Interventions should address imbalances across race, gender, disability status and geographic location through the youth lens

The objectives of the Integrated Youth Development Strategy (IYDS)

The objectives of the IYDS are to provide an implementation plan for the National Youth Policy 2020-2030 by:

- providing a single comprehensive national framework for implementing youth development programmes,
- providing a coordinating instrument for youth development programmes across all sectors of government, private sector, and civil society to align resource allocation,

- lobbying all government sectors to create a more youth-friendly, supportive policy environment
- facilitating programmes in government, business, and civil society organisations aimed at job creation and economic security for the youth.
- providing a platform to initiate catalytic programmes designed to benefit youth from disadvantaged backgrounds (primarily youth from rural areas and townships, youth with disabilities, and young women)
- providing a monitoring and evaluation framework and a system which will enable coordinated nationwide tracking of youth development programmes implemented by public, private and civil society organisations.
- providing a youth development reference point for the youth to hold the government accountable

Strategic focus areas and implementation framework

The National Youth Policy (NYP 2030), which constitutes the policy basis of this strategy, has identified the following interconnected youth development areas for strategic intervention:

1. **Education, skills, and second chances** – covers basic education, higher education and training, and skills development, and the links between education, skills, and economic opportunities, thus supporting various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This pillar primarily contributes to achieving the targets of SDG 4 (Quality Education); however, it also impacts SDGs 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) by making communities and schools safe.)

2. **Economic transformation, entrepreneurship, and job creation** – covers economic transformation, youth participation in the labour market and youth participation in entrepreneurship. The pillar particularly contributes to SDGs 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). It also supports SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by supporting employment, entrepreneurship and improving economic opportunities through various support mechanisms, including financial support.

3. **Physical and mental health promotion, including pandemics** – covers health behaviour and practice, mortality and morbidity, HIV prevalence, pregnancy, nutrition and obesity, and other primary healthcare issues. In addition, it covers substance abuse and youth safety. The pillar primarily supports SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), while contributing to SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

4. **Social cohesion and nation building** – covers youth participation in social development and related activities in communities, including participation in political processes, nation-building, sports, arts and culture, youth leadership, and youths in conflict with the law. It supports SDG 1

(No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) as economic exclusion persists as a major challenge and militates against social cohesion. The National Youth Service (NYS) initiatives could facilitate SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

5. **Effective and responsive youth development machinery** – provides an overview of institutions and mechanisms that play an important role in youth development and identifies gaps in the machinery. The pillar highlights the significance of integrating youth development into government planning as part of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). It also supports SDG 17 (Partnerships for Goals), which strengthens collaborative partnerships, particularly with the private sector and civil society.

Segmenting the youth for targeting purposes

While many young people face common challenges, their different economic situations, their different levels of development, their different geographic location, their gender, their race, their disability status, their historical legacies, their sexual orientation, and many other characteristics dictate that the youth should not be treated as a homogenous group whose needs can be addressed by one-size-fits-all interventions. The diversity and the multidimensional nature of the challenges that young people face require targeted approaches as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach. Based on this approach, multiple groups of young people have been identified. They include, but are not limited to the following:

- Young women
- Young men
- Youth in secondary schools
- Youth in tertiary institutions
- School-aged-out-of-school youths
- Unemployed youths
- Youth in business
- Youth in the workplace
- Youth from poor households
- Youth from different racial groups
- Teenage parents
- Orphaned youths
- Youth heading households
- Youth with disabilities
- Youth in politics
- Youth living with HIV and Aids and other communicable diseases
- Youth in conflict with the law
- Youth abusing dependency-creating substances
- Homeless youth living on the streets
- Youth in rural areas

- Youth in townships
- Youth in cities
- Youth in informal settlements
- Young migrants
- Young refugees
- Youth who have been or are at risk of being abused (Mr Motimela, I propose that the list above can be populated in the table, at least three columns. This will save space and look good)

Segmenting youth development programmes according to the youth cohorts as above helps to focus and prioritise; however, it should never be interpreted as a suggestion that these cohorts are insulated from each other and that youth development happens in silos. Secondly, even the cohorts are still not homogenous, which shows how complex the development of interventions can be. Thirdly, the segmentation should not be seen as a finite list; it should rather be seen as an attempt to assist in identifying youth cohorts that must be prioritised. So, nothing in this targeting list should prevent the initiation of new programmes to deal with emerging youth development challenges.

Given that many of the youth challenges have not changed, and for continuity, the 2026-2029 IYDS will continue to prioritise the groups identified in the previous IYDS. To ensure that youth with disabilities are still prioritised across sectors, the NYDA has developed a Disability Inclusion Strategy. The purpose of the strategy is to facilitate integrating youth with disabilities into all economic, education, and social programs, prioritising equitable access to funding, training, and entrepreneurship support. To refine the focus, youth in townships and rural areas should be prioritised under the following categories:

- Youth heading households
- Youth in business
- Unemployed youth
- Out-of-school youth
- Youth abusing substances

It is also important to note that the needs of these cohorts and the cohorts themselves are not necessarily static. For this reason, constant evaluation is important to assist in prioritising and to deliver relevant and informed youth development programmes.

1. Background

As the implementation period for the Integrated Youth Development Strategy (IYDS) (2022-2025) comes to an end, this presents an opportunity to reflect, to consolidate the gains, to confront and learn from some of the shortcomings that arose and the challenges experienced during that period, and to improve on the approaches that were used. This updated IYDS provides a vehicle to do that. Rather than reinventing the wheel, updating this youth development strategy is akin to going back to the drawing board to reprioritise, to improve, and to maximize resources allocation. It is also an analysis and encouragement of the bringing together of institutions, policies, and resources in shaping youth development. In other words, it is about consolidating decision-making on youth programmes, how the decisions are made, who implements them, and who co-ordinates them, and whether the co-ordination mechanisms are effective.

The IYDS (2026-2029), like the previous one, is an affirmation that youth development is a national priority as expressed through the National Youth Policy (2030). The youth are critical to the country's development, not only because of their numbers, but also because of their energy and innovative spirits. Investing in the youth is therefore empowering them to contribute positively to their own development and that of the country. The opportunity cost of not investing in the youth often manifests in a multiplicity of social problems, like political and social instability, crime, substance abuse, etc. Furthermore, research has consistently shown that young people disproportionately experience difficult socio-economic challenges, such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, and social exclusion. These challenges are underpinned by structural factors, among them, barriers to accessing quality education and training, barriers to accessing economic opportunities, barriers to accessing health and well-being services, obstacles to contributing to social cohesion, and challenging governance issues. The structural nature and the interconnectedness of these challenges imply that single-entity or episodic interventions may not have the desired effect. It is for this reason that, in line with the National Youth Policy (2020-2030)'s vision and the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA)'s mission, an integrated and mainstream response to these challenges is adopted. An integrated and mainstreamed approach is not only motivated by bringing together resources and maximising impact, but it is also motivated by the recognition that youth development is inter-sectoral, and incorporates various and complementary stages of development such as schooling, post-schooling education and training, transition to work or to business, for example. Unless poverty, unemployment, inequality, and social exclusion are confronted in a collective and integrated way and unless investment in young people is elevated, the country as a whole is unlikely to advance its development.

Understanding the gravity of these challenges and guided by the youth voices, the democratic state has made youth development a legislated mandate. Furthermore, during the previous implementation cycle, the youth policy environment was buttressed through the National Youth Development Agency Amendment Act, 2024 (Act No. 11 of 2024). In addition to streamlining the NYDA's mandate, of particular interest in this amendment is the reaffirmation and reinforcement of the obligation of state organs to assist the NYDA in performing its duties and in implementing youth development programmes. Although the provision is still not as legally robust and as empowering to the NYDA as it can be, this development signals that youth development is being entrenched at the centre of the government's development programme. Secondly, this entrenches the principles of collectivism and collaboration within the government and with social partners, which the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) (2024-2029) seeks to inculcate and reinforce. Collaboration and collectivism contribute to fast-tracking slow developmental progress, which the MTDP attributes to weak institutions and weak coordination, the challenges that were also diagnosed in the National Development Plan (NDP).

This updated IYDS is intended to provide a consolidating platform, which aligns with the Medium Term Development Plan 2024–2029, a government planning instrument that spells out the priorities of the 7th administration. This alignment locates youth development within the government programme and affirms the holistic approach to youth development while prioritising certain developmental imperatives.

The IYDS is not only an implementation and coordination instrument, but it is also intended to be a policy voice of all youth development stakeholders, particularly the youth themselves. This is why consultations are at the core of this strategy to translate the policy voices into quantifiable interventions. While the strategy is holistic and multi-sectoral, it is not intended to replace strategies from other sectors; instead, it is intended to harmonise them for a common and consolidated approach for maximum impact. Recognising the importance of all levels of government in achieving the objectives of this strategy, the strategy also creates a base for provincial and local spheres of government to develop their own strategies to suit their local developmental needs and peculiarities. By affirming youth development as a societal matter, the IYDS also provides a guide for the private sector and civil society to align their youth programmes with the government's overall strategic direction and approach to youth development, as framed and articulated in the National Youth Policy (2030).

2. Youth Development in Context: Policy Foundations, Reflections, Demographic Realities, and Key Challenges Across Youth Development Pillars

This section covers the policy framework that informs youth development, reflections on previous IYDS, the youth demographics and key challenges faced by the youth. Its objective is to set a context and to frame youth development challenges that should be prioritised.

2.1 Youth development in context

While positive policy and programmatic youth development interventions have been made in the last 30 years, many of the youth challenges remain stubborn. This is partly because of factors like population growth, slow economic growth (causing the revenue base to shrink), and the limited resources at the government's disposal that must be shared among competing priorities. High debt-servicing costs for the government further constrain an already weak growth environment by reducing the resources available for social spending and public investment. The government's ability to provide social wages like free education and free health care, which benefit the youth mostly, is diminishing with declining state revenue partly caused by slow economic growth and an increasing number of people excluded from the economy. In line with the shift from the historical youth deficits view to acknowledging institutional deficits, and the shift to a mainstreamed approach, the government is expected to take more responsibility for youth development, squeezing even more resources. Inclusive growth, which is now core to the government's strategic planning, is intended to respond to the sluggish economy and to recognise that participation in the economy is not as inclusive as it should be, partly because of historical reasons.

Furthermore, historical developmental backlogs and inequalities slow down the impact of government interventions. Unlike in other contexts, youth development in South Africa is also about redress and correcting the injustices caused by apartheid and other exclusionary practices and their legacies. In addition to dealing with racialised access to socio-economic opportunities, there is also a need to deal with the exclusion of youth, exclusion of women and people with disabilities, and exclusion of people in rural areas and the townships. This implies that as part of the development policy machinery, the IYDS must also take into account redress as a policy priority. Building on the constitution, the National Youth Development Agency Act No. 54 of 2008, as amended in 2024, the National Youth Policy (NYP) (2030), and other policies that are discussed in sections 2.2.1 to 2.2.3, the IYDS affirms the need and the importance of redress as part of youth development. Factoring redress in crafting the strategy is an appreciation that the IYDS should be located in the proper historical and socio-economic context.

The location of the IYDS in historical, political and socio-economic context is grounded in the appreciation that evidence-based policy development and implementation is central to youth development. This section is, therefore, intended to build a case for prioritising certain youth development areas through describing the youth demographics, the current status of the youth and flagging the key challenges while locating them in the policy and socio-economic context. Sources of evidence that are used include most recent data on population distribution, general households surveys, labour market participation, health and wellbeing data, reports generate by government departments, country reports, profile of vulnerable groups, reviews (e.g. Towards a 30 Year Review of South Africa's Democracy (1994 – 2024)), and any relevant literature. Most of these sources are national statistics, meeting the requirements of official statistics status, which are rigorous and robust. These sources are supplemented by stakeholder consultations that were conducted with various youth development stakeholders.

2.2 Strategic Policy Foundations and Institutional Enablers for Youth Development

Globally, youth development has become more intentional, focused, more resourced and coordinated, which signals a shift from the historical ad hoc projects approach to a more integrated and mainstreamed approach. Mainstreamed approach is about "intergenerational equity and justice that enables young people's capabilities, participation, and human rights to be an integral dimension"[1] of development. In practical terms mainstreaming means a shift from symbolic inclusion to institutionalised youth development planning and policy implementation. Below is an overview of the global, continental, regional and local policy frameworks.

2.2.1 Global, continental, regional and national policy frameworks

Governments and multilateral organisations recognise the importance of developing young people in a holistic way. It is for this reason that many of them have adopted a mainstreamed and integrated youth development approach driven by policy and the attached planning and budgetary requirements. To support the integrated and mainstreamed approach, some of these organisations mandated by their affiliated nations have done comprehensive research on youth development and provide guided approaches to developing youth policies and strategies, as opposed to merely encouraging youth development programmes. Some of these policies and frameworks are an expression of collective views of the nation states represented in the multilateral organisations. Among the available and valuable guiding frameworks are:

- The World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) - a global framework adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1995 to guide national and international actions on youth
- Youth2030, the UN Youth Strategy - a comprehensive, umbrella framework launched by the UN Secretary-General in September 2018 that guides UN action on youth issues across all relevant pillars
- The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE) – a principal strategy framework that the Commonwealth has used historically to guide action for youth development across member states

Integrating some of the above instruments, the African Union (AU) has developed the African Youth Charter in 2006 to address the specific challenges faced by the youths on the African

[1] Commonwealth (2017: p3)

continent. The charter, which South Africa ratified in 2009, puts an obligation on the signatories to develop holistic youth policies that are concretely supported with the necessary resources. Its intentions include among others, to realise the AU's intention of 'harnessing the demographic dividend' through investment in youth, to ensure that youth development is not just a rhetoric, and that it is elevated to the centre of development. African Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (APAYE) is an AU implementation framework to operationalise continental youth commitments, with a focus on empowerment, participation, skills, employability and inclusion. South Africa has also deliberately aligned its Medium-Term Development Plan 2024-2029 (MTDP) with the African Union's Agenda 2063, and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)'s Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP). Agenda 2063 puts women and the youth as the key drivers of development, and caring for children as some of its priorities. On the other hand, one of the strategic objectives of the SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan 2020–2030 is to "Improved youth empowerment and participation of young people and people with disabilities in all aspects of social and economic development, and enhanced welfare of senior citizens[2]". The SADC Youth Empowerment Policy Framework (2021-2030) is a regional framework to guide coordinated youth empowerment actions across SADC member states by developing programmes and policies that promote youth empowerment, employment, participation, and socio-economic inclusion across the region. Important continental and regional policy frameworks that have a bearing on youth development on the African continent include:

- African Youth Charter
- African Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (APAYE)
- African Union's Agenda 2063
- SADC Youth Empowerment Policy Framework (2021–2030)
- SADC's Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan 2020-2030

The sum total effect of these global, continental, regional and multilateral youth policy frameworks is the recognition of youth development as a global necessity and to provide a collective and uniform policy and pragmatic response to youth challenges. In the context of this discussion, the IYDS and other South African policies serve to domesticate the global, continental, and regional youth policy discourses and practices to align them with our local developmental challenges. This is done through the policy framework described below.

Locally, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act, no. 108 of 1996 provides a foundation for all policies and legislation in the country. As a foundational document, the constitution requires all the policies in the country to be consistent with its founding principles such as protecting and entrenching socio-economic and individual rights while promoting redress. Among the socio-economic rights included in the constitution are, the right to education, the right to livelihood, health care, and the right to housing. Some of these rights inform and

[2] Southern African Development Community (SADC) (2020: p.46)

correspond with the youth development pillars as articulated in the National Youth Policy (2030). Section 9 of the constitution outlaws any form of unfair discrimination and also makes provision for redress policies to be put in place. Some of the policies to operationalise non-discrimination and redress that emanated from the section, include among others, the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998 (EEA), Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, no.4 of 2000 (PEPUDA), Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act 53 of 2003 and the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act 5 of 2000. The Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act 5 of 2000 will be repealed and replaced by the Public Procurement Act, No. 28 of 2024 once the relevant regulations are finalised.

Established in terms of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) Act 40 of 2013, the Human Rights Commission, is mandated to monitor adherence to socio-economic rights provided in the constitution like housing, health care, food, water, social security, education and the environment. In terms of this act, the Commission is legally empowered to make recommendations or issue directives on appropriate measures that the concerned state organs should take to ensure adherence and observance of human rights, especially socio-economic ones. In certain instances, the commission can also ensure that redress happens through legal means. This mandate is intended to ensure that state organs tasked with making these rights a reality do so. The constitution and the SAHRC Act lay a foundation for youth development policy development and implementation.

There are multiple policies that directly and indirectly have a bearing on youth development. Given the limited space, the discussion will be limited to policies that are more direct to youth development like the National Youth Development Act, no. 54. of 2008 as amended through Amendment Act, 2024 (Act No. 11 of 2024) and the National Youth Policy (2030). The NYDA Act, which repealed the National Youth Commission (NYC) Act, No. 19 of 1996, established the NYDA, and empowers it to initiate, design, coordinate, evaluate, and monitor all youth development programmes, and it spells out how youth development should be executed. It also provides for other state organs to support the NYDA in execution of its functions. The National Youth Policy (2020-2030), which is provided for in the act, operationalises the act by detailing the policy priorities over a period of time, in this case, up to 2030. It is also a link between the youth development priorities and the country's broader development plan. On the other hand, the IYDS expresses the youth development programmes that must be implemented to realise the provisions of the act and the policy priorities in the NYP. In summary, the NYDA act frames the legal mandate for youth development, the National Youth Policy identifies youth development priority areas, and the Integrated Youth Development Strategy provides interventions plan to address the identified youth development priorities. For a detailed description of the policies that inform youth development see **Appendix A**. At macro level, the National Youth Development Plan 2030 (NDP) which sets the national development priorities, provides a guiding framework for youth development.

2.2.2 The National Development Plan and Youth Development

As an overarching development plan for the country, the National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) constitutes a framework and reference point for all developmental interventions. The NDP, developed out of successive macroeconomic policies, like Reconstruction and Development Policy (RDP), Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), and New Growth Path (NGP), articulates developmental targets for 2030. It also appreciates the importance of placing the youth at the centre of development. This IYDS is intended to contribute towards placing the youth at the centre of development and to contribute to the realisation of the targets set in the NDP and expressed through the Medium-term Development Plan (MTDP).

The (NDP) 2030 frames South Africa's long-term development challenge as the elimination of poverty and reduction of inequality by 2030. As the mechanism to deal with poverty and inequality, it proposes growing an inclusive economy that creates jobs, strengthening the capabilities of people (especially through education and skills), and building a capable, ethical state that can actually deliver on these intentions. For the IYDS review, this is important because the NDP treats young people as the country's "energy source" and it also recognises that as a group most of them are exposed to some of the failures across the system. For example, weak early learning is likely to turn into dropout at a later stage. Too few credible pathways into post-school training and work means fewer opportunities, and an economy that does not have the capacity to absorb new entrants means less job opportunities. The compound effect of these challenges translate into less revenue for the state and more dependency on the state, which limits the capacity of the state and is not sustainable in the long run. The logic applied in the NDP is that youth development must be mainstreamed into education reform, labour market reform, spatial planning, and state capacity and measured through outcomes, not activities.

In practical terms, the NDP pushes an IYDS review to ask harder questions like: is the state succeeding in expanding capabilities (literacy, numeracy, skills, economic opportunities, access to health) at the required scale? And are capabilities turned into opportunities (employment, successful enterprises, healthy lifestyles, mobility, participation in civic and nation-building activities, safety)? The NDP highlights critical youth development issues like improving the quality and throughput of schooling and post-school education and training (including second-chance routes). Secondly, increasing employment through faster and more inclusive growth. Thirdly, strengthening public institutions so that services reach people consistently and fairly. The IYDS should therefore be understood as an implementation bridge between the NDP's national ambitions and the day-to-day realities facing young people. This could be realised through clear coordination across departments, and setting medium term and yearly targets, which is where the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) comes in.

2.2.3 The Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) (2024-2029)

The Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP), which replaces the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) provides a medium term operational plan for the government to pursue the developmental goals set out in the National Development Plan. As a medium-term plan, the MTDP 2024–2029 articulates the current government's development priorities until 2029. It also translates the priorities into measurable targets that the government must work towards. Beyond providing a medium term development plan for the country, the MTDP is an instrument to enhance integrated planning in government and to foster partnerships with social partners. This is done through among others, aligning the priorities of national departments with the priorities of the 7th administration and mobilising resources from social partners. Like the NDP, the MTDP put the youth, women, and people with disabilities at the centre of development. The plan treats the youth as a central and a cross-cutting priority across all its three strategic priorities rather than as an afterthought. The Medium-Term Development Plan 2024–2029 positions inclusive economic growth as a key lever to address poverty, inequality and unemployment, which characterise South Africa's fundamental structural challenges. The MTDP has three strategic priorities:

i) **Strategic Priority 1:** Drive inclusive growth and job creation - commits the government to facilitate inclusive growth through expanding employment and work opportunities, strengthening labour-intensive sectors, accelerating structural reforms, and institutionalising the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI), including SAYouth.mobi
ii) **Strategic Priority 2:** Reduce poverty and tackle the high cost of living – recognises the level of poverty as a threat and advocates for urgent strengthening of social protection while improving education, post-school training and skills pathways
iii) **Strategic Priority 3:** Build a capable, ethical and developmental state - focuses on rebuilding state capability, reforming the criminal justice system, improving local government delivery, and mainstreaming youth empowerment in planning and governance systems

Recognising that youth development is not a standalone, means that alignment of the different interventions is important. This also means that for the IYDS review, there must be measurable and outcomes-driven programmes, particularly in employment creation, NEET reduction, improving access to quality education, skills development and skills articulation, an enabling and supportive business environment, especially for small businesses, preventative approaches to health, accessible healthcare facilities, promotion of social cohesion, spatial inclusion and institutional coordination. To make all these ambitions a reality, youth development machinery, led by the NYDA, becomes central.

2.2.4 The NYDA as a key youth development institution

The National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) is the key institution in youth development with a responsibility to initiate, design, coordinate, evaluate, and monitor all youth development programmes. In other words, it exists to ensure that the high level policies described above are translated into specific youth policies and programmes, and to ensure their implementation and co-ordination. To maximise co-ordination, the agency has to strengthen the youth development machinery assisted by the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities. Through the National Youth Policy 2030 and the IYDS, the NYDA expresses the youth development priorities for implementation and provides a guide to other youth development implementers. To pursue youth development objectives, the NYDA's operations include:

- Individual (Micro) level: The NYDA provides direct services to youths that include among others, information provision, career guidance services, mentorship, skills development and training, entrepreneurial development and support, health awareness programmes, and involvement in sport.
- Community (Meso) level: The NYDA encourages young people to be catalysts for change in their communities through involvement in community development activities, social cohesion initiatives, National Youth Service (NYS) programmes, and social dialogues.
- National and Provincial (Macro) level: Through its participation in policy development, partnerships, and research and development, the NYDA facilitates the participation of youth in developing key policy inputs, which shape the socio-economic interventions landscape of South Africa.

Involving the whole government machinery through strong co-ordination, lobby and advocacy elements, will contribute to strengthening and increasing the reach of youth development programmes (**Also see Pillar 5**). The involvement of the government machinery in youth development is led by the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (DWYPD), which is the NYDA's executive authority.

2.2.5 The NYDA and Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (DWYPD)

The Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (DWYPD) is mandated to lead, coordinate, and oversee the socio-economic transformation, empowerment, and rights of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in South Africa. Given the cross-cutting nature of the challenges facing the groups cited above, the department pursue its mandate through mainstreaming, advocacy, and monitoring and evaluation across all government sectors to ensure inclusivity and non-discrimination. Structurally and legally, the NYDA is located in the DWYPD, which means the department is the NYDA's executive authority. This means that the department is responsible for the policy function and budgetary vote assisted by its youth branch, while the NYDA is responsible for implementation, a function which seems to dilute the potential potency of the NYDA. Being a youth development entity under the DWYPD also means that as the executive authority, the department is expected to champion youth development at the highest levels of government, including in the Cabinet. This includes advocating for a bigger budget for the NYDA to be able to execute its functions effectively (**Also see Pillar 5**). Another element that could improve IYDS implementation is looking at the road travelled in the implementation of youth development programmes. (This is an interesting observation, Mr Motimela. May we verify what it is that is contemplated by the NYDA Amendment Act 11 of 2024, so that we succinctly position our argument. I know somewhere in the current Act, that is, the Amendment Act, the Act speaks explicitly about the role of the Minister and of Parliament)

2.3 Brief Reflection on the Previous Implementation Cycle

A clearer appreciation of the road travelled in the previous IYDS implementation cycle will enable better framing of the IYDS (2026-2029) and better implementation. The assessment of the previous IYDS indicates that certain areas that are very important in youth development were not given adequate attention in the previous cycle. Some of them are discussed below.

2.3.1 Strategic Areas for Strengthening

Some areas have not received adequate attention in the previous IYDS despite their importance and relevance to youth development. These include, but are not limited to:

- **Youth and sustainable environment (including green economy)** – With biodiversity loss and increased natural disasters linked to climate change, awareness and active participation in sustaining the environment has become even more important. For the youth, this means protecting the environment that they will inherit. The 2025 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) shows how climatic conditions and natural disasters escalate poverty, with almost 80% of people living in multidimensional poverty exposed to dangerous climatic conditions. In the context of South Africa, previous environmental disasters in provinces like Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal illustrate the point. However, a sustainable environment is not only about trying to protect the earth for future generations, but it is also an area of emerging economic opportunities. As the global community gradually moves into renewable energy sources and other environment-preserving activities, it is projected that by 2030 about 40% of South Africa's energy supply will be from renewable sources. There are also opportunities in the construction of energy-efficient infrastructure and waste management. How can young people take advantage of these economic opportunities while participating in the protection of the earth? The launch of the Just Energy Transformation (JET) skills desk in the Department of Higher Education will give impetus to the skilling of the youth in the energy sector.
- **Youth in agriculture (including agro-processing)** – Despite its importance for jobs, growth, and food security, agriculture receives limited attention in youth development. Recent Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) data from Statistics South Africa shows that the agriculture sector added about 30 000 jobs in the quarter4 of 2025 and another 10 000 in quater1 of 2026, bringing total employment to roughly 960 000, and marking a 3% year-on-year increase (for 2025), which highlights its growing role in job creation. The government is prioritising commercial hemp and cannabis production, which is likely to create more opportunities for young people if they are assisted to position themselves to

take advantage. Many young people still see agriculture as low-status, physically demanding, and offering little income or mobility. Policy choices have also reinforced this by focusing more on urban and service-sector opportunities. Yet agriculture has real potential, especially through agro-processing, value chains, and green economy initiatives. With the right support, such as access to land, finance, technology, and markets, it can become a viable pathway for youth economic participation. What is missing is a deliberate effort to reposition the sector as modern, profitable, and worth pursuing.

- **Youth in mining (including beneficiation)** – The mining sector in South Africa, which according to the Minerals Council South Africa (MCSA) contributes about 6% of GDP and directly employs approximately 473,000 people, and supports a broader employment footprint of about 400,295 through supply chains, is not used optimally as an avenue for youth economic participation. In addition, the sector also offers opportunities across beneficiation and downstream value chains such as mineral processing, manufacturing, engineering services and technology systems. Currently, the Mining Qualifications Authority (MQA) contributes to youth development in the sector through supporting bursaries, learnerships, internships, and TVET-linked pathways. The question is: How can the existing skills training and funding ecosystem established through the MQA be harnessed to maximise youth economic participation? The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) Youth Structure (2025) has highlighted weak skills pipelines, poor graduate absorption and limited meaningful participation, while the South African Mining Youth Association (SAMYA) highlights information gaps and structural constraints that require deliberate intervention.
- **Ocean economy (including localisation and beneficiation)** – Although there is insufficient youth-specific data, this sector is one of the most neglected in terms of youth participation. This is despite its strategic importance and its contribution to the economy. According to Operation Phakisa: Oceans Economy initiative, the sector is estimated to contribute up to R177 billion to GDP and has potential to create up to one million jobs by 2033, including in areas such as maritime transport, aquaculture, offshore resources, tourism and marine services. There is also a huge potential for localisation and beneficiation in areas like shipbuilding, boat repair, fish processing and related manufacturing. South African Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA) reports that the sector is characterised by skills shortages in maritime and aquaculture fields, weak alignment between training institutions and industry needs, geographic concentration along coastal regions, and low awareness of opportunities among young people. So raising awareness, increasing the training opportunities and encouraging education institutions to increase inclusion of the sector will improve participation of young people.
- **Youth participation in the global economy** – Initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and China's temporary zero-tariff trade programme, for example, create opportunities for young people to access regional markets and engage in cross-border trade. The BRICS+, which has a youth chapter, also provides a platform for

youth to expand their economic wings. In South Africa, while youth show relatively high levels of entrepreneurial intention, actual participation in formal trade and export markets is low, largely due to barriers such as limited access to finance, market information, networks, and compliance requirements. Existing support programmes have not yet translated into broad-based youth inclusion in trade. This points to the need for more practical support and targeted awareness to help young people access and benefit from these opportunities.

- **The changing nature of work, digitisation, artificial intelligence (AI), and telecommunications** - Digital technologies, telecommunications infrastructure, and artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping labour markets, influencing how work is organised, the skills required, and the types of opportunities available. In South Africa, this transition is taking place within a context of high youth unemployment and persistent skills mismatches. At the same time, investment in digital infrastructure is creating opportunities linked to fibre networks, ICT services, software development, digital platforms, and technology-based enterprises. The telecommunications sector is central to this shift because it underpins digital participation and access to economic activity. Initiatives linked to coding, digital skills development, mobile device repair, and youth-focused platforms such as Telkom's Plug'd programme seek to expand participation in the digital economy. The Media, Information and Communication Technologies Sector Education and Training Authority (MICT SETA) is also contributing through ICT learnerships, digital skills programmes, internships, and training linked to the fourth industrial revolution and the telecommunications sector. It is important to ensure that the youth maximise these opportunities. Investment in fibre and broadband infrastructure is also creating new areas of economic participation for young people. The expansion of fibre networks increases demand for technicians, installers, maintenance services, network support, and small contractors linked to digital infrastructure rollout. According to the 2025 Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA)'s State of the ICT Sector Report, South Africa is continuing to expand broadband infrastructure and improve fixed broadband connectivity. The Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) has also supported youth-owned enterprises involved in fibre installation and telecommunications infrastructure. However, participation in the digital economy is still shaped by differences in access to quality education, technical skills, devices, and affordable connectivity. The 2025 General Household Survey indicates that while most households have some form of internet access, this is mainly through mobile phones, which does not necessarily provide the level of digital access or technical capability required for many opportunities in the digital economy. Government is continuing work on a national AI policy framework through the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies – the policy will address some of the challenges in the sector. The latest draft policy was withdrawn for technical revisions.

- **Youth in fibre processing and manufacturing**
  The fibre processing and manufacturing sector provides opportunities for youth participation across industries such as clothing and textiles, forestry, furniture, packaging, printing, and wood products. These industries support technical training, artisan development, and small enterprise participation. The Fibre Processing and Manufacturing SETA (FP&M SETA) supports skills development through learnerships, apprenticeships, internships, and workplace training programmes. According to the FP&M SETA Sector Skills Plan 2025–2030, the sector continues to require technical and occupational skills linked to manufacturing and industrial processes. At the same time, factors such as automation, import competition, and slow economic growth continue to affect employment creation in parts of the sector.

Supporting the uptake of these economic opportunities will require awareness and funding, especially for youth entrepreneurs. Among the initiatives being considered is the youth fund, which is already provided for in terms of the NYDA Act as amended. To fortify and enrich the conceptualisation of the contemplated fund, a brief discussion of how other countries fund entrepreneurship and literature on the subject are considered next.

2.4 International Funding Model Benchmarking

Whilst more and more countries have put in place youth development policies, some seem to be more effective than others. Funding is one of the key factors that support the success of youth interventions. Section 5(a) (vi) of the Act states that the NYDA must establish competencies and capabilities in its operations, including a youth fund. To contribute to strengthening the contemplated fund, it would be prudent to learn from research and other countries' experiences. The key question is what the key features of a successful youth fund are. This section looks at research and the experiences of five selected countries from Africa (including SADC), BRICS+, Asia, and Europe. The objective is to draw lessons from their funding approaches – particularly for their youth funds. Youth funds are not only about making funding available, but they are also about assisting enterprises to build their creditworthiness and to contribute to economic growth.

The benchmarking exercise is intended to strengthen the economic participation aspect of the IYDS and its implementation from a financial point of view. The criteria for choosing the countries include a clear integrated youth policy, resources made available to support the policy (Youth Fund) and the actual implementation of the policy goals. Another important element is how progress in pursuing these goals is measured and tracked.

Asia - Malaysia

Malaysia is useful as a benchmark even though it does not have a single, ring-fenced youth fund. This is because it shows that the government can create youth-targeted financing channels within a broader entrepreneurship support system that includes everybody. This matters for South Africa because it suggests that youth support does not always require a separate stand-alone fund. It can also be built through specialised windows inside existing public finance institutions.

This approach will be in line with the integrated and mainstreamed approach, which South Africa has adopted.

TEKUN Nasional is the key institution in the Malaysian funding model. TEKUN Nasional is a public microfinance agency that provides financing to micro and small entrepreneurs who struggle to access conventional finance. Its core financing products are not youth-only. However, its official financing offerings include youth-relevant and youth-linked products, such as the Programme for Graduate Entrepreneurs (PPUS) and the Young Bumiputera Professional Entrepreneur Development Scheme. TEKUN's main financing product, TEKUN Niaga, offers financing from RM1,000 to RM100,000 (about R4,275 to R427,470), charges a 4% annual profit rate (because Islamic/Sharia does not allow charging of interest rates). This fund support is open to all eligible Malaysian entrepreneurs aged 18 to 65.

Malaysia also supports youth entrepreneurship through SME Bank. A clear youth-specific example is the Young Entrepreneur Fund 2.0 (YEF 2.0). SME Bank states that this fund is intended to support young SME entrepreneurs aged 21 to 40. According to the bank, financing can be used for working capital and the acquisition of business assets, with financing of up to RM1 million (about R4.3 Million). This is more relevant to growth-oriented youth enterprises than microcredit alone. Based on the current broad framing of the national youth fund in South Africa, this is where the NYDA intends to pitch the contemplated youth fund.

There is also evidence of direct youth earmarking in national support measures. A 2023 analysis by the Khazanah Research Institute notes that TEKUN Nasional had a microfinancing allocation of RM330 million (about R1.4 Billion), with RM10 million (about R409 million) reserved for youth from underprivileged families. Targeting disadvantaged groups is important, especially in highly unequal societies like South Africa. The institute also noted that Malaysia has tried to strengthen youth entrepreneurship through wider policy frameworks, including the National Entrepreneurship Policy 2030, and through cross-ministerial support programmes.

The main lesson from Malaysia is about access. Young entrepreneurs often face the usual problems like limited collateral, weak credit history, and low credibility with formal lenders. Malaysia's response has been to lower entry barriers through public programmes, targeted funding windows, and linked training or mentoring support. In that respect, the Malaysian model is useful for South Africa because it shows how government can widen access for young entrepreneurs who would otherwise be screened out by banks.

At the same time, Malaysia also shows the limits of this approach. Much of the support remains concentrated in micro and small enterprise finance, not in a full progression system from youth start-up support to larger commercial finance. TEKUN's core products are relatively small. Even where youth-focused instruments exist, they sit within a wider public support structure rather than a clear, unified youth enterprise pipeline. For South Africa, that suggests that focusing most of the resources on microfinance limit the potential of youth businesses. TEKUN shows how to improve access, but it also shows that access on its own does not guarantee progression into larger-scale business finance.

The Malaysian case also highlights the strong role of government. Government does not merely regulate from a distance. It funds institutions, creates special schemes, sets policy direction, and uses public agencies to deliver finance and development support. This gives the state a strong hand in shaping who gets support and on what terms. The advantage is reach and visibility. The disadvantage is that sustainability can become tied to public budgets and administrative capacity.

Europe - France

France was selected as the primary European benchmark because, according to the OECD, it possesses a highly developed and institutionally coordinated entrepreneurship financing ecosystem. Its financing system is characterised by strong public-private collaboration, extensive state-backed financing through Bpifrance, active venture capital markets, and a comprehensive network of entrepreneurial support programmes. France does not operate a single, ring-fenced youth fund. Instead, it supports young entrepreneurs through a structured system that combines public finance, private banking, and targeted inclusion programmes. The two most relevant components are Bpifrance and Adie. The French model combines youth-focused inclusion through institutions such as Adie with growth-oriented finance provided by Bpifrance[3]. This creates a clear pathway from early-stage support (through Adie) to mainstream finance (through Bpifrance). This approach seems to resonate with what the NYDA seeks to achieve, which is to be able to provide funding beyond grants at the entry level (which is what the agency is currently doing). France has developed a particularly coordinated entrepreneurial support system that facilitates progression from business start-up to growth and internationalisation. The French government provides capital, sets strategic priorities, and backs guarantee schemes. It does not replace the market. Instead, it reduces risk and enables private sector participation. This is very important as one of the barriers to accessing funding for youth enterprises is a lack of collateral.

Bpifrance is France's public investment bank (Banque Publique d'Investissement), established in 2012 to support business financing, innovation, investment, and export development. It provides loans, guarantees, equity finance, and advisory support to businesses across their lifecycle. Young entrepreneurs benefit mainly through start-up support, innovation funding, and access to guarantees that reduce the risk for commercial banks. Bpifrance rarely lends alone. It co-finances with banks and shares risk. Leveraging private funding is critical as it increases the resource pool, especially in South Africa where the state has limited resources compared to countries like France. Sharing risks also allows young firms that lack collateral or track record to access funding that would otherwise be denied.

Adie operates at the lower end of the market. It focuses on young people, unemployed individuals, and those excluded from traditional banking. It provides small loans, usually below

[3] Bpifrance. 2020.

€10,000 (about R196 840), combined with training and mentoring. This creates an entry point into entrepreneurship for youth who are not yet bankable. This seems to be the equivalent of current NYDA entrepreneurship grants. In 2007, Adie launched CréaJeunes, which is a youth entrepreneurship programme specifically targeted at young people 18–32 years old with a business idea. It also provides business skills and mentorship. This emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to funding that supports businesses beyond funding.

The strength of the French model lies in its pipeline structure. Youth can move from micro-level support (Adie) into more formal and larger-scale finance (Bpifrance and commercial banks). Funding is not isolated. It is part of a broader financial system that supports progression. In other words, it builds young people's creditworthiness, which is often one of the problems with accessing funding. This looks akin to the NYDA's approach, which provides grants at the lower end, but intends to eventually provide loans of between R750 000 and R2 million for more established youth businesses to encourage growth.

Ghana - Africa

In Ghana, the Ministry of Youth Development and Empowerment (MYDE), which replaced the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 2025, provides policy leadership, coordination, monitoring and evaluation of youth development programmes, while exercising oversight of the National Youth Authority (NYA) to support the implementation of national youth policy objectives. Youth interventions in Ghana are financed primarily through government budget allocations administered by the Ministry of Finance, supplemented by other statutory and development-partner funding sources. Public institutions involved in youth development are expected to implement programmes in alignment with national youth policies and strategic priorities coordinated by the Ministry of Youth Development and Empowerment. The National Youth Policy (2022–2032) provides the overarching framework for youth development in Ghana. It emphasises coordination across sectors and institutions rather than reliance on a single financing instrument. In this sense, youth funding in Ghana is organised through multiple programmes aligned under a common policy direction. This is in tune with South Africa's mainstreamed and integrated approach.

Ghana's youth funding system is best understood as a state-coordinated set of programmes and budget allocations, rather than a single, fully operational youth fund. Since 2025, oversight of youth policy has been located within the Ministry of Youth Development and Empowerment (MYDE), which is responsible for formulating, coordinating, monitoring and evaluating youth development policies and programmes. The Ministry also works with public and private institutions to facilitate access to funding and mobilise resources for youth initiatives. This allows for expanding the funding pool by involving private funding.

The Ministry's 2025 programme-based budget reflects this structure. The total allocation to MYDE is GH¢644,080,655 (approximately R837 million), with GH¢487,331,526 (approximately R633 million) directed towards Youth Development and Empowerment, and GH¢149,183,835 (approximately R194 million) allocated to Job Creation and Promotion[4]. These figures indicate that youth development is embedded within mainstream public expenditure rather than financed through a separate fund.

A key implementing agency is the Youth Employment Agency (YEA), which represents one of the largest channels of youth-related funding. In 2025, YEA has a total allocation of GH¢1,771,556,792 (approximately R2.30 billion), sourced from multiple public funding streams, including the Communication Service Tax, the District Assemblies Common Fund, and the Ghana Education Trust Fund. The bulk of this allocation supports programme implementation, including employment modules and operational activities, with smaller portions allocated to compensation and capital expenditure. This demonstrates that Ghana's youth funding architecture is integrated into broader fiscal systems and supported by multiple funding sources.

The National Youth Authority (NYA) plays a central coordinating role in this system. It is responsible for ensuring the implementation of youth policy, coordinating youth programmes, promoting youth development initiatives, and supporting structures such as youth resource centres. The Authority operates across national and sub-national levels, linking policy with implementation. This role seems similar to the role played by the NYDA in the South African youth development context.

Entrepreneurship support forms another important component of youth funding. The National Entrepreneurship and Innovation Programme (NEIP) focuses on start-up development through business incubation, training, and funding support. While NEIP contributes to youth entrepreneurship, it operates as part of a broader national entrepreneurship support system rather than as a dedicated youth fund.

At the local level, youth interventions are implemented through Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies and are typically incorporated into local social and economic development planning frameworks. This reinforces the decentralised nature of implementation, even though funding remains largely centralised through the national budget. Although the National Youth Policy (2022–2032) signals an intention to strengthen financing mechanisms, there is no clear evidence that a distinct, ring-fenced Youth Development Fund has been fully established and operationalised. Ghana therefore continues to rely on a programme-based and budget-driven system, rather than a unified youth financing instrument.

Ghana demonstrates the value of institutional coordination and policy alignment in youth development. It shows how multiple programmes can be organised under a common policy framework and supported through mainstream public budgeting. This approach allows for broad coverage and integration across sectors. However, the Ghanaian case also highlights important limitations. Without a clearly defined and ring-fenced financing mechanism, funding can become fragmented and difficult to track. In addition, the absence of a structured progression pathway

[4] Ministry of Youth Development and Empowerment (MYDE). 2025 Expenditure Framework (MTEF) FOR 2025-2028

(similar to the Malaysian and French ones) may limit the ability of youth enterprises to move from early-stage support to larger-scale business finance.

The Ghanaian experience shows that a mainstreamed and integrated approach to youth funding can work, but only if coordination is deliberate and structured. When funding is spread across multiple programmes and institutions, the main risk is fragmentation and duplication. Strong coordination, clear mandates, and aligned funding channels are therefore essential. South Africa has already moved in this direction through the establishment of the Small Enterprise Development Finance Agency (SEDFA), which brings together Small Enterprise Finance Agency (SEFA), the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA), and the Cooperative Banks Development Agency (CBDA). This consolidation helps reduce fragmentation and improve coherence in funding delivery. However, there should also be a clear guide in terms of how the NYDA Youth Fund relates to other development funding institutions (DFIs) like SEDFA and the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC). The key lesson is that if South Africa adopts an integrated model rather than a stand-alone youth fund, coordination must be built into the institutional design, with clear accountability and simplified access for youth entrepreneurs. Another key lesson is that even where a stand-alone youth fund is established, it cannot operate in isolation. It must be embedded within the broader institutional landscape, with strong coordination mechanisms, clear accountability, and alignment with existing agencies to avoid duplication and fragmentation in funding delivery. In general, the youth funding approach is not about either a youth fund or a mainstreamed approach; it is about the purpose, avoiding unnecessary duplication, and how well the system is designed.

BRICS+ – India

India also does not operate a stand-alone youth fund. Instead, youth development and entrepreneurship are supported through a mainstreamed system of programmes and credit-linked schemes embedded within the broader public finance framework. Youth policy is coordinated by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports through institutions such as the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan, National Youth Corps, and Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development, which focus on skills, leadership, and youth mobilisation rather than direct financing.

Enterprise financing is delivered primarily through national MSME schemes. The Stand-Up India Scheme provides bank loans ranging from ₹10 lakh to ₹1 crore (approximately R230,000 to R2.3 million) for new enterprises[5]. The Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana provides collateral-free loans up to ₹10 lakh (approximately R230,000), structured into Shishu (Infant/ Early stage), Kishor (Adolescent/Growing business), and Tarun (Young adult/ Established growth) stage categories. As of November 2023, 44.46 crore (about R94 million) loans had been sanctioned under MUDRA since its launch in 2015[6]. This reflects a distributed financing model. Youth do not access a

[5] Government of India. Stand-Up India Scheme

[6] Government of India. Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY) – loan categories

dedicated funding pool, but enter the system through mainstream financial instruments delivered via banks and supported by government policy and guarantees. This enables large-scale outreach but does not guarantee youth-specific targeting, as eligibility is based on general lending criteria.

India shows that large-scale youth financing can be achieved without a dedicated fund if mainstream financial systems are accessible, bank-led, and supported by risk-sharing mechanisms. However, without explicit targeting, youth may compete with other groups for access. In the case of South Africa competing for finance with everyone may be difficult given that most of the youth have limitations in terms of collateral and track record.

Botswana - SADC

The Government of Botswana implements youth development programmes through the National Youth Policy, with the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sport and Culture Development providing policy oversight and coordinating implementation. Programme delivery is supported by the National Youth Council and other government agencies responsible for youth empowerment, skills development, employment creation, and civic participation. According to Diraditsile (2021, Youth Empowerment Programmes include:

- **Youth Development Fund:** The YDF was established in 2009, with a focus on youth not in school or employed, underemployed, and those with no academic background. The fund is 50% a grant and 50% an interest-free loan, and the maximum allocation for individual youth start-ups is BWP100 000 (about R121 400) and BWP450 000 (about R546 000) for industry cooperatives. The focus of the fund mainly to support entrepreneurship in an attempt to respond to the challenge of young people not being able to access bank credit to support their businesses.
- **Young Farmers Fund (YFF)**: The Young Farmers Fund is administered through the Citizen Entrepreneurial Development Agency (CEDA) to promote youth participation in agriculture and agribusiness. The programme provides financial support to young farmers to establish commercially viable agricultural enterprises and create sustainable self-employment opportunities. Eligible beneficiaries can access funding of up to BWP500,000 (about R607 000) depending on the nature and viability of the project. The fund forms part of Botswana's broader strategy to increase youth entrepreneurship, employment, and participation in the agricultural sector.
- **National Internship Programme:** The National Internship Programme provides unemployed graduate citizens with an opportunity to acquire practical work experience through placements in government departments, state-owned enterprises, private sector organisations, non-governmental organisations, and community-based organisations. The programme seeks to facilitate the transition from tertiary education to the workplace by developing relevant workplace skills and experience. Placements are administered by the Department of Employment Services and may last for up to two years. The

programme forms part of Botswana's broader efforts to improve graduate employability and address youth unemployment.

- **Botswana National Service Programme (Tirelo Sechaba):** The Botswana National Service Programme (Tirelo Sechaba) provides opportunities for unemployed young people to gain practical skills and work experience through voluntary placements in government departments, public institutions, parastatals, non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations. The programme seeks to promote volunteerism and community service, while enabling participants to acquire life skills, work experience, discipline, and a sense of responsibility. It also serves as a platform for youth participation in community development and national development initiatives, particularly among young people with limited formal qualifications and employment opportunities.

Despite Botswana's substantial investment in youth empowerment programmes, particularly through enterprise financing and agricultural entrepreneurship initiatives, concerns remain regarding the long-term sustainability and impact of some interventions. Programmes such as the Youth Development Fund and the Young Farmers Fund have expanded access to finance for youth-owned enterprises and agricultural ventures, thereby promoting entrepreneurship and self-employment. However, evidence from government reviews and academic studies suggests that the outcomes of some youth financing initiatives have fallen short of expectations, particularly in relation to sustainable enterprise growth and employment creation. In 2025, the Government of Botswana announced a review of the Youth Development Fund, acknowledging that the programme was not fit for purpose and required restructuring to improve its effectiveness. The review highlighted the need for more targeted support, improved training, stronger market access, and funding models better suited to the diverse needs of young entrepreneurs. These developments underscore the importance of complementing youth enterprise finance with effective monitoring, business development support, and mechanisms that promote the long-term sustainability of funded enterprises.

2.4.1 Insights from Literature and International Practice

The evidence on youth funds suggests the Following:

- Youth fund and mainstreaming are not necessarily mutually exclusive. So the discussion cannot be reduced to either one or the other. The important point is that if both are used, they be conceptualised such they complement each other
- Designing youth fund has a big influence on whether a youth fund succeed or fail[7] – this involve how the fund will actually run. For example, design will include what vehicle will be used to implement the fund. Will it use infrastructure that is already in existence e.g. public entity or financial institution(s) and what are the advantages and disadvantages in both cases. What will be the funding mechanism? Will there be an annual allocation from the government or only seed funding is required? How will private sector funds be

[7] ILO (2012)

leveraged to boost fund size? The French, the Malaysian and the Indian models recognise that youth funding should not operate in isolation, instead it must link to the wider financial system to leverage private sector funds. How will risk be managed? The French model provides for risk-sharing with banks through guarantees. The advantage of this is that it unlocks private capital and allow scale. In the case of the Malaysian model, the government takes the risk on behalf of the borrowers. This very important given that youth are generally high risk and unless there is some form of guarantee they are not likely to secure funding without some form of credit guarantee

- The International Labour Organisation (ILO) youth fund analysis recommends that Youth funds should be used as an instrument to stimulate private sector participation in youth employment creation with a clear system rather than as a permanent creditor to the youth. The rationale is that the intention of the youth funds is not to replace financial institutions, but to facilitate access to funding
- Most youth funds are created to deal with limited youth participation in the economy through business which is often limited by difficulties in accessing funding. To this extent, youth funds are intended to fund entrepreneurs, who it is assume will contribute to economic growth and employment creation. So the purpose of a youth fund must be clearly articulated.
- There are multiple models of youth funding models, each targeting a specific youth development challenge and that one country can use several models – e.g. in the case of Botswana there are several funds with each targeting a particular policy issue. For example, Youth Development Fund targets youth who want finances for enterprise purposes, but cannot access bank funding. Young Farmers Fund on the other hand target youth in the agriculture sector. However, the downside of this is possible fragmentation and duplication. This makes co-ordination very important.
- To increase the funding accessible and the size of funding to young people, a combination of grants and loans could be used. For example, the Botswana youth fund uses a 50/50 funding model with the government providing 50% grants and an interest free 50% loans. This reduces the burden of repayment while it discourages the beneficiaries from treating the support as "free money". "Free money" mentality might encourage a lackadaisical attitude towards how the money is used. The Malaysian model and Adie in France model targets those with limited collateral, weak credit history, and low credibility with formal lenders – this increases access
- There is no one-size-fits all youth funding model. Each country should have a clear conception of what it intends to achieve with the youth fund to be able conceptualised it properly. In this regard it becomes very important to clearly articulate the objectives of the youth fund. The Botswana Youth Development Fund is intended to support youth not in school or employed, underemployed and those with no academic background to establish and run businesses. Specificity of what the fund is intended for implies that there is no prescriptive blueprint of what a youth fund should look like, but lessons can

be learned from the advantages that others models were able to exploit or what made them fail

- Clear articulation of the youth fund's objective is linked to an important aspect of the fund, which is monitoring and evaluation. It is important to track progress and measure if the objectives of the fund have been achieved – the Indian and Ghanaian funding model seems to encourage mainstreaming by encouraging government wide allocation of funds to the youth rather than a separate youth fund. However, it is not clear how it will ensure that targeted funding like provision or entrepreneurship will be ensured through this model. On the other hand, a youth fund that is not supported by policy, broader funding mechanism is unlikely to make a desired impact. Based on the NYDA's public articulation, it seems the objective of the youth fund is to encourage youth business growth and to graduate to medium and big businesses
- Youth Fund should combine financing with mentoring and advisory support. The strength of this is that it minimises failure, which in turn increases chances of repayment, which improves the fund's sustainability. The French, the Malaysian and the Indian models are using this approach
- To avoid duplication, a national fund must also articulate clearly what its relationship will be with similar funds or programmes. For example, in the case of the NYDA youth fund, what will be its relationship with the Youth Challenge Fund (YCF) run by SEDFA? In the case of the French model, Adie focuses on the low end to make those businesses viable so that they can access bigger funding through Bifrance, so the focus of both funds is clear and different
- If a youth fund is not properly conceptualised, it can be a political or 'gesture' fund[8] - and such funds are likely to fail

In 2008, South Africa seemed to veer away from a youth fund model that was run by Umsobomvu Youth Fund (UYF) before its dissolution in 2009 because the integrated and mainstreamed approach was deemed more efficacious than a Ministry or a youth fund. However, it is important to point out that the integrated and mainstreamed approach and a youth fund are not necessarily mutually exclusive, though they can potentially cause a lot of duplication and inefficiencies. Despite a temporary veering away from the youth fund, the provision of a youth fund remained in the National Youth Development Act and its amendment – though it is not clear what the fund will mean in practice. Recently, in 2025, the NYDA has begun to operationalise the provisions of the youth fund in the Act. In conclusion, an international benchmarking of this kind cannot be fully explored and interrogated as part of the IYDS; it needs an in-depth study. As the foregoing discussion implies, funding is central to youth development and by extension so are national budgets.

[8] Davies (2024)

2.5 The National Budget and Youth Development

The IYDS should also be factored into the national budget, as an important lever to youth development, taking into account the multiple programmes requiring funding. In the light of the provision of the NYDA amendment act that state organs should assist the NYDA in executing its duties, the national budget becomes one of the important instruments to do this. (**This is a key point because it gives credence to the role of NYDA as it is pertains to budget allocation towards youth development**)Section 19 of the NYDA Act, as amended, provides powers to the Minister to prescribe regulations that will facilitate youth development. Perhaps this powers can be used to ensure state organs do factor youth development in their budget votes, especially those whose mandate are not directly dealing with youth development. Lobbying for mainstreaming and integration of youth development should start with the national budget, informed by research and budget analysis.

The Gender-Responsive Planning, Budgeting, Monitoring, Evaluation and Auditing Framework (GRPBMEAF) strengthens the case for embedding youth development within the national budget. It requires all organs of state to integrate the priorities of women, youth and persons with disabilities (WYPD) across planning, budgeting and reporting processes. This means youth development cannot be treated as a standalone programme. Instead, all departmental budgets must be assessed for their impact on youth, including those departments without a direct youth mandate. The framework further requires the use of age-disaggregated data, clear performance indicators, and reporting systems that track outcomes for youth. In practical terms, this shifts youth development into the core of public finance and accountability. It places an obligation on departments to show how their allocations contribute to measurable improvements in youth outcomes, and to subject this to monitoring, evaluation and auditing processes. Though not approve the concept provides a good basis for budget monitoring. Whilst the potential benefits of the framework are undeniable, a youth-only focused framework might be more efficacious. It will be more focused and eliminate the possibility of privileging one sector over another.

The national budget provides a broad fiscal framework within which youth development will be funded, with detailed programme allocations to be determined at departmental level. At a system level, the budget strengthens the foundations that shape youth outcomes. This is why it is important to monitor the budget to assess if it is aligned with the MTDP priorities and how it can be leveraged for youth development. Examples of youth-relevant allocations in the 2026 budget include early childhood development (ECD), which receives an additional R12.8 billion over three years, expanding access to 300 000 learners. The National School Nutrition Programme continues to support over 9.9 million learners. And education remains the largest area of consolidated expenditure at 23.7 per cent over the medium term, reinforcing the state's long-term investment in human capital. So, what do these allocations and the overall budget mean for youth development? What alternative allocations that could be made? These are some of the questions that could be addressed through the youth-focused budget monitoring framework. (**This is, by the way, to highlight that the points made are significant. It does not**

mean the content is wrong. In short, we appreciate all of the points highlighted in red. Moreover, we proposed that the Minister use his/her powers to cost the IYDS implementation plan. This will be doable by employing his/her powers to cost the IYDS.)

The 2026 budget also allocated R319 million for the Presidential Employment Intervention (PYEI) to continue to address unemployment. As it will be seen throughout this document, unemployment is a serious threat. So, this is a positive step, though the real impact will be measured by the outcomes. Reforming the national skills ecosystem was another area that the budget alluded to, including the exploration of a dual-training model and stronger artisanal pathways. Although the modalities of how this will work have not been detailed, the dual-training model has shown great success in countries like Germany and Switzerland. And the fact that the proposition is driven by the Presidency and the National Treasury indicates that it is likely to receive support. In addition, more than R1 trillion was allocated to public infrastructure over the medium term to drive economic activity and employment. Although this is not specifically for the youth, it has potential to create multiple employment and business opportunities for the youth directly and through the multiplier effect, if the youth sector develops mechanisms to place young people in a position to exploit this. While the budget does not introduce a new ring-fenced youth development instrument at the fiscal framework level, it creates the resource base within which departments, including the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities and its entities such as the NYDA, will determine specific youth-focused allocations and programme priorities.

An important factor in relation to the budget is underspending, which means that allocated funds are not spent. In that case, the population and particularly the youth are deprived of available resources that are supposed to benefit them. This suggests that the entities to which the funds are allocated are either not doing what they are supposed to do or they cannot execute their mandates – except where a genuine factor beyond their control caused underspending. Budget monitoring should therefore include underspending. Budgeting and all policy instruments (including the IYDS) should take into account the country's demographics.

2.6 Youth Demographic Landscape

For youth development planning to be effective, it should be underpinned by a clear understanding of the current population structure and how it will possibly change in future. It is therefore important to analyse the current population data and credible population projections, like the Mid-Year Population Estimates. **Figure 1** below shows a comparison of the Census 2022 population pyramid and the Mid-Year Population Estimates 2025 pyramid. The figure indicates that South Africa continues to have a large youth population, with the Mid-Year Population Estimates Report estimating that about 37.3 million (59.1%) of the South African population is under the age of 34 years. Those aged 15 to 34 years are estimated at 20.8 million – the Mid-year population pyramid also shows a 'youth bulge' particularly between ages 15-19 and 30-34 years. (**According to Stat-SA, data for youth ages between 15 and 35 is available. All that it requires is for the reporter/researcher to extract it from what they call metadata. If time was on our side,**

we could organise a Zoom meeting with some of them to take us through. Late last year, they capacitated us on how to extract data from the Stat-SA portal so that tables/graphs or diagrams are developed or constructed.). The estimated 20.8 million (33%) youths (15-34 years) are out of an estimated overall population of 63.1 million – 51.1% female and 48.9% males. Africans are estimated to constitute 81.8% of the South African population, followed by Coloureds at 8.5%, and then Whites and Indians at 7.2% and 2.5% respectively.

The comparison of the Census and Population Estimates also suggests that, except for ages 25-29 years, which shows considerably lower estimates in 2025, and an estimated population growth of about a million between 2022 and 2025 – the age and sex structure of the South African population remained largely similar in the period 2022 to 2025. This comparison between the Census and the estimates should be done with caution as the Census 2022 is based on actual data, while the Mid-Year Population Estimates are based on projections. If any or all the assumptions upon which the estimates are made do not hold, this will mean that the estimates might not be accurate. The rationale for juxtaposing the two is to have a sense of where we might be currently in terms of population growth and distribution, while we are waiting for the 2032 Census.

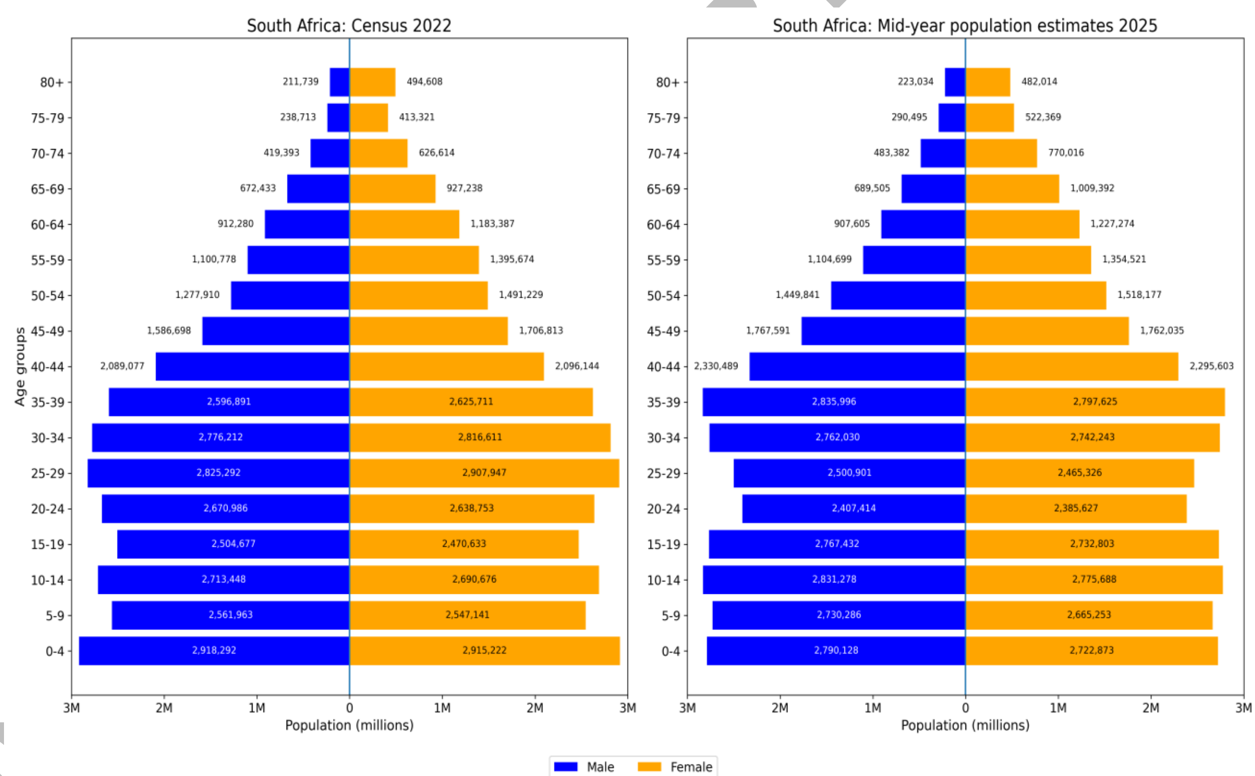
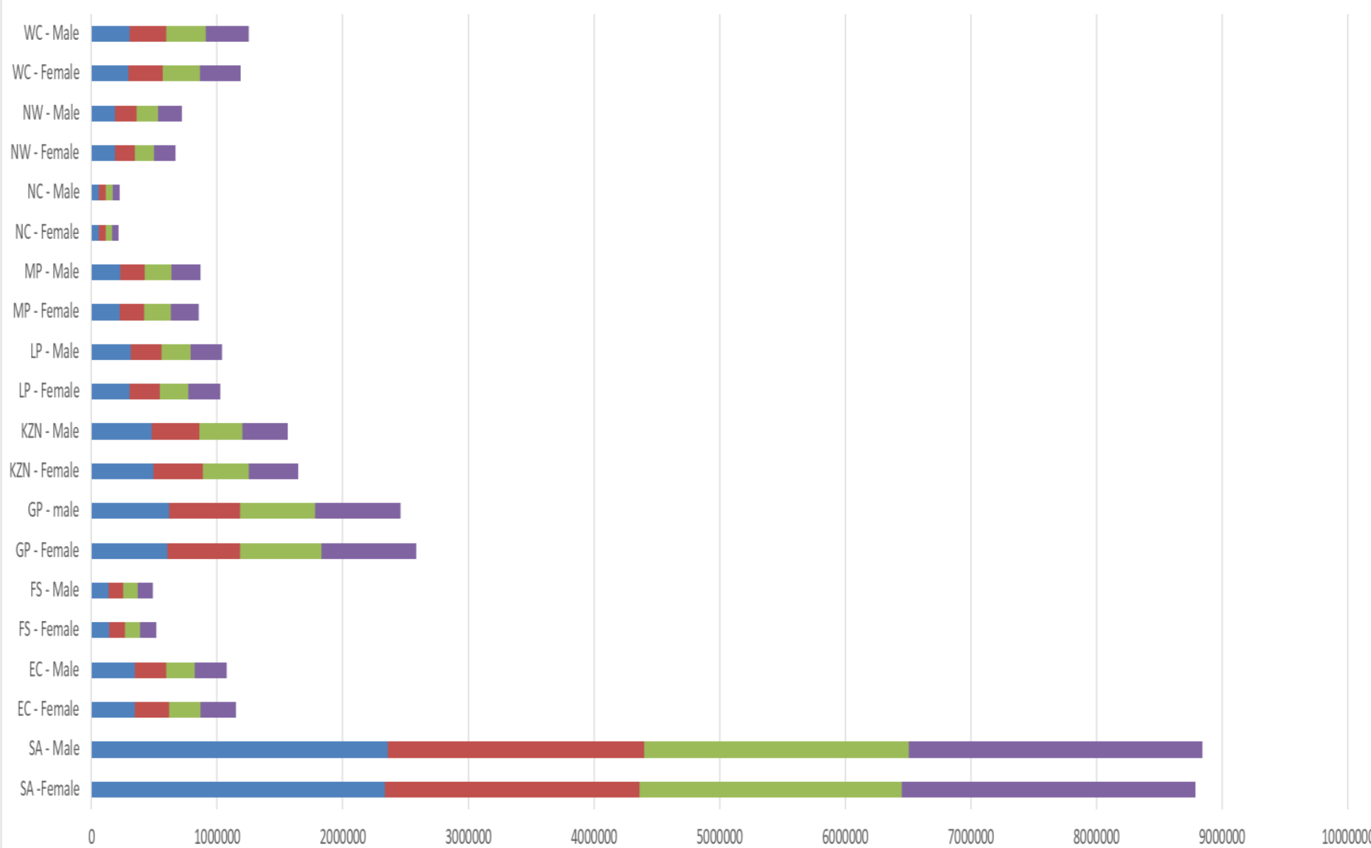


Figure 1: The South African population: Census 2022 and the 2025 Mid-year population Estimates by age and gender

Source: Stats SA Census 2022 & 2025 Mid-year population estimates

In addition to the national population distribution by age and sex, an overview of the provincial, gender, and age distributions of the youth is important for targeting and for distributing resources. **Figure 2** below shows that almost 60% of the youth are estimated to be concentrated in three provinces, Gauteng (25.5%), KwaZulu-Natal (19.4%) and the Western Cape (12.1%), which is in line with these provinces' overall populations, their economic attractiveness, and their levels of urbanisation. The Northern Cape has the lowest youth population followed by Free State and North West respectively. There appears to be a relatively balanced distribution of young people by gender across the provinces, which is in line with the estimated general population split of 51.1% female, 48.9% male.



	SA -Female	SA - Male	EC - Female	EC - Male	FS - Female	FS - Male	GP - Female	GP - male	KZN - Female	KZN - Male
15-19	2335785	2360190	346393	344512	144094	138465	602693	617092	493574	481726
20-24	2026556	2037310	270523	250964	124544	116679	581979	564428	393139	376080
25-29	2087136	2106592	252547	228276	120558	112827	646514	596420	363867	341716
30-34	2335985	2336934	283608	252043	128855	120006	756404	683517	395978	364722

	LP - Female	LP - Male	MP - Female	MP - Male	NC - Female	NC - Male	NW - Female	NW - Male	WC - Female	WC - Male
15-19	301784	312773	227295	228407	60072	60896	185982	189615	295914	305565
20-24	241065	245984	194051	194909	52047	54018	159391	167827	273260	288644
25-29	228771	229002	209622	213076	51274	54238	154422	173221	292824	314930
30-34	252811	252364	222173	231566	54237	57859	168844	191929	325679	342348

Figure 2: Youth population estimates by province, age and sex (2025)
Source: StatsSA 2025 Mid-year population estimates

In line with the targeting approach, people with disabilities are one of the demographic groups that the IYDS is prioritising partly because of years of exclusion. **Figure 3** below shows the population of South Africa by age groups and by disability status, using Census 2022 data. About 2.4% of South African people have disabilities, which is a slight decline from 2,6% in 2011. The data shows that the number of people with disabilities tends to increase with age, which is largely attributed to accidents, certain diseases and physical decline caused by old age. This pattern becomes visible from the age category 25-29 years – between 5 and 9 years the rate is 2.1%, and then it starts to increase steadily and reach 2.4% by age 25-29 and 4.1% by age 40-44. And by ages 50-54 years onwards, the rate increases steeply, probably with age-related disabilities starting to contribute significantly. Perhaps the increase in disabilities with age suggests the possibility for prevention or early detection to minimise this increase. Early prevention would include education, medical interventions and dissuading the youth from pursuing risky lifestyles which often expose them to violence and accidents, and reducing incidents of violence (South Africa is one of the most violent countries in the world). The patterns are also important in the allocation of resources and targeting.

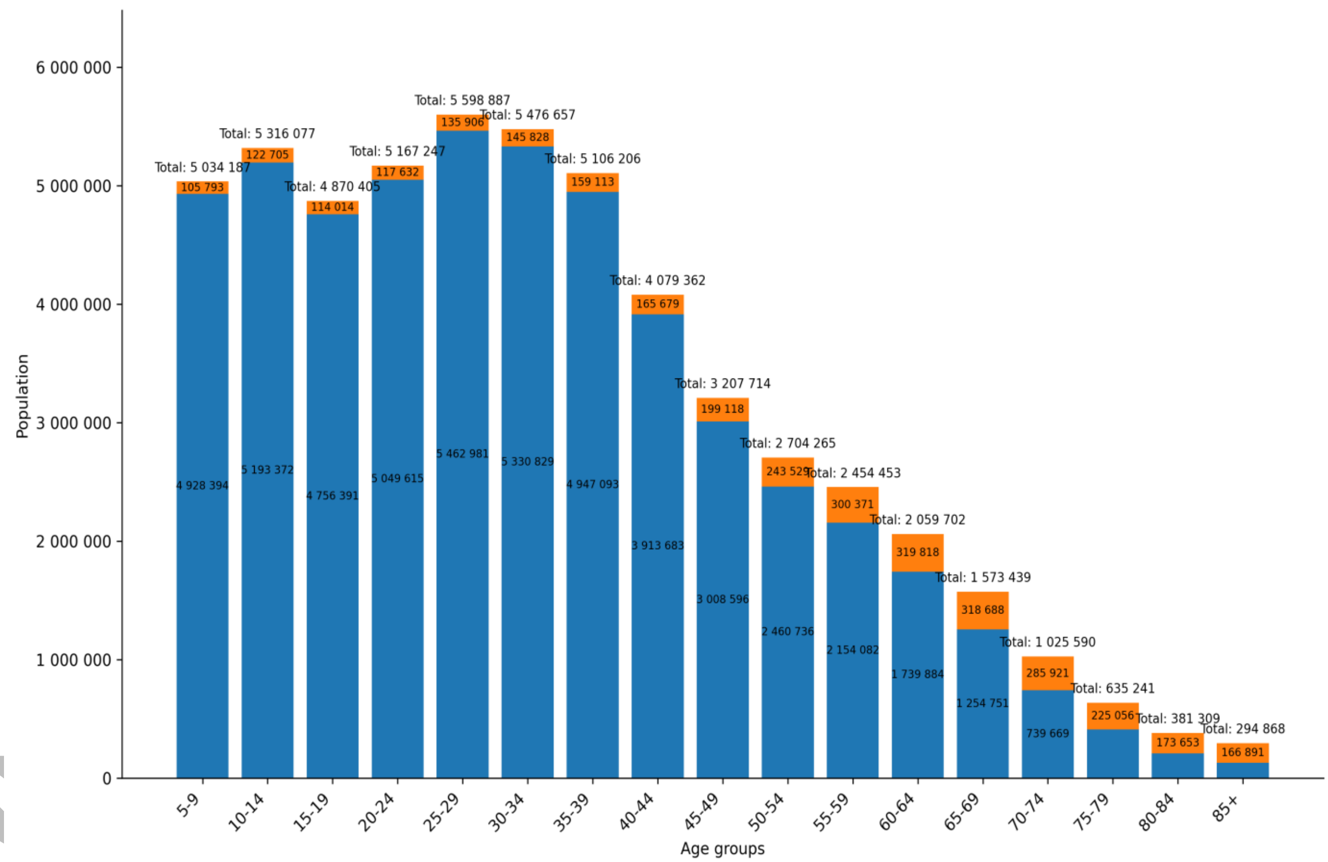


Figure 3: Population by age group and disability status (2022)

Source: Stats SA (2024): Census 2022

The foregoing presentation of demographics of people with disabilities emphasises the importance of an inclusive integrated youth development strategy, and it also puts disability in

context and underlines the importance of coordination across the sectors. For a detailed strategy for inclusion of youth with disability, see the link below: (**Let us also take advantage of mid-term population estimates, but also without ignoring the importance of Census 2022**)
https://www.nyda.gov.za/Portals/0/WebSitesCreative_MyContentManager/1092/NYDA_Disability_Inclusion_Strategy_2025_2028.pdf

2.6.1 Poverty and the youth

Poverty affects all aspects of the lives of the South African population, particularly the youth and cuts across all the youth development pillars. Many indicators show that the youth are more likely to live in poverty than the general population, which is partly attributed to the phenomenon of youth headed households, which are often characterised by low total household income. To put this into perspective, while some youth-headed households are by choice (especially for older youths), in other cases this is imposed by circumstances – e.g. lose of parents. To put this in context, about 18.6% of households headed by youth are headed by those aged between 15 and 24 years. Indicators like living conditions (e.g. dwelling, access to piped water, etc.), household income, homelessness, and access to food indicate that the youth are more vulnerable to poverty than the general population.

Employment is still the biggest sources of income and therefore unemployment means deprivation of income and by extension likelihood of poverty. About 29.6% youth-headed households were found to be without an employed adult member in 2024. Just over 12% household income for youth-headed households is from social grants. While social grant plays an important role to alleviate poverty for the unemployed, they are still not sufficient. The government has indicated an intention to implement a basic income grant (BIG), however, at the moment there is very little tangible actions towards that direction. The importance of BIG is that it will be linked to employment opportunities, support for job searches, and other economic opportunities. About 35.9% of youth aged 15-24 years and 19.2% of those aged 25-34 years are beneficiaries of social grants with 28.5% being female and 26.4% being male. This is not only about the demographics of those benefitting from grants, it is also a reflection of the levels of poverty.

Limited access to food is one of the clearest indicators of poverty. Studies, notably, the 2024 South African Mental Health Situational Analysis shows that lack of food is not only linked to physical health, but also to mental health challenges such depression. About 13.3% of youth-headed households have reported hunger in the 2024 General Households Survey (GHS). The Northern Cape and Mpumalanga have the highest number of youth-headed households that have reported hunger with 25.8% and 24.9% respectively. Limpopo and Gauteng reported the lowest percentages with 3.7% and 7.7% respectively. The Western Cape, the Northern Cape, Mpumalanga, the Eastern Cape and North West show youth-headed households that reported hunger well above the national average of 13.3%. According to the data, in many of the provinces female youth-headed households are likely to go without food than male headed ones.

Furthermore, youth living in non-metros are more likely to live in households that reported hunger at 18.3% compared to those living in metros at 12.2%. So interventions in this regard should take into account geographic location and sex. For a detailed provincial and sex breakdown, **see Appendix B**

Looking at all the households (inclusive of those headed by youths), 17.3% of youth aged 15-24 years and 14.1% of youth aged 25-34 years lived in households that reported hunger in 2024. The number of youth living in households that reported hunger also reflects historical inequalities with 17.1% of African and 12.7% Coloured youth reported to be living in households that reported hunger compared to 1.9% and 1.3% of White and Indian households respectively[9]. The lived poverty index (LPI) in South Africa reflects sharp inequalities, with white South Africans reporting the lowest levels of deprivation (mean = 1.4, improving from 1.6 in 2023), while black South Africans report the highest levels (mean = 2.4, up from 2.3)[10]. This gap reflects persistent inequality in living conditions.

According the 2025 Profile of Homeless Persons report, of the estimated 55 719 homeless persons in South Africa in 2022, 44% (about 24 510) were young people. The main reasons for homelessness include, economic reasons (unemployment and lack of income), family matters (disputes, death and dissolution), and alcohol and drug abuse.

2.6.2 Key Issues Emerging from Youth Development Context for Implementation Consideration:

- South Africa is still experiencing a youth "bulge' which can still be harnessed for demographic dividend
- A substantial number of youths live in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape
- The number of people with disabilities increase with age suggesting that early interventions could prevent and/or mitigate some of the disabilities
- Many indicators show that the youth, especially those living in youth-headed households, still experience poverty more than any other population group
- The lived poverty index highlight racial inequalities
- Race, gender, disability, geographic location are still signifiers of poverty

The policy framework described earlier and the brief overview of the youth population provide a solid based to explore the priority challenges that inform the implementation plan that is proposed in this document. The challenges are looked at through the lens of the youth development pillars defined in the NYP (2030).

[9] Statistics South Africa (2026)
[10] Lefko-Everett, K. 2025. SA Reconciliation Barometer: 2025 Report

2.7 Pillar1: Priority Challenges Affecting Quality Education, Skills and Second Chances

The democratic government has been grappling with issues of equal access to quality education and training since the advent of democracy in 1994. Its interventions were intended to bring those who were deliberately deprived of educational opportunities into the fold. The interventions were informed by the belief that education has the potential to contribute to empowering young people, reducing poverty, and reducing inequality. While noticeable progress has been made in education and skills development, available data suggests that more still needs to be done. Among the positive developments in the education sector is policies that are geared towards redress and equity, no tuition fees schools, free learner support materials, school nutrition programmes, norms and standards for school infrastructure, scholar transport, constantly improving Matric results, the Department of Basic Education supported second chance programme for Matric learners, increased access to higher education, higher education funding through and the National Student Financial Aid Service (NSFAS), the revamped technical vocational education and training (TVET) sector, and recently the formalisation of early childhood development (ECD). The skills policies, which include the Skills Development Act 97 of 1998 and its amendments, and the establishment of Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) are also some of the positive initiatives.

Without suggesting a hierarchy, although all the pillars are interconnected and influence each other, education and training impact on the youth more deeply as it has an influence on all other areas of youth development. One's level of education influences the economic opportunities one can access, and more likely to influence their health choices and risky behaviour, and their participation in civic and nation building activities. There are also suggestions by some studies that education improves overall well-being and self-esteem, which in turn lead to positive attitude, which is vital for mental health[11]. Early childhood education lays a foundation for all subsequent learning.

Early Childhood Development (ECD)

The Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act no.32 of 2024 has made Grade R officially compulsory. Many studies have shown over the years that good early childhood education provides a solid foundation for later schooling[12]. For example, learners who were exposed to early learning scored above average in Mathematics and Science in the TIMMS Grade 5 assessments, while those who had limited exposure scored considerably below average. So, while ECD may not be immediately relevant for youth, its relevance manifests in the long term when the youth are in higher grades. In the 2025/2026 financial year, 13 300 ECD centres were registered by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) so that they can benefit from the government subsidy framework. Like with the other levels of education, access to ECD is unequal and in many cases non-existent particularly for rural learners. The fiscal constraints also seem to threaten the effective implementation of the ECD programme. In the 2026 Budget Speech, R12.8

[11] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), (2025)

[12] Suna, (2024)

billion was allocated to ECD over three years and it is intended to bring 300 000 more learners into ECD, which is modest in the light of massive numbers of children joining ECD, learning materials provision, and the training requirements for ECD teachers. For example, in her 2026/7 budget vote, the Minister indicated that Grade R teachers' salaries will cost approximately R10 billion over the medium term. Bringing ECD into schools also has implications for the school infrastructure expansion, which already has backlogs. These challenges notwithstanding, strengthening ECD will strengthen access to education.

Access to basic education

Access to education is enshrined in the constitution as a fundamental human right and the state is expected to make it available and accessible. In line with the constitution, the basic education policy framework outlaws any form of discrimination and exclusion of learners from accessing basic education. Access was further improved through the BELA Act, which prevents schools from using admission policies or language of teaching as exclusion instruments, which was the case before the BELA Act. There is also a particular concern with some schools still using pregnancy as an exclusion from access to education. The Equal Education Law Centre (EELC) points out that it is still dealing with cases of expulsion of pregnant learners and school policies that allow such practices. The Department of Basic Education is current developing regulations to deal with this challenge. The regulations include mandatory individualised support for affected learners, and punitive measures against schools or school officials who used pregnancy to exclude learners or treat them unfairly.

In addition to home schooling as a way of expanding access to basic, the DBE is also working on the amendment of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (as amended) to recognise and regulate online schooling, which is currently not recognised and regulated. Because of its accessibility and flexibility, this has potential to ease pressure on overcrowding in schools, shortages of spaces, and to promote learner-centred approaches. However, online schooling has its own challenges with outcomes depending heavily on student self-discipline, teacher quality, parental support, digital access, and course design.[13] Furthermore, maintaining learner motivation and engagement was also found to be more difficult online than in traditional classrooms, which in turn will affect outcomes.

No tuition fees schools (65.1% learners benefit) and the school nutritional programmes (78.2% learners benefit) are also intended to make access to basic education easier. Improved access to basic education reflects in the near universal attendance at primary level – there is almost 100% participation for children up to the age 15 years (97.1%)[14]. Despite the improved access to schooling, the challenge is that the quality of schools and schooling is unequal implying unequal access. For example, some schools still have high teacher-learner ratio, some lack basic infrastructure like running water, laboratories, etc. The government's quintile classification of schools bears testimony to these inequalities, although on the positive side the quintile system

[13] Forsström, S. et al. (2025)

[14] Stats SA (2026a)

is used to identify schools that need more resources and more interventions. Secondly, the near universal primary attendance does not translate into positive results at higher level of schooling because with progression, the repetitions and drop-out rates also increase.

So, drop-out rates at basic education level are still a major concern. DBE data shows that about 4 out of 10 learners who start grade 1 will drop out of school before they complete grade 12[15]. According to the 2025 General Household Survey (GHS) data, poor performance seems to be one of the reason for high drop-out rates with 27.1% of youth who dropped out of school indicating that they are not attending school because of poor performance – with males showing a higher rate (28.5%) than females (25.5%). How do we mitigate poor performance and by extension school drop-out rates?

One of the key enablers to accessing basic education is no tuition fee schools – The General Households Survey (GHS) found that in 2025 almost two thirds (65.1%) of learners in public schools attended no tuition fees schools. However, the percentage of leaners attributing lack of money as a reason for not attending school was 21.5% in 2025 suggesting that lack of money as a barrier to schooling is still a reality though on the decline. Although there has been a decline over the years in the percentage of those attributing not attending school to lack of money, 21.5% is still too high. Lack of money should be interpreted in a broad sense – meaning that it is not just about tuition fees, it is also about uniforms, stationery, transport in some cases, availability of things like lighting to do homework, access to the internet, nutrition, etc. For example, in 2024/25 households spent R175.5 billion on education[16], which represent about 98% increase in household education spending over a decade. While households with higher income spent more on enrichment programmes for their children, poor households spent on basics that are absolutely necessary like uniforms and stationery. To complicate matters, education inflation is shown to be higher than inflation on other goods and services, meaning that the costs of education related goods and services increase at higher rate than other goods and services. Although household expenditure on education is not broken down according to the households' income, it illustrates that beyond no-tuition schools, education has other costs which are substantial and can be a real barrier to accessing education.

The Zero Drop Out's 2025 report frames dropping out of school as a function of a plethora of factors, chief among them, poverty, poor performance, and lack of psycho-social support. This means that to deal with the challenge of school drop-outs effectively, an inter-sectoral and multi-dimensional strategy is required. To put a collective approach to mitigate the challenge of school drop-out, in 2025 the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Zero Dropout Campaign have partnered with the intention to focus on improving and implementing psycho-social support for learners. The impact of this partnership will be judged by the outcomes in the next two to three years. Coupled with high drop-out rates is grade repetition, which results in low throughput and in some cases contributing to drop-out rates. The 2025 GHS found that 8,8% of 21-year-olds are

[15] Zero Dropout. 2025

[16] Statistics South Africa, 2025

still attending secondary school, which suggests high repetition. To underline the magnitude of the challenge, it is estimated that about 8% of the Department of Basic Education's annual budget is spent on servicing repeating learners[17].

Another challenge that dilutes relatively easy access to schooling is poor outcomes. The Department of Basic Education's 2024 report acknowledges that although it is improving, the schooling system "still under-performs relative to schooling systems in other middle income countries[18]". However, everything is not lost as the 2024 McKinsey report on education put South Africa among the seven countries that are exemplary in their outcomes improvements trajectory. The international assessment reports like the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which assess performance in Mathematics and Science in grade 4 and 8 every four years has shown that South Africa's performance is still below par. In the last assessment which was in 2023, grade 5 and grade 9 were assessed. In Grade 9 Mathematic, South Africa scored an average of 397 compared to the top performers, which are Singapore (605), Chinese Taipei (602), and the Republic of Korea (596), Japan (595) and Hong Kong SAR (575). Comparing the performance over time indicates that although South Africa is still among the lowest performers it has been on an improvement trajectory – scoring 352 in 2011, 372 in 2015, 389 in 2019, and 397 in 2023. Except for 2023, the improvement trend is also visible in science – in 2011, South Africa scored and average of 332, 358 in 2015, 370 in 2019, before declining to 362 in 2023 (**See chart in Appendix C: Figure A**).

Although Mathematics and Science performance has improved gradually over time, both are still well below the international benchmark of 500. At the provincial level, significant gaps in learner achievement are evident. In Mathematics, learners in Gauteng (412) and the Western Cape (424) achieve the highest average scores, while provinces such as Limpopo (374) and the Eastern Cape (368) lag behind. This reflects a gap of 56 points between the best and worst-performing provinces. A similar pattern is observed in Science, where the Western Cape (416) and Gauteng (381) again lead, compared to much lower scores in Limpopo (327) and the Eastern Cape (322). The disparity is even more pronounced here, with a 94-point difference between the highest- and lowest-performing provinces. Despite relatively better performance in more affluent provinces, even the top scores remain below internationally competitive levels. The evidence therefore points to a dual challenge: a generally underperforming national system alongside persistent and substantial provincial inequalities. For a visual breakdown and more detailed provincial comparisons, please (**see Chart in Appendix C: Figure B**).

Educational outcomes also differ by school socioeconomic status, reflecting inequality in the system. Data from Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study shows that learners in Quintile 5 schools scored an average of 470 in Mathematics, compared to 319 for those in Quintile 1 schools, a gap of about 100 points. Performance increases steadily across quintiles, showing a clear link between learner achievement, school resources, and community wealth.

[17] RESEP (2025)
[18] Department of Basic Education (2024: 3)

Gender gaps are evident but not large. In 2023, girls scored an average of 401 in Mathematics versus 393 for boys (8-point gap), and 370 in Science compared to 355 (15-point gap). No significant differences appeared in 2011 and 2015, but gaps in favour of girls emerged in 2019 and persist in 2023. This seems to be linked to a phenomenon that is increasingly in the public discourse – the falling behind of the boy child in education. It may be prudent to intervene before the situation becomes worse.

In terms of language, the outcomes are not any better. In 2021, 81% of South African Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language, up from 78% in 2016. This means most children are unable to understand basic texts. South Africa ranked last out of 43 countries in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessment and recorded the largest decline among all participants. This is particularly concerning given that the country wrote the assessment a year later than most others, which should have provided an advantage but clearly did not. This is partly attributed to the switch in the language of teaching from home language to English from grade 4. This is because many learners are expected to learn in a language that they do not have sufficient grounding in. Language is foundational, and without strong reading ability, progress to high grades and in other subjects will be affected adversely. Learners who cannot read for meaning will struggle to follow Mathematics problems or understand Science concepts, for example. Of particular importance is that these language limitations are carried into higher grades impacting on the ability of the youth to access quality education.

Educational outcomes also still mirror historical and racial inequalities. Africans and Coloureds show lower educational attained in both the 15-24 and the 25-34 age categories, while Indians/Asian and Whites should high educational attainment. To illustrate the point, only 6.8% African and 7.7% Coloureds aged between 25 and 34 years are graduates compared to Whites at 33.2% and Indians at 22.2%. The same pattern is apparent at all education levels. For detailed **see Appendix D: Figure A.**

To complicate the situation, there is currently no annual mechanism to assess the overall performance of the education system. Although the Annual National Assessment (ANA), which was suspended in 2015, had its flaws, it was a useful annual barometer for the state of learning especially at lower levels of the education system. The education system now relies on interval internal evaluation reports and on global studies to have a sense of its overall performance, which has its limitations.

Violence in schools

Violence in schools is another factor that militates against conducive learning environment. To illustrate the point, in schools that teachers described as “very safe and orderly” the average Mathematics achievement was 383 and an average Science was 338 in the TIMMS assessments. While performance of learners in schools identified as “less than safe and orderly” averaged 354 in Mathematics and 259 in Science. School violence cannot be isolated from societal context characterised by unemployment, poverty, and gangsterism. Protection and support mechanism for learners and teachers are currently not sufficient.

School infrastructure and Learner support materials

School infrastructure contribute to creating a conducive learning environment and by extension the quality of education and outcomes. For example, limited classroom space means big class sizes and high learner-teacher ratio, which has been proven to affect the quality of learning negatively. After the 2026 budget speech, the Minister of Basic Education indicated that there is a R120 Million infrastructure backlog in schools[19]. A 2024 South African Human Rights Commission report found that while the Department of Basic Education has made progress in dealing with water and sanitation backlogs in schools, a lot still need to be done to completely eliminate the challenges. An allocation of R16.3 billion to the Education Infrastructure Grant for safety, sanitation, overcrowding reduction and rural infrastructure in the 2026/7 DBE budget is an indication of the extent of the infrastructure backlog and safety concerns.

Although there are indications that many of the challenges raised in the above sections are being tackled, it is equally true that more still need to be done to prepare the youth for the challenges ahead. Even with these challenges, there are pockets of excellence and innovation in the public schooling system, which we can learn from. For example, there are several rural schools, like Mbilwi Secondary School that are among the top performing despite relatively disadvantaged situations.

Strengthening Career Development and School-to-Work Transitions

South Africa has made significant progress in expanding access to basic education, and increasing numbers of young people complete Grade 12 and enter post-school education and training. However, educational attainment does not always translate into clear career pathways or successful entry into the labour market. Many young people leave school without a clear understanding of the opportunities available to them, the skills required in the economy, or the pathways that can lead to employment and entrepreneurship.

Career guidance is provided through the Life Orientation curriculum and is intended to support learners in making informed decisions about subject choices, further study and future occupations. Despite this, many learners have limited exposure to the full range of opportunities available after school, including TVET colleges, apprenticeships, artisan development programmes, entrepreneurship and emerging occupations. Access to workplace exposure, mentorship and career development opportunities is also limited in many schools.

Strengthening career development support can improve school-to-work transitions and help young people make informed education and career decisions. This includes improving access to labour market information, strengthening links between schools and employers, and expanding opportunities for workplace exposure, mentorship and career planning. Psychometric and career assessment tools may be used to support learners in understanding their interests, strengths and career options. However, these tools should complement rather than replace broader career development interventions. Greater collaboration between schools, post-school institutions,

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SETAs, employers and youth development agencies can help equip young people with the knowledge, exposure and practical insights needed to navigate the labour market and participate more effectively in the economy. After completing schooling, learners follow different paths, among them is pursuing higher education.

Access to higher education

Currently, South African higher education institutions have limited capacity to accommodate all students who have passed matric. It is estimated that the public universities have a capacity of 235 000 for first year admission while about 245 00 learners qualify for university admission, and this excludes those who passed in previous years and only applied for university a year or more later. Universities subsidies from the government are not adequate for them to expand their infrastructure at a pace that can accommodate the growing population of students who qualify for university. The same applies to the expansion of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, which are even more underfunded than universities.

The limited infrastructure also affects student accommodation, where some of the students who have been admitted to study do not have a place to stay. This is not only unsafe, but causes distress and makes studying almost impossible. Although NSFAS has brought private accommodation providers on board, the challenge is still not fully solved. Shortage of student accommodation has resulted in non-compliant buildings and residential homes being used as student residents – e.g. no rezoning, no fire compliance, no approved building plans, etc. Such non-compliant student residences put students at risk. While the government has made its intention to build more universities and TVET colleges, the question is how is the immediate challenge of lack of spaces addressed while waiting for the new institutions. The challenge with lack of spaces include increasing chances that learners who are not able to get admission will likely be economically inactive as prospects of employment are very low. Lack of space make the students vulnerable – for example, some have been targets of scammers posing as legitimate and registered higher education learning institutions, causing students to lose thousands of rands in the process while also suffering mental distress.

Those with adequate resources have an option to attend private higher education institutions or even go to other countries to study. For the majority of poor students this means exclusion from higher education, which has long term economic and social implications. This also underscores the inequalities and how they affect access to education. In addition to limited physical access to higher education, there is also the challenge of epistemic access, which manifests through drop-out rates and failure rates. Barriers to epistemic access include various factors like institutional culture, language, resistance to decolonization of knowledge, and inadequate school preparation for higher education.

In terms of the higher education demographics, the 2024 GHS shows that about 11.2% of African and 14% of Coloured attend higher education institutions, compared to 43.2% of Indians and 27.9% of Whites. This indicates that Africans attending higher education institutions are below the national average of 12.8% with Coloureds just slightly above. Again these figures underscore the historical inequalities. Funding is another huddle that makes access to higher education difficult and even impossible for some.

Post school student funding

Access to higher education is further constrained by limited funding for the majority of poor students. After the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training (CIHET) in 2016, the government expanded the number of youths covered by the NSFAS in 2018, with all those whose household income is R350 000 and below qualifying for NSFAS financial assistance. In addition, NSFAS assist students with disabilities to buy assistive device to alleviate any barrier to their participation in higher learning. However, student funding remains a challenge especially for those whose household income is too high to qualify for NSFAS funding, but too low to afford higher education fees. In 2024, the DHET introduced a loan scheme for students whose household income is from R351 000 to R600 000, but it had challenges with limited resources and therefore its ability to deal with the "missing middle" challenge effectively is limited.

There are several problems in relation to NSFAS student funding:

- The R350 000 threshold to qualify for funding has not been revised since 2018 in line with the inflation and general rise in the cost of living as measured through the Consumer Price Index (CPI). This suggests that more and more poor students whose household income is more than R350 000 do not qualify for financial aid, whereas in real terms R350 000 in 2026 is much lower than it was in 2018.
- A blanket cut off at R350 000 has limitations and it is exclusionary compared to the use of a sliding scale as a funding model – to illustrate the point, a question can be asked: what is the material difference between a student whose household income is 350 000 and another with a household income of R355 000. If a sliding scale was used students from R351 000 and above could qualify for a percentage of financial support progressively until a set upper scale. While those above the maximum scale would have to pay their fees.
- NSFAS application and payment processes seem inefficient and ineffective. Student have reported undue delaying in the processing of their applications and payments, which in some cases resulted in student not being able to register. Another sign of inefficiency is that thousands of students who do not qualify but were reported to have receive assistance, while many qualifying students did not receive the financial support.

The allegations of massive corruption previously linked to NSFAS does not make the situation any better. Currently, the institution was placed under administration. To counter these challenges, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) should consider reviewing the funding model to a sliding scale and to build in inflation into the model. NSFAS should also consider looking into applications and payment processing efficiency and effectiveness.

Funding challenges also manifests through financial exclusions which often spark protests at the beginning of every academic year. Universities often resort to barring students with historical debts from continuing with their courses or withholding certificates from those who have completed their courses, but are owing fees. This adds to university drop-outs numbers and also makes it difficult for those whose certificates are withheld to secure employment. Starting their own viable businesses is also difficult because they often do not have start-up capital or in some cases basic business skills. Alternatives to university education include Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

Despite the fact that TVET is positioned as an alternative to university education and its essential role in addressing skills shortages, TVET colleges are still underfunded. This is despite extra investment by Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), which according to the DHET, have invested over R5 billion in TVET college infrastructure. Secondly, although the TVET system and colleges have been reconfigured to attempt to make them more attractive to learners, application patterns suggest that TVET colleges are still perceived as a second option. Thirdly, while access to TVET has improved for the majority of students, there are still challenges like access to internships which is required for completion of a TVET qualification. TVET institutions face constraints in engaging relevant industry partners, which limits available internship opportunities for students. As a result, students may experience delays in obtaining their qualifications and in accumulating the required practical work experience that could enhance their employability. Fourthly, the Quarterly Labour Force Surveys have consistently shown that TVET graduates are two times more likely to be unemployed than university graduates. For example, the 2026 first quarter figures show unemployment rate of 12.2% among university graduates and 22.2% among TVET graduates. And this pattern has been consistent over time. This adds to TVET being perceived as a less attractive option. These factors also contribute to the stigmatisation of TVET colleges as necessarily inferior to universities.

In responding to the challenges faced by students' lack industry opportunities, which affects the qualification rate, the Department of Higher Education has included industry partnerships in the performance agreements of TVET principals meaning that bringing partners who can offer internship opportunities is elevated and rewarded. The question now becomes whether that decision is being implemented and whether its success is being monitored. So far, there is limited evidence as to whether principals are bringing credible partners and if that has translated into increased internships and graduation of students.

The reference to dual-training model and stronger artisanal pathways in both the 2026 state of the nation address and the budget speech has potential to strengthen the TVET sector and address some of its challenges. For example, the dual-training model could address the limited internships challenge. However, more details need to be provided on the modalities of how the dual-training will be implemented.

Skills Development

Given the rapid change in skills requirements in the economy, skills development is no longer just about acquiring a qualification, it is also about lifelong learning. South Africa's skills shortage is driven by a set of structural factors that extend beyond the education system[20]:

- **Misalignment between education and labour market demand**: Graduates enter the labour market without the practical and technical competencies required by employers.
- **Technological change**: Automation, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms are altering skill requirements faster than curricula are updated.
- **Limited emphasis on vocational pathways**: Technical and service-oriented fields remain under-prioritised despite their role in employment creation.
- **Emigration of skilled professionals**: The outflow of experienced workers reduces the domestic skills base.
- **Unequal access to education**: Differences in the quality and relevance of education across regions constrain skill development, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

To respond to some of the challenges, corporates and professional bodies have an important role to equip graduates with the necessary practical skills. For example, the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) requires accredited auditing firms to place graduates on formal training contracts of at least three years. During this period, trainees rotate across departments, receive mentorship from experienced professionals, and undergo regular assessments. This structured approach builds practical competence and links academic training to professional practice. One of the issues that was raised in the Human Resource Submit convened in March 2026 by the Human Resources Development Council (HDRC) was the increasing necessity for short courses which is necessitate by the rapid change in technologies and the nature of skills required.

2.7.1 Key Issues Emerging from the Pillar for Implementation Consideration:

- While ECD has now been placed at the centre of basic education, the available resources are not sufficient
- While access to basic education has improved considerably, it is still unequal and characterised by disparities in outcomes
- Drop-out rates, which are influenced by multiple factors, are still a persistent challenge
- Indirect costs of education can be a barrier to accessing education for youth from poor households
- Grade repetition is still a challenge and it is linked to dropping out of school with surveyed learners indicating that one of the reasons for dropping out of school is poor performance
- Better access to basic education is diluted by outcomes that still have room for improvement – especially when judge based on international assessments
- School infrastructure backlog is still a challenge

[20] Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) (2025)

- Many schools are still plagued by violence, which undermines conducive learning environment
- Equip learners to make informed career decisions
- Improve transitions from education to economic participation
- The higher education sector has limited capacity to absorb all students who have completed matric – and there seems to be no immediate plan to address this.
- The NSFAS run loan scheme to address the 'missing middle' has made limited impact
- Not factoring CPI and not using a sliding scale makes the NSFAS funding model exclusionary and its application processing is not as efficient and effective as it could be
- TVET colleges are underfunded and students still perceive them as second choice
- Unemployment statistics show that TVET graduates are two times more likely to be unemployed compared to university graduate – this could dissuade potential students from applying for TVET as a first choice
- What will the move to dual-training mean in practice?
- Access to both basic and higher education is unequal and reflect historical injustices
- The rapid changes in skills requirements points more to the need for lifelong learning underpinned by short causes

2.8 Pillar 2: Priority Challenges Affecting Economic Transformation, Entrepreneurship, and Job Creation

Youth participation in the economy is more than just about individual material gain, it is also about dignity, preventing social ills, and about national security. Economic participation also provides a platform for young people to contribute to society through their abilities, labour, ideas, and innovation. It is also a revenue gain for the government and it also means less dependency on the state by the participating youth. In fact, this is what benefiting from demographic dividend is about. Despite all these potential gains, youth economic participation is still limited and skewed. At the heart of limited youth economic participation is the slow growth of the economy limiting the number of employment opportunities created, and limiting the aggregate demand for goods and services from small and medium businesses. Recognising the central role of economic growth in creating opportunities, the government has expressed through the MTDP that all state organs and sectors should prioritise interventions to stimulate more rapid and inclusive growth[21]. Whilst the NDP projected that to reduce unemployment to 6% by 2030, an average of 5.4% annual growth rate is required, the economy has been growing at less than 2% on average in the last five years. With increasing population, slow growth also means decline in per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Slow economic growth is compounded by high debt-servicing costs, which divert resources away from social spending and public investment. The National Treasury projects a 1.6 per cent real economic growth in 2026, which though it would be an improvement on the 2025 growth of 1.1 percent, is still modest

[21] Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (2024: 25)

relative to the NDP target and the challenges the country is facing. And the medium term prospects are also not promising judging by the Minister of Finance's prediction during the 2026 Budget Speech that over the medium term, growth is expected to average 1.8 per cent, reaching 2 per cent by 2028.[22] Given the current global developments like the United States (US) tariffs and the war in the middle East, the prospect of a substantial growth are even dimmer. And one of the consequences of low performance of the economy and gloomy economic prospects is that unemployment has been hovering around 32% in the last five years and it does not show any signs of massive decline.

Economic transformation

Youth economic participation is not only minimised by slow and low economic growth, but it is also influenced by the challenges pertaining to economic transformation. The South African economy is still dominated by large corporations and sometimes they have used this domination to collude against small players, for example, the Competition Commission has dealt with a number of cases where big companies have fixed prices to squeeze out small players (of which the majority of youth business are). Now these corporations are flooding township and rural markets making it difficult for small business to compete. A good example is the entrance of big retailers into the market that was historically served by small businesses, particularly spaza shops. Whilst it is the constitutional right of businesses to operate anywhere in the country, the state needs to find ways to assist small businesses to stay in business in the light of fierce and sometimes unfair competition. This would be in line with one of the objectives of the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and Co-operatives Funding Policy, which is to reduce the level of concentration or monopolies in certain sectors of the economy, and transform the ownership patterns of the economy[23]. This will be beneficial to everyone in the long-run.

The competition extends to doing business with the state. Youth businesses which are often small and with no financial reserves have to compete for state business with established businesses and institutions like universities while struggling with cash flow. These established businesses and institutions command far greater resources than youth businesses. This enables these big players to mobilise institutional resources that enable them to bid for state business at way lower prices than youth businesses. In essence is institutions are subsidised. If not treated with caution, this may defeat one of the constitutional imperative, which is to use procurement as a redress mechanism. In many cases even the preferential procurement points cannot off-set this competitive advantage. While a case has been made for set-asides to support small businesses, especially if owned by historically marginalised groups like youth, women, and people with disabilities, there is still room for improvement in their implementation. Perhaps state organs should report on their progress on the amount of business they set aside for youth and other marginalised businesses.

[22] National Treasury (2026: 3)

[23] Department of Small Business Development (2025: 10)

Youth participation in the economy, particularly in business, has also been historically skewed against rural and township populations. This is largely attributed to limited infrastructure, limited access to economic opportunities and to some extent to limited reach by the government. It is therefore important to frame the strategy such that it intentionally respond to this gap. Therefore, increasing the inclusion of rural and township youth in the mainstream economy is another important element of economic transformation. Studies suggest that compared to youth in privileged areas, these youths have limited opportunities to actively engage the economy at the national level, more so with rural youth. Strengthening local economic development through municipalities could go a long way in responding to this. This should be coupled with tangible support like access to finances for business purposes, skills development (especially on running a business), and improving access to relevant economic information and markets.

Available data on economic ownership shows slow change over time. The B-BBEE Commission National Status and Trends Report indicates that black ownership was 29.5% (2021 reporting cycle), down from 31% in 2020. This is the latest consolidated national estimate in the public domain. Sector data shows lower levels in parts of the economy, including around 17% in agriculture and financial services. The management control element reports higher levels of black representation, at about 51.6%, but representation declines at senior and executive levels where key decisions are made. For young people, this suggests some opening into management roles, but access to ownership and senior decision-making remains limited, and this progress is from a low base shaped by past exclusion.

The limited transformation in senior management is also corroborated by the Commission for Employment Equity (CEE). The Commission's 2023/24 report shows that white individuals hold 62.1% of top management positions, while African individuals account for 17.7%, despite making up the majority of the economically active population. This pattern is also reflected at senior management level, where whites hold 41.8% of positions, compared to 35.8% for Africans. These figures show that control over decision-making in the economy is concentrated within a relatively small segment of the population.

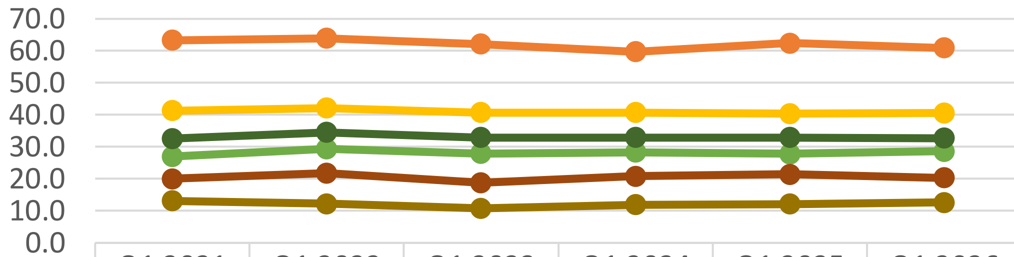
For young people, this structure limits progression into leadership roles and access to positions where key economic decisions are made. Advancement depends on access to opportunities, networks, and promotion pathways that are shaped by those already in leadership. As a result, many young people, particularly black youth who constitute the majority, are more likely to remain in lower-level positions with limited influence over economic activity.

Youth Participation in the labour market

The NDP had set a target to reduce unemployment rate to 6% by 2030. However, unemployment has been on the increase instead of decreasing. Unemployment increased from 25.4% in 2012 to 32.7% in 2026. Young people are the most affected by unemployment. In the last ten years, youth employment has declined by about 520,000 jobs despite the small economic growth – this means that about 8% of youth employment has been lost. Indications are that the 6% unemployment rate target is not only likely to be missed, but that it will be missed by a big margin unless drastic measures to deal with unemployment are taken between now and 2030. In economic terms, this is a very short time. A new target of 28% unemployment by 2029 is proposed in the MTDP (2024-2029), which is an admission that the 6% target will not be reached by 2030. The changing nature of work is further complicating the situation with increased automation and traditional jobs increasingly being replaced by automation, digital technologies, and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Participation in the labour market is a major vehicle through which young people access economic opportunities followed by entrepreneurship. In 2025, for example, salaries constituted 54.3% of the total households' income while for youth-headed households salaries made 59.4% of household income. This makes employment the biggest source of households income. However, the ability of the economy to absorb labour has been declining which is compounded by the increasing population of new labour market entrants. The 2026 first quarter figures show an increase in unemployment to 32.7% from 31.4% in the fourth quarter of 2025 – representing a 1.3% increase. This means that there are about 345 thousand fewer people employed or 301 000 more unemployed in Q1:2026 than in Q4:2025. Even more concerning is that long-term unemployment has risen to 75.5%. The longer one is unemployed, the more unlikely that they will find employment because when unemployed they lose opportunity to acquire experience and practical skills.

For the youth this translates into an increase in unemployment from 3,7 million in quarter 1 of 2016 to 4,7 million in quarter 1 of 2026. **Figure 5** below shows official unemployment by age groups from 2021 to 2026 using first quarter labour force surveys data. The data indicates that unemployment rate has not improved substantially over the past five years. If anything, it seems to be constant rather than decrease or increase (as illustrate by the relatively flat curves in the chart). The only substantial decrease is visible between 2022 and 2023, which could largely be attributed to jobs recovery post Covid19. Unemployment is highest for youth age 15-24 years followed by those aged 25-34 years. In the first quarter of 2026, the unemployment rates were 60.9% for those aged 15–24 years and 40.6% for those aged 25–34 years. Both these categories (15-34 years) are above the national unemployment average of 32.7%, with the two youth categories averaging 45.8% unemployment rate while those aged 35 to 64 years show unemployment rates way below the national average at 23.4%. Unemployment data has consistently showed the lowest unemployment rate for those aged between 55 and 64 years, followed by those aged 45-54, and then 35-44 years. Whilst unemployment rates are high across all population groups, the data shows that it is consistently and much higher among the young people.



	Q1 2021	Q1 2022	Q1 2023	Q1 2024	Q1 2025	Q1 2026
15-24Yrs	63.3	63.9	62.1	59.7	62.4	60.9
25-34Yrs	41.3	42.1	40.7	40.7	40.4	40.6
35-44Yrs	27.0	29.4	27.9	28.3	27.8	28.6
45-54Yrs	20.0	21.8	18.8	20.8	21.4	20.3
55-64Yrs	13.1	12.2	10.8	11.9	12.1	12.6
SA (15-64Yrs)	32.6	34.5	32.9	32.9	32.9	32.7

Figure 5: Unemployment trends by age (2021-2026)

Source: Stats SA QRLF Surveys Trends 2021-2026 (Quarter 1 data)

Youth labour market outcomes differ markedly across provinces, pointing to significant differences in access to employment opportunities. In the first quarter of 2026, youth unemployment (15–34 years) in the Eastern Cape (56.2%), Free State and North West (both 53.1%) was notably higher than the national average of 48.5%. Gauteng also recorded youth unemployment close to the national level (47.4%), despite relatively high labour force participation, suggesting that many young people are actively seeking work but remain unemployed. By contrast, the Western Cape recorded substantially lower youth unemployment (28.7%) and the highest labour force participation rate, indicating stronger labour market absorption. **For a detailed provincial breakdown, see Appendix E.**

Unemployment figures also reflect the racialised and genderised nature of access to opportunities in the South African society, with African women (40.5% compared to national average for women unemployment rate of 36.4%) more likely to be unemployed than any other population group. Nationally 36.4% women are unemployed compared to 29.6% of men. African and Coloured youths are more likely to struggle to find employment compared to Whites and Indians. Unemployment rate among African has been consistently above national average. The 2026 first quarter Labour Force Survey shows that it was the highest at 36.4% followed by Coloureds at 23.9%. While the unemployment rate among Indians and Whites were substantially lower at 13.6% and 9.2% respectively.

Furthermore, the Quarterly Labour Force surveys showed over time that those with a Matric qualification or less than Matric qualification are most vulnerable to unemployment. In the first quarter of 2026 those with Matric were at an unemployment rate of 35.7% and those with less than matric at 37.6% unemployment rate – both way above the national average of 32.7%. This is as compared to graduates at an unemployment rate of 12.2% and those with other tertiary qualifications at 22.2% unemployment rate (for level unemployment by education trends see **Appendix F**). This pattern has been consistent over time, confirming that education is an important factor in finding employment. In addition, the level of education affected income with Statistics South Africa's 2025 Income and Expenditure of Households survey (IES) report showing that households headed by a person with a tertiary qualification earned an average annual income of R577 415 compared households headed by a person without schooling at an average of R84 185.

Juxtaposing the unemployment rate, the labour absorption rate and the labour participation rate provides a better understanding of the labour market as it gives an overall picture. **Figure 6** below shows unemployment rate, labour absorption rate, and labour participation rate by age using the 2026 first quarter Labour Force Survey data. The data in the chart shows that although labour participation rate is the second highest for the youth aged 25-34 years, the labour absorption rate is low at 42.8 % compared to the age groups 35-44 years and 45-54 years at 55.4% and 57.7% respectively. The labour absorption rate is lowest for those aged 15-24 years. In simple terms the pictures painted in the chart means that those aged 35-44 and those aged 45-54 are more likely to be absorbed as employees in the economic than those aged 25-34 years and those aged 15-24 years. Even more simpler, it means that while 72% of those aged 25-34 years are participating in the labour market, the economy is only able to absorb 42.8% of them, meaning that of the 72% about 40.6% are unemployed. This is not because the young people aged 25-34 years are not actively looking for a job as evidenced by their high participation rate of 72%.

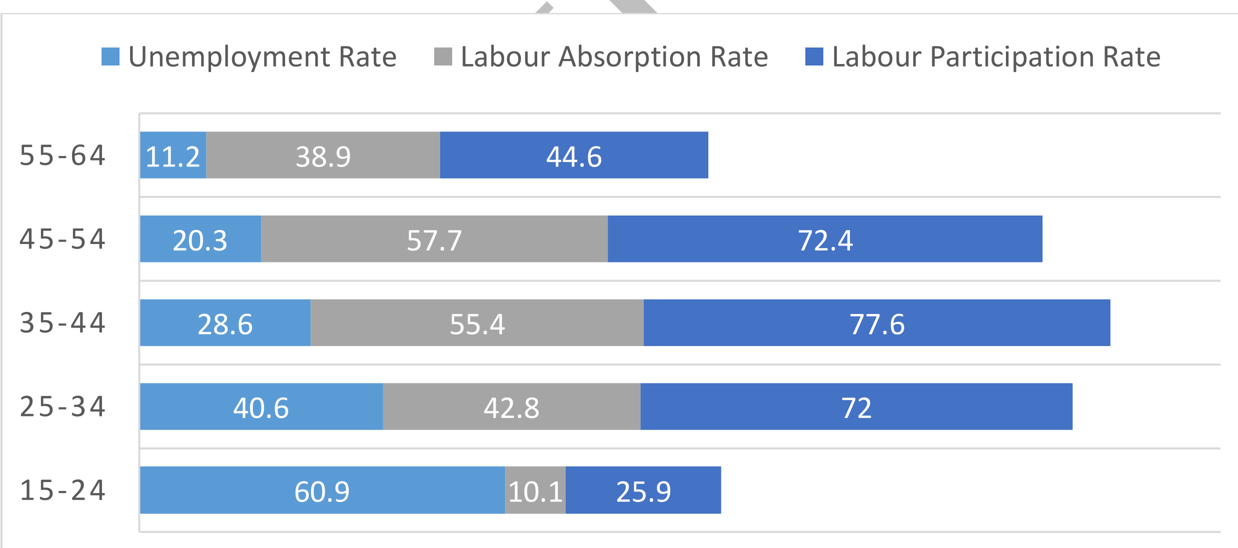


Figure 6: Unemployment rate, labour absorption rate, and labour participation rate by age (1th quarter 2026)

Source: 2026 Quarterly Labour Force Survey quarter 1 data

The overall picture presented above is that young people are less likely to find employment compared to those aged 35 and older. While unemployment is high among both young men and young women, it tends to be slightly higher for young women. Unemployment should not be seen merely as an inability for affected individuals to earn an income; it has broader implications. These include potential social instability, reduced prospects of future employment, diminished productivity due to a lack of experience and skills, and adverse effects on mental health. According the OECD one of the factors that increases the acuteness of unemployment in South Africa is that the informal sector is smaller than those of comparable economies, limiting alternative avenues for economic participation[24].

Furthermore, the 2026 first quarter Labour force Survey found that about 37.6% (about 3.9 million) of the 10.3 Million youth aged 15–24 years were not in employment, education or training (NEET). This represents a 3.6% increase in the percentage of NEET in quarter 1 of 2026 from 34% in quarter 4 of 2025. Gender disparities are also apparent with data showing that 39.2% of young women are NEET compared to 36% of young men. The youth who are NEET are more vulnerable to economic and social exclusion. These youths are also not gaining any skills or experience that will improve their economic chances in future. Instead, they are likely to fall to the temptation of being involved in crime or to experiment with harmful substances. In many cases, some of these youth are homeless.

The proportion of young people aged 15–24 who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) has remained persistently high, indicating limited movement despite ongoing interventions. Nationally, over one-third of young people aged 15–24 remained outside employment, education, or training throughout the 2022–2026 period, with little movement in the overall rate. Provincial differences are more pronounced. In 2026, the Northern Cape recorded the highest NEET rate (44.5%), followed by the North West (39.7%), while Limpopo (31.7%) and the Western Cape (29.3%) recorded the lowest rates, although the levels remain high. The persistence of these figures suggests that current interventions are not yet shifting NEET levels at the scale required to make an impact, raising questions about the reach, targeting, and effectiveness of existing measures aimed at supporting young people into education, training, and employment. For trend analysis and detailed provincial data, **see Appendix F**. One of the DWYP's 2026/27 priorities is to confront youth unemployment and vulnerability, among those not in education, employment or training (NEET). Perhaps this is worth monitoring.

Presidential Youth Employment Intervention

In light of the unemployment challenges, the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI) was established to complement other initiatives to deal with unemployment. The PYEI, which is made up of multiple stakeholder was launched in 2020 with the objective of dealing with youth unemployment in a comprehensive way through facilitating youth transitioning from learning to employment. The Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI) is coordinated through a Project Management Office (PMO) in the Presidency, bringing together government, the private sector, social partners, technical experts, and young people. Its location within the Presidency

[24] OECD (2025a)

strengthens coordination and convening authority. While implementation is driven by relevant departments, the PMO provides strategic oversight, resolves implementation constraints, mobilises support and funding, and strengthens collaboration across and beyond government.

The PYEI operates alongside other national initiatives aimed at unlocking job creation and addressing structural constraints, including Operation Vulindlela and the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES). Through this arrangement, the PES finances several elements of the PYEI and creates public employment opportunities for young people. The PYEI, through the National Pathway Management Network (NPMN), complements this by connecting young people to those opportunities and supporting the rollout of PES interventions. Among the objects of PYEI are coordinating, accelerating and enhancing existing programmes and unblocking pathways to employment rather than replacing the multiple interventions aimed at increasing job opportunities. Its specific objectives are to:

- Drive systems change to address the barriers that young people face in establishing themselves in the labour market
- Aggregate existing opportunities and create new opportunities for young people
- Link young people to opportunities and available support in a single national network

The PYEI consists of the following elements:

- Demand-led skills development
- Enabling local ecosystems to facilitate self-employment and enterprise opportunities
- The revitalisation of the National Youth Service (NYS)

Youth participation in business

Entrepreneurship plays a critical role in economic development of many nations including South Africa. With slow economic growth and the unrelenting unemployment, entrepreneurship is seen as a potential area to lead economic growth and generate more jobs. It is estimated that there are 1.6 million Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in South Africa, which constitute about 92% of formal business and creating about 62% of all the jobs in the country. Furthermore, the NDP envisages that SMEs will contribute 90% (about 9.9 million) of the targeted 11 million jobs by 2030. According to the 2024 Annual financial statistics (AFS), of the R15.7 trillion turn over in 2024, small businesses contributed 23% (about R3.6 trillion) while medium businesses contributed 9% (about 1.4 trillion). The future of sustainable job creation in South Africa rests not merely on encouraging new business formation, but on ensuring that emerging enterprises are able to stabilise, scale up, and remain viable over time. However, entrepreneurship space is also plagued by many challenges including business failure, limited access to funding, limited access to markets, and strong competition from established businesses.

Funding for small business has always been a challenge with many business initiatives failing along the way or failing to even take off because of funding. Access to funding is limited by requirements to qualify for funding, which include credit-worthiness and/or collateral in some cases. According Small Enterprise Development and Finance Agency (SEDFA) about 50% of owners of businesses with a turnover of below 1 Million carry poor credit scores. Among the interventions to mitigate this challenge, is the establishment of Khula Credit Guarantee (KCG) Scheme, which is designed to improve access to finance for small businesses that are unable to meet the collateral requirements of traditional lenders. Instead of lending directly, the scheme provides partial guarantees to financial institutions, reducing their risk and encouraging them to extend credit to emerging enterprises. For youth-owned businesses, this mechanism is particularly important because young entrepreneurs often lack assets, credit history or established track records. By lowering these barriers, the KCG scheme can enable greater participation in economic activities, support business start-up and expansion, and strengthen pathways into formal enterprise development. Furthermore, it is estimated that about 70% of microenterprises are informal, which further constrain access to funding and business opportunity.

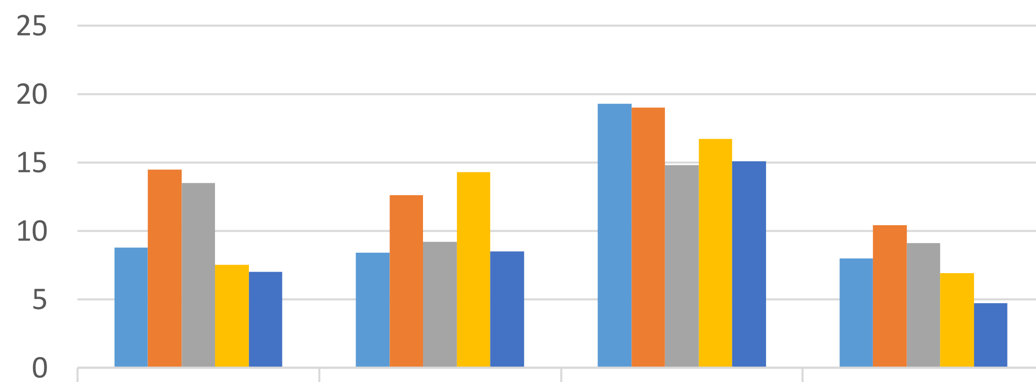
To improve access to funding and the volume of funding, in 2024 the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA), the Small Enterprise Finance Agency (SEFA), and the Co-operative Banks Development Agency (CBDA) were merged to form SEDFA. This merger was also intended to reduce duplication and to consolidate financial and non-financial support into one unitary organisation. The strategic objective was to ensure survival of small and medium enterprises through providing pre-investment and post-investment support. The merger was made possible through the National Small Enterprise Amendment Act 21 of 2024. It is still too early to measure the impact of this consolidation, but theoretically it sounds solid and prudent. In the financial year 2024/25 SEDFA provided financial support to 165 068 MSMEs and co-operatives, and non-financial support to 74 546 enterprises. Of the R3.3 billion that was disbursed by SEDFA to MSMEs in 2024, R552 Million (about 17%) went to youth businesses while 1.6 Billion (about 33%) went to women businesses[25].

Accessing markets has also proven difficult for small businesses partly because most of them have not developed a reputation for big contractors to have confidence in them. Even the government require evidence like reference letters before they can entrust their business with small businesses. This is also akin to the demand for experience before young people can get into employment. The key issue is what can be done to support small business (of which the majority of youth business are) to reach a level where they have built reputation that will enable them to access business opportunities. This also links to the earlier reference to set-asides, which even though provided for legally, have not had a major impact. Set-asides must be coupled with other support mechanism, like training and encouraging subcontracting. For example, established businesses could be incentivised to support small business through, including training and subcontracting as part of the criteria to access government business.

[25] Department of Small Business Development (2025)

Small businesses also do not have the financial muscle to undertake some projects without any upfront payment – some state organs pay service providers upon delivery or completion of a project. These businesses often have cash flow challenges. This means that small businesses are unlikely to bid for projects that require substantial capital outlay, and for small business this could even mean as little as R50 000. Tranche payment has proven to be an alternative to supporting small businesses in countries like Kenya and India.

Taking initiative to start a business is an important indicator of youth appetite to participate in business. **Figure 7** below shows that while Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA), which is the proportion of the adult population who are either starting or running a new business[26], has been on the rise since 2017, it has dropped considerably between 2021 and 2022 (possibly because of Covid19). The more recent data is not available given that GEM surveys tend to rotate globally. Given the high level of youth unemployment this drop in the number of people starting or running a new business is not a good indication. However, the likelihood is that it has increased judging by sustained increase until Covid19. On the positive side, it is a good sign that the highest level of TEA is in the age group 25-34 years. It is an indication that young people are willing to engage in entrepreneurship and what is needed is to support them by mitigating and eliminating obstacles, and by providing any necessary resources.



	2017	2019	2021	2022
18-24 Yrs	8.8	8.4	19.3	8
25-34 Yrs	14.5	12.6	19	10.4
35-44 Yrs	13.5	9.2	14.8	9.1
45-54 Yrs	7.5	14.3	16.7	6.9
55-64 Yrs	7	8.5	15.1	4.7

Figure 7: Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity percentage by age in South Africa (2022)
Source: Bowmaker-Falconer, A., Meyer, N. and Samsami, M. 2023. Entrepreneurial Resilience during Economic Turbulence 2022/2023

[26] Bowmaker-Falconer, A., Meyer, N. and Samsami, (M. 2023: 2)

To encourage the youth and others to participate in business, the Presidency has initiated a programme to cut or eliminate all factors that make it difficult for business to operate and to access business opportunities. According to an advisory note by the National Planning Commission (NPC) red tape reduction should include lowering regulatory burdens, streamlining administrative processes, and reducing the costs of doing business in key sectors. The Department of Small Business Development (DSBD), the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) have also initiated actions to reduce red tape. While this programme has not been officially evaluated, it is a positive initiative. One of the outcomes of attempting to make the environment easy for doing business is the introduction of draft Business Licensing Bill in 2025. The president also indicated in the State of the Nation Address (SONA) 2026 that to increase access to funding the government intends to amend the National Credit Act regulations to make it easier to access credit at a lower cost.

The overall picture painted above is that the current economic trajectory, which to a large extent does not include the youth, is unsustainable in the long run. To respond to the situation, the following emerging issues should be considered in the implementation plan.

2.8.1 Key Issues Emerging from the Pillar for Implementation Consideration:

- Increased inclusive economic growth is urgently required to deal with some of the challenges
- The South African economy is still concentrated and monopolistic in many case, making it difficult for small business to compete
- Ownership and executive management of businesses is still concentrated in one racial group
- Unemployment is still a big challenge in the country with youth unemployment being the highest and show no signs of declining
- In addition to age, race and gender are signifiers of unemployment
- One's level of education has a bearing on employment chances – with those with higher qualifications more likely to find employment and to have higher household income than those with lower qualifications or without education
- The NEET population is still too huge and the government interventions do not seem to make a considerable dent to address the challenge. Why is the percentage of those who are NEET not declining significantly?
- Accessing funding and business opportunities are still major barriers to youth enterprises
- Despite preferential procurement policy provisions, youth businesses face big competition from established business, small businesses are unlikely to win because of their limited resources – this extend even to state business, which is supposed to deal with transformation

- The set-aside regime has not had a huge impact – suggesting that the modalities and implementation need to be revisited and monitored
- In terms of government procurement policies, youth businesses face challenges of delivering without tranche payments or some kind of upfront payment – which may discourage them to bid for business
- Using TEA as an indicator, it seems the percentage of youth starting or intending to start a business is on the decline – however, this must be interpreted with caution as the latest figures are not available
- Reduction of red tape has potential to facilitate an increase in youth businesses if the youth take advantage
- Minimising barriers to business as pursued by the presidency is important – the youth sector can take this opportunity to lobby and advocate for the elimination of specific barriers impacting on the youth

2.9 Pillar 3: Priority Challenges Affecting Physical/Mental Health and Response to Pandemics

The quality of human life and any human activity are most possible with good health without which everything else become difficult and limiting. So youth health and wellness is by no means a secondary issue. Ill-health does not only affect the quality of life, it also affects productivity. Many of the health challenges facing humanity today are lifestyle related, which suggest that active investment in prevention should be a key driving motivation for health and wellbeing interventions. Prioritising treatment as the main intervention is not only costly, but often treatment might come too late.

Access to healthcare remains a significant challenge for many South African households. According to Household Expenditure on Health in South Africa, households spent R31.5 billion out of pocket on healthcare, with the largest share directed towards medicines, health products, and outpatient services. This expenditure places additional financial pressure on families and may limit young people's access to essential healthcare services, particularly in low-income households. An Integrated Youth Development Strategy should therefore prioritise affordable and accessible health services, including preventive care, mental health support, sexual and reproductive health services, and access to medicines, to reduce the burden on households and improve youth wellbeing.

Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights

The Sexual reproductive health choices that the youth often make are shaped by structural constraints, which minimises the youths' agency. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRH&R) are reflected in access to health services, the timing of first pregnancy, and the ability of young people to make informed reproductive decisions. In South Africa, access is largely through the public health system, which serves the majority of the population. Access to healthcare remains limited. The 2025 General Household Survey (GHS) shows that only 15.5% of individuals are covered by a medical aid scheme and that the age group 20-24 is the least covered, which means that many young people depend on public health facilities for sexual reproductive health and other health services.

Early pregnancy is one of the indicators of access and use of these services. The GHS 2025 reports that 3.0% of females aged 14–19 were pregnant in the 12 months preceding the survey. This is a decline from 4.9% recorded in GHS 2022, representing a reduction of 1.9 percentage points over this period. Pregnancy rate increases with age within this group. In 2025, it rises from 0.3% at age 14 to 7.1% at age 19. This indicates that early childbearing is concentrated among older teenagers. Birth registration data provides scale. In 2023, approximately 100,000 births were registered to mothers aged 19 and younger. This aligns with earlier administrative data showing annual births to this age group consistently exceeding 100,000. The decline from 4.9% in teenage pregnancies in 2022 to 3.0% in 2025 shows measurable progress. However, the concentration of pregnancy among older teenagers and the annual number of births to mothers under 20 indicate that early childbearing remains widespread. There is also a link to schooling. The GHS 2025 shows that 8.4% of females who left school cited family commitments as the main reason, compared to 0% of males. This partly reflects the effect of caregiving responsibilities associated with early motherhood. Furthermore, some schools use pregnancy to deny learners the right to education, despite policies prohibiting exclusion on the basis of pregnancy. Limited access to contraceptive is also a contributor to early pregnancy.

Limited access to contraceptives means that many women end up relying on termination of pregnancy instead. Termination of pregnancy is a legally protected component of sexual and reproductive health and rights in South Africa. However, reliable national data is limited. Available figures are not consistently published and are not disaggregated by age, which makes it difficult to assess patterns among adolescents and young women. Access to services is affected by delays in recognising pregnancy, uncertainty about where to seek care, and fear of stigma. These factors contribute to late presentation at health facilities and, in some cases, failure to access services within the formal health system. This push many young women to seek illegal termination.

Unsafe or illegal termination remains a risk. Some women turn to unregistered providers or attempt to end pregnancies outside the health system, which can result in severe infection, heavy bleeding, long-term reproductive harm, or death. Decisions around termination are often influenced by partners, including the father of the pregnancy, particularly through pressure or the withdrawal of support. Where decisions are made under pressure or without support, women may experience anxiety and distress. When termination is accessed early and performed within the health system, the risk of long-term physical complications is low. The main risks arise where access is delayed or where unsafe methods are used. Although counselling is provided, the potential long-term mental effect cannot be underestimated, especially for teenagers. The DWYP's currently working on the national strategy against teenage pregnancies, which should address some of these issues.

HIV Prevalence, Prevention and Treatment

The 2025 Mid-Year Population Estimates approximate that HIV prevalence among youth aged 15–24 has declined to about 6.84%, reflecting a longer-term downward trend. This is consistent with the 2022 SABSSM VI findings, which show a prevalence of 5.2% among 15–24-year-olds, down from 7.8% in 2017, confirming a sustained reduction in new infections among younger cohorts. However, both data sources show a clear sex differential. In 2022, HIV prevalence among females was 16.4% compared to 8.8% among males overall, with differences more pronounced in younger age groups. Among those aged 15–19, prevalence was 5.7% for females compared to 3.1% for males, while among those aged 20–24, it was 8.0% for females and 4.0% for males. For detailed prevalence rates by age and sex, and for the 2025 midyear estimates **see Appendix H**. Furthermore, the 2022 mortality figures show that considerably more young women than young men aged 15-34 years die from communicable diseases (not necessarily only HIV related) – for example in the age category 25-29 years death from communicable diseases are at 51.6% for females compared to 22.6% for males.

The higher vulnerability to HIV among adolescent girls and young women is associated with conditions that influence both exposure and risk. These include gender inequalities, relationships with older partners, experiences of gender-based violence, lower levels of education, and limited access to appropriate sexual and reproductive health services. Stigma and discrimination further restrict access to information, testing, and care. Together, these factors increase the likelihood of HIV exposure and reduce the ability to take preventive action.

Progress in treatment and viral suppression has been substantial, but shows differences across age and sex. The SABSSM VI shows that 80.9% of people living with HIV were on anti-retroviral treatment (ART) in 2022, up from 63.7% in 2017. Viral load suppression reached 81% overall among those aged 15 years and older. However, suppression remains lower among the youth, at 70% for those aged 15–24, and lower among young men (79%) compared to young women (83%). This gap is linked to lower treatment uptake among younger cohorts, where ART coverage among 15–24-year-olds was 63.2% in 2022, significantly below that of older age groups.

The usage of condoms for prevention remains limited. The 2022 SABSSM VI shows that condom use at last sexual encounter was reported by 38.5% of males, down from 40.9% in 2017, and 33.7% of females, down from 35.7% in 2017. This indicates that a large proportion of sexually active individuals continue to have unprotected sex. The survey identifies low condom use as a direct contributor to ongoing HIV transmission. Another factor that contribute to the spread of HIV is the sharing of needle among those using drugs. Male circumcision has expanded as a prevention measure. By 2022, approximately half of males aged 15–24 were medically circumcised, up from 43% in 2017. This is significant, as evidence shows that circumcision reduces the risk of female-to-male HIV transmission by about 60%. Despite this progress, important gaps remain in prevention, treatment uptake, and viral suppression. Young women are more likely to acquire new HIV infections, while young men on antiretroviral treatment have lower levels of viral load suppression, reflecting challenges with adherence and retention in care.

Scientific advances continue to create new opportunities to reduce HIV infections among young people. The introduction of long-acting injectable lenacapavir adds an important prevention option to South Africa's HIV response and demonstrates the value of continued investment in research and innovation. While existing interventions such as HIV testing, condom use, voluntary medical male circumcision and PrEP remain critical, new prevention technologies can strengthen combination prevention efforts and help reach populations that may not benefit fully from existing approaches. As these innovations become available, priority should be given to ensuring that young people are informed about and able to access the full range of HIV prevention services.

Youth and Mental Health

In an increasingly stressful and precarious world we live in, mental health seems to be emerging as a serious health challenge. Yet, the 2024 Mental Health Situational Analysis: South Africa found that mental health was not given enough attention – with only 5% of the national budget allocated to mental health. The disproportionate experience of economic and social pressures by young people makes their mental health even more precarious. A global survey by the UNDP shows that young people were the most affected by mental challenges. It shows that young people aged 18 to 24 years have the lowest mental health quotient, which is a measure of mental wellness. The next group with the lowest mental health quotient is those aged 25 to 34 years. According to the survey, the sub-Saharan youth were the most affected compared to all other regions of the world. Among other contributing factors, the survey has linked the low metal quotient among the youth to digital technologies. This is possibly because digital technologies limit human interaction. Limited social connections and interactions were found to increase the risk for poor mental health by the 2025 World Health Organisation (WHO) report, which is corroborated by other studies[27]. Encouraging social connections is therefore recommended as one of the interventions for long-term positive mental health. Stats SA's 2022 adolescent health report indicates that approximately 20% of South African teenagers are estimated to experience a mental health disorder, including both diagnosed and undiagnosed conditions. According to South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) about 65% of the youth aged 15-24 years in South Africa reported that they felt anxious and depressed and about 30% indicated that they have considered suicide. One of the areas of concern on youth mental health is the issue of stigmatisation of those with mental health challenges, especially in school. Stigmatisation could make affected individuals to avoid seeking help in publicly available services and/or exacerbate their mental health condition. Department of Health' 2023-2030 mental health strategy indicates that mental disorders are also the leading cause of years lived with disability.

[27] Holt-Lunstad J. 2024

Youth and substance abuse

Substance abuse among young people remain one of the stubborn challenges in youth development. The key challenge with substance abuse is that it is not only destructive to the lives of young people, but it also contributes to economic insecurity, crime, accidents and violence. For example, alcohol abuse is linked to just over 58% of road fatalities. Typically, people who used illicit drugs in developing regions are concentrated in youth and young adults aged 15–44 years. Collecting statistics has always been a problem as the use of drugs (especially elicit ones) is by itself a hidden activity, so treatment data provide an alternative indicator. According to the South Africa National Drug Master Plan reports / CDA Annual Report (2023/24), about 70% of people in drug treatment are aged 15–34. To combat substance abuse, the Central Drug Authority (CDA) was created with a mandate to implement the National Drug Master Plan (NDMP), which is a strategy to reduce the demand for harmful substances and to reduce the harm caused by the supply of substances. Established by the Prevention for and Treatment of Substance Abuse Act, no.70 of 2008., one of CDA's responsibility is to 'ensure that each department of state has its own performance indicators' to deal with substance abuse. This means that substance abuse is collective responsibility of all government departments.

Collective and integrated approach to combating substance abuse is necessary as drug abuse impact on all aspects of youth development. For example, the sharing of needles for drug use contributes to the fueling of the epidemics of HIV and viral hepatitis[28]. Another area of substance abuse that is least highlighted according the South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (SANCA), yet it has taken many lives, is drug overdose. While SANCA has done awareness about over dosage, including dedicating every August to this issue, many young people are still not aware of the dangers and symptoms of over dosage. Knowing the symptoms could save many lives.

According to the Central Drug Authority, South Africa is one of the countries that are most targeted as a transit and destination of illicit drugs. This makes it easy to supply illicit drugs in the country thereby making it one of the factors fueling drug abuse. Part of fighting this problem should therefore include intensifying the fight against facilitators of illicit drug inflow into the country. Even more concerning is that judging by media reports young people in South Africa are used as drug mules in the international transit of illegal drugs. Factors that make young people vulnerable to being used as drug mules include unemployment, financial desperation, and the fact that they are mostly inexperienced travelers. Drug supply and using the youth as drug mules again illustrated the need for multiple state organs to work together.

Youth and safety

Fueled by poverty, unemployment, high costs of living, and in some cases drug abuse, crime and criminality increasingly affect the physical and mental safety of South Africans. According to the 2024 General Household Survey, about 17.7 % of the youth in South Africa indicated that they

[28] WHO (2024) Global status report on alcohol and health and treatment of substance use disorders

felt unsafe to walk alone during the day while the percentage jumps to 63.8% at night. A gender disaggregation indicate that females are more likely to feel unsafe at 19.2% during the day (night 66.1%) compared to males at 16% during the day (night 61.5%). A provincial breakdown suggest that the Western Cape and Gauteng were the least safe provinces with 32.3% of youth in the Western Cape indicating that they felt unsafe to walk alone during the day and 24% in Gauteng. The rest of the other provinces indicted lower percentages way below the national average of 17.7%, with KwaZulu-Natal (15.9%) coming closer to the national average. At night the provincial figures range from 60.2% to 74.3% with Limpopo being the only province below that band at 34.9%. About 7.9% youths aged 15-34 years (8% males and 7.9% females) reported in the same survey that they have been victims of theft of personal property crime during the past 5 years. Those aged 25-34 years were more likely to be victims at 8.9% compared to those aged 15-24 years at 6.9%.

Youth morbidity and mortality

Reliable mortality data is essential for analysing patterns of disease, guiding public health interventions, improving health outcomes, and tracking progress against national health and development targets. The 2023 report on mortality shows that young men are more likely to die than young women. Figures indicate while in the age categories between 0 and 14 years, death rates are almost equal for females and males, death rates for 15-34 years were higher for males. For those aged 15-19 male death rate was at 1.7% compared to 1.3% females, 3.4% for males aged 20-24 compared to females at 1.9%, 5.2% for males aged 25-29 years (females 2.6%), and for 30-34 years, males at 6.7% compared to 3.8% females. This pattern is partly attributed to the high likelihood for young men be involved in violence, accidents and to engage in risky behaviour than young women – with other external causes of accidental injury being the leading cause of unnatural death. Fo r example, 63.5% of young men aged 20-24 years die from injuries compared to 26.2% of young women. The report also found that the highest morality rate from unnatural causes occur among the youth aged 15 to 34 years. About 51.8% of deaths of young people aged between 20 and 24 years are from unnatural causes. Unnatural causes of death are the highest among those aged 25-29 years accounting for 50.2%. This followed by those aged 25-29 years at 46.8%, then those aged between 15 and 19 years 45.4% and lastly, 36.4% for those aged 30 to 34 years. This trend declines with age showing that unnatural death account for 28.6% of deaths for those aged 35 to 39 years, 21.2% for those aged 40-44 Years, 15% for those aged 45 to 49 years. It continues to decline in every next older age category right into the 2 percentages. This data suggests that risky lifestyles, violence, accidents, which most of the unnatural causes of death are attributed to, are a major threat to the youth. Both data for death by sex trend and for death from unnatural causes trend have been consistent over the years.

With regard to natural causes of death, diabetes mellitus was the leading underlying cause of death accounting for 5,8% of all deaths, followed by hypertensive diseases (5,4% of all deaths), then cardiovascular diseases (5,2% of all deaths), and the fourth is tuberculosis (4.2% of all deaths). But for those aged 15 to 44 years HIV (8.3%) was the leading underlying cause of death followed by tuberculosis (7.5%), and other viral diseases (5.3%) on the third spot. For those aged

15-24 years, tuberculosis (5.4%) was the leading underlying cause of death, followed by HIV (4.3%), and Influenza and pneumonia (3%). What is notable is that all of the leading underlying causes are to some extent lifestyle related diseases. This implies that there is room for prevention and mitigation. Health education and encouragement of healthy lifestyles becomes very important. Testing and early diagnose also increases the chances of managing the conditions and thereby prolonging lives.

About 3.8% of youth aged 15 to 34 years suffer from chronic diseases compared to 13.2% of all South Africans. Five provinces show a higher percentage of youth with chronic diseases, well above the national average of 3.8%, they are the Eastern Cape (6.1%), Free State (5.6%), Northern Cape (5.3%), KwaZulu-Natal (4.9%), and the North West (4.1%). Limpopo and Gauteng show the lowest percentages with 1.9 and 2.6% respectively. The challenge in managing chronic diseases is access to medication, which organisations like Stop Stockouts Project (SSP) has identified as a serious problem because of stock shortages.

Obesity

Obesity is a chronic condition that often returns even after weight loss[29]. It develops through a mix of factors such as genetic predisposition, high-calorie diets, limited physical activity, and stress. It also raises the risk of serious diseases, including heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers[30]. According to UNICEF the rate of obesity for youth and children aged 5 years to 19 years in South Africa rose from 3% to 9.4% and those who are overweight from 9% in 2000 to 21% in 2022. Girls are more likely to be obese than boys with 31.3 per cent of 15-19-year-old females overweight or obese compared 9.6% boys in the same age group.

Obesity is not only linked to morbidity and mortality, but it also has economic implications. The 2022 RTI International and World Obesity report estimates that in South Africa the economic cost was about US$6 billion (1.58% of GDP) in 2019. This is projected to rise to US$28 billion (2.6% of GDP) by 2060. Most of the cost comes from indirect losses. These include reduced productivity and early death, not just healthcare spending. The report emphasises that early-life obesity leads to long-term health and economic costs. This implies that youth are at a critical intervention point. Obesity also contributes to mental health challenges because it often results in stigmatisation, discrimination and bullying, especially in schools. The report encourages looking into policies targeting youth include, limiting junk food marketing, improving physical activity spaces, and creating healthier environments. A targeted approach for the IYDS could include:

- Focus on early prevention, not just treatment
- Target schools, communities, and food environments
- Treat obesity as a system issue, not individual failure
- Link obesity to future economic participation of youth

Promoting Healthy Nutrition, Physical Activity and Positive Lifestyle Choices

[29] RTI International and World Obesity (2022)
[30] RTI International and World Obesity (2022)

Heathy lifestyles are not only about addressing obesity, they are also about managing risky life styles, like substance abuse, risky sexual behaviour, involvement in violence activities, driving while under the influence of substance. Addressing these should include dealing with poverty, promoting healthy eating, promoting participation in regular physical activities, and providing health education. Poverty and inequalities underpins some of the challenges of healthy living such as access to nutritious food. While education about healthy lifestyle is vital there should be concrete way of actually encouraging young people to actually participate in activities that promote healthy living like sports. Given the threat of unhealthy lifestyles, perhaps this should be entrenched even more into the school curriculum.

The National Health Insurance (NHI)

In 2024, the President signed the National Health Insurance Act 20 of 2023 into law. The act is intended to give practical effect to the right for everyone to access health care services, as provided for in section 27 of the Constitution, including the state's obligation to progressively expand access to these services. It establishes a National Health Insurance Fund intended to purchase health services for all residents so that access to care depends less on ability to pay and more on need. According to the Department of Health's 2024/2025 annual report, implementation is being introduced gradually and in phases. The department reported that it is currently focused on building the institutions, regulations and systems required for the scheme. At the same time, the Act is being challenged in court by several organisations, which means aspects of its implementation remain subject to legal processes while preparatory work continues. Some sections relating to regulation of private sector health provision were declared invalid by the Constitutional Court in May 2026. This is going to delay its implementation and/or possible lead to withdrawal of some of its provisions.

National Health Insurance is highly relevant to youth development because it seeks to expand equitable access to health services across the population. Many young people face barriers to health services, including limited access to primary care, mental health support, sexual and reproductive health services, and treatment for substance abuse. By expanding access to publicly funded health services and strengthening the primary health care system, NHI has the potential to improve the health conditions of young people. These conditions directly influence their education outcomes, employment prospects and overall wellbeing. In the context of the Integrated Youth Development Strategy (IYDS), improved access to health services can support healthier transitions from adolescence to adulthood. It can also help reduce inequalities related to access to health that disproportionately affect poor and vulnerable youth. While in principle the NHI has great potential to improve access to healthcare, its real value will ultimately be judged by whether it actually expands access to health services and improves the quality of care delivered to the population.

Pandemics

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of strengthening preparedness for future pandemics and other public health emergencies. While it is impossible to predict every health crisis, governments, communities, and institutions can put measures in place to respond more rapidly and effectively. Young people were particularly affected through disruptions to education, employment opportunities, social interactions, and mental wellbeing. Future preparedness efforts should therefore include strengthening youth health literacy, expanding access to digital learning, protecting youth livelihoods during crises, and ensuring the availability of mental health support services. Young people should also be recognised as active partners in pandemic response through volunteerism, community education, innovation, and leadership. In addition, greater investment in local research, healthcare capacity, and manufacturing capabilities can reduce dependence on external sources and strengthen resilience to future health emergencies.

2.9.1 Key Issues Emerging from the Pillar for Implementation Consideration:

- While teenage pregnancy shows a decline between now and 2022, it is still a challenge
- Adolescent girls and young women are still most at risk of contracting HIV compare to any other population group
- Uptake of anti-retroviral treatment (ART) has increased and save more lives, it is relatively low among the youth compared to the older individuals
- Condom usage has declined
- Circumcision has increased noticeable, but more still need to be done to encourage young people to get circumcised
- Mental health challenges among the youth are on the rise including depression, and suicidal thoughts
- Encouraging social connection has potential to lower the risk for poor mental health (especially in this age of screen live)
- Substance abuse is still a major challenge among the youth with treatment data suggesting that the youth are the main users of illicit drug – and over dosage poses a serious problem
- Though no official statistics are publicly available, young people (especially young women) are increasingly used as drug mules in global drug trafficking
- Death rates among young men are noticeably higher than for young women, mostly attributed to high likelihood of exposure to violence, accidents, and risky behaviour
- Youth between 15 - 34 years are more likely to die of unnatural causes that include violence and accidents than the general population
- Four leading underlying causes of natural death are partly attributable to lifestyle (diabetes, hypertensive diseases, cardiovascular diseases, and HIV, in that order)
- While HIV is the fourth leading underlying cause of death for the general population, it is the number one underlying cause of death for those aged 15-44 years
- Chronic diseases are also a challenge facing many youths though considerably lower than the adult population
- There is shortage of medical stocks, which does not only affect curative treatment, but also affect management of chronic diseases

- Considerable number of youth feel unsafe while some indicate incidents of being victims of crime of theft of personal property – The Western Cape and Gauteng are the most unsafe provinces
- Obesity is becoming a real threat to the youth population showing an increase over time and it also a challenge for the economy
- Obesity also contribute to mental health challenges that are linked to stigmatisation, discrimination and bullying
- The implementation of some aspects of the NHI, which in theory has potential to improve access to healthcare services, has been delayed because of legal processes
- Preparedness for pandemics is very important

2.10 Pillar 4: Priority Challenges Affecting Social Cohesion and Nation Building

South Africa's democratic transition demonstrated the power of collective action, civic participation and social solidarity in advancing political change. However, the persistence of inequality, unemployment, social fragmentation and other forms of exclusion continues to pose challenges to social cohesion and nation building. Young people have a particularly important role to play in strengthening social cohesion, not only as beneficiaries of development but also as active citizens, community leaders and agents of social change. Their meaningful participation in civic, social and economic life is essential for building inclusive, resilient and cohesive communities. The OECD conceptualises social cohesion through three interrelated dimensions: social inclusion, social capital and social mobility. These dimensions relate to young people's ability to participate meaningfully in society, build relationships and trust within their communities, and access opportunities that enable them to improve their socio-economic circumstances. Together, they influence young people's sense of belonging, civic participation and contribution to the broader development of the country.

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 identifies social cohesion and nation-building as integral to South Africa's development trajectory. It recognises that progress in reducing poverty, inequality and unemployment is closely linked to the creation of a more cohesive, inclusive and united society. Similarly, the National Youth Policy 2030 identifies social cohesion as one of its strategic principles and emphasises the importance of youth development interventions that promote inclusion and meaningful participation in democratic and nation-building processes. This reflects the recognition that young people constitute a significant proportion of the population and should play a critical role in fostering social cohesion and shaping the country's future. The MTDP is also based on inclusion, especially with regards to supporting the rights of women, youth, people with disabilities, and children. To effect inclusion of these groups, the plan commits targeted programmes like expanding employment, entrepreneurship through providing access to finance, mentorship and markets, focusing on small businesses and cooperatives. Furthermore, MTDP commits to ensuring inclusion of these groups in the value chains of public and private sectors, and developing regulations, policies, and if necessary, legislation will be instituted to ensure equal opportunities.

Building social cohesion and a shared national identity is a complex undertaking in South Africa. Historical patterns of racial exclusion, spatial segregation and socio-economic inequality continue to influence how people experience citizenship, opportunity and social belonging. As a result, divisions based on race, class, gender and social status continue to influence social relations, economic participation and political engagement. These divisions often find expression in public discourse and political contestation, thereby undermining efforts to foster social cohesion and nation-building. South Africa is also among the most unequal countries in the world, with high levels of inequality reinforcing social fragmentation and limiting social integration. If left unaddressed, these conditions will continue to undermine social cohesion, weaken nation-building efforts, and hinder the development of an inclusive society. Below are some of the challenges that have a bearing on social cohesion as it pertains to the youth.

Economic exclusion

Many young people remain excluded from meaningful participation in the economy, with limited access to employment, entrepreneurship, ownership opportunities and certain professions. According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2025, South Africa's Human Development Index (HDI), a composite measure of achievements in health, education and income, improved from 0.737 in 2022 to 0.741 in 2023. Despite this progress, high levels of inequality, unemployment and poverty continue to limit the extent to which these gains are experienced across society. As noted earlier, young people are more likely than the general population to experience poverty and exclusion from economic opportunities. Economic exclusion remains a major driver of inequality in South Africa. Since the previous IYDS cycle, the Gini coefficient has declined only marginally, from 0.67 to 0.64, leaving South Africa among the most unequal societies in the world. Household income disparities further illustrate this challenge. While the median household income is R95,770, the average is R204,359, reflecting significant income concentration. Clear disparities also exist across gender and race: male-headed households (R239,590) earn more than female-headed households (R158,481), while white-headed households (R676,375) earn almost five times more than black-headed households (R143,632). Socio-economic inequalities continue to reflect strong racial dimensions, with African and Coloured households generally experiencing lower incomes, higher unemployment and greater levels of poverty than white households. Economic exclusion undermines social cohesion, constrains social mobility and reflects the slow pace of socio-economic transformation.

A large share of South Africans surveyed in the 2025 Reconciliation Barometer identified poverty and income inequality as the main obstacles to reconciliation. Racism was ranked second, ahead of corruption, crime and violence, and political divisions. These findings suggest that socio-economic conditions play a significant role in shaping social cohesion. Reducing poverty, inequality and economic exclusion is therefore critical to strengthening social cohesion and nation building.

The youth and active citizenship

Active citizenship is essential to a functioning democracy. It helps hold those in positions of authority accountable and ensures that public policies reflect the needs and aspirations of citizens. It also contributes to rebuilding a shared ethos, strengthening participation, and encouraging a shift from passive to active citizenship, which are among the priorities highlighted during the National Dialogue process. For young people, active citizenship provides opportunities to develop leadership skills, build networks, influence decision-making, and better understand democratic institutions and processes.

However, it has become evident that young people in South Africa are not participating as fully as they should in strategic platforms aimed at fostering unity and active citizenship. This is despite young people frequently leading and participating in protests and other forms of civic action aimed at addressing challenges affecting their communities, especially inadequate service delivery. High levels of unemployment and limited economic opportunities, particularly among black youth, can contribute to feelings of frustration, exclusion and disillusionment. They can also weaken confidence in formal participatory mechanisms and state institutions. As trust in these institutions declines, some young people may view protests and other forms of collective action as more effective channels for expressing grievances and seeking change. Slow responses by authorities to issues affecting young people can create a perception that protests carry greater influence than formal participation mechanisms. This perception is often reinforced when concerns raised through established participatory platforms do not receive timely responses or fail to produce tangible outcomes. These perceptions are reinforced by declining levels of trust in public institutions and leadership. The 2025 South African Reconciliation Barometer found low levels of confidence across a range of public institutions and reported that 78% of South Africans believed that leaders cannot be trusted to do the right thing most of the time. While this was largely unchanged from the 79% recorded in 2023, it represents a substantial increase from the 21% recorded in 2013. Such levels of distrust can weaken confidence in formal participatory processes and contribute to perceptions that alternative forms of civic action are more likely to attract attention and secure a response from authorities.

Another indicator of limited youth participation is voter turnout in the 2024 National and Provincial Elections. According to the IEC, turnout was comparatively low across all youth age cohorts. Approximately 45% of registered voters aged 18-19 cast their ballots, compared with 48% of those aged 20-29 and 49% of those aged 30-39. In each of these age groups, more than half of registered voters did not participate in the election. Low electoral participation among young people has implications for democratic governance. Young people constitute a significant proportion of South Africa's population and are directly affected by public policy decisions. Their limited participation in elections reduces the extent to which their interests and priorities are reflected through democratic processes and weakens one of the primary channels through which citizens influence public decision-making.

Low levels of youth participation in formal structures such as elections, ward committees and other institutional platforms have often been interpreted as evidence of youth apathy. However, emerging evidence suggests that low participation in formal mechanisms does not necessarily indicate disengagement from public affairs. Research points instead to growing disillusionment with formal political institutions and a shift towards alternative forms of participation, including issue-based activism, community mobilisation and engagement through digital platforms[31]. These forms of participation extend beyond protests and include engagement through social media platforms, where young people actively debate political, social and economic issues, mobilise support for causes and hold public institutions to account. At the same time, some studies have found that social exclusion, marginalisation and limited opportunities can increase the appeal of anti-social groups, including gangs, particularly where young people are seeking belonging, identity and recognition. Addressing these challenges requires more than expanding participation opportunities. It requires tackling the socio-economic conditions that constrain meaningful participation while ensuring that formal engagement platforms are accessible, responsive and relevant to the needs and aspirations of young people.

Unfair Discrimination and hate speech

Unfair discrimination undermines the values enshrined in the constitution, which were intended to be as a symbol of unity, inclusion and reconciliation. Manifesting in various forms, unfair discrimination is still a challenge for this country and it undermines social cohesion because it militates against reconciliation, human dignity, human development and it may perpetuate systemic exclusion. Unfair discrimination is continuing despite the constitution of the republic, and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, no.4 of 2000 (PEPUDA) explicitly prohibiting all forms of unfair discrimination and providing protection for citizens against unfair discrimination. In addition to other mechanisms to deal with unfair discrimination and hate speech, Equality Courts have been established through PEPUDA. And to make the Equality Courts more accessible there are no fees involve, and any person can initiate proceedings, and alternatively PEPUDA makes provision for SAHRC and the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) to institute matters at the Equality Court on behalf of individuals. This is important for young people given that in many cases they are unlikely to have resources to pursue justice. However, the SAHRC noted that the equality courts are underutilised mainly because of limited awareness. Unfair discrimination manifests in various forms and a few are discussed below to illustrate the point.

Racism

Given South Africa's history of institutionalised racial discrimination, racism is still one of the most persistent challenges facing the country. Respondents in the 2025 Reconciliation Barometer ranked racism as the second most significant obstacle to reconciliation, after poverty and income inequality. In 2024, the Human Rights Commission reported that complaints relating to unfair discrimination, racism and hate speech continue to constitute a significant portion of matters brought before the Commission and Equality Courts. For example, the use of the "K-word"

[31] Hoffmeester, D. 2025

remains one of the recurring forms of racial abuse dealt with by Equality Courts. The persistence of racism and hate speech needs serious attention, particularly in schools, where incidents of racial discrimination continue to attract public concern. These incidents highlight the need for continued efforts to promote inclusion, equality, mutual respect and appreciation of diversity. If left unaddressed, racism will continue to undermine trust, social cohesion and nation building, while increasing the risk of social tensions and division.

Ethnicity

Discussions on discrimination and social cohesion often focus on racism, while giving less attention to ethnicity as a source of prejudice, exclusion and hate speech. When combined with regionalism and the enduring effects of apartheid spatial planning, ethnic divisions can undermine social cohesion and social integration. Equality Court cases have illustrated how ethnic prejudice continues to manifest in contemporary South Africa. For example, Hamilton Mkhothokgo was found guilty of hate speech after posting comments on social media that demeaned members of the Vatsonga ethnic group during the Covid-19 pandemic. The legacy of apartheid's homeland system and the separation of communities along ethnic lines is often underestimated, yet it continues to influence social relations and perceptions of belonging. If left unaddressed, ethnic prejudice and discrimination can reinforce social divisions, limit opportunities for some groups, and undermine nation-building efforts.

Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination has deep historical roots and continues to disadvantage women across social, economic and political spheres. It does not only contribute to exclusion, but it also creates conditions that enable various forms of gender-based violence. This is reflected in the high levels of violence experienced by women. A 2022 Human Sciences Research Council study found that women aged 18 years and older reported a lifetime prevalence of physical and sexual violence of 35.5%, compared to 20.5% among men. In line with the Constitution, the National Development Plan envisions a non-sexist South Africa in which women and men enjoy equal rights, opportunities and protections. However, many women continue to face significant barriers to full and equal participation in society. These include gender-based violence, persistent poverty, under-representation in leadership, gender pay differences and sexual harassment. While men may also experience discrimination and violence, available evidence indicates that women are disproportionately affected. Like racism and ethnic discrimination, gender discrimination undermines social cohesion by reinforcing inequality, limiting inclusion and weakening the vision of a non-sexist society.

Sexual orientation

Members of the LGBTQ+ community continue to experience discrimination, stigma and violence despite constitutional protections. The South African Human Rights Commission reported in 2025 that discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation was the third most complained-about ground of discrimination during the 2024/25 financial year. Young people who identify as LGBTQ+

may be particularly vulnerable to exclusion, bullying, harassment and violence, which can negatively affect their sense of belonging and participation in society. Such experiences reinforce inequality and undermine social cohesion and nation-building efforts. Recognising these challenges, the government and civil society have developed interventions aimed at promoting inclusion and protecting the rights of members of the LGBTQ+ community. The revised National Intervention Strategy 2023-2027 on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) provides a coordinated framework to address discrimination, violence, exclusion and inequality. Beyond protecting the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, the strategy seeks to foster greater inclusion, dignity and participation, which are important foundations for social cohesion and nation building.

People with disabilities

Young people with disabilities face structural barriers that limit their participation in social, economic and civic life, including reduced access to education, employment, transport and community programmes. This exclusion restricts participation in shared social spaces where interaction and belonging are developed, which in turn weakens efforts to build an inclusive and cohesive society. Data from Statistics South Africa shows that persons with disabilities have lower levels of educational attainment and labour market participation than those without disabilities[32]. South Africa has an established legislative and policy framework, including the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA) and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016), yet access to education, employment and public services for persons with disabilities remains substantially lower than for the rest of the population. Interventions to deal with some of these issues are provided in the Youth with Disabilities Strategy:
https://www.nyda.gov.za/Portals/0/WebSitesCreative_MyContentManager/1092/NYDA_Disability_Inclusion_Strategy_2025_2028.pdf

In addition, the DWYP is also working on Disability Rights Bill, which is intended to fortify the current policy instruments aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of people with disabilities. The strength of this intervention will also depends on the public participation and the quality of inputs.

History and social cohesion

Social cohesion is influenced by how people understand the country's past. Data from the South African Reconciliation Barometer (2025) shows a clear generational gap in understanding South Africa's past. Only 34% of young adults (18–24) report strong knowledge of apartheid and 32% of the democratic transition, compared to 72% and 69% respectively among those aged 55 and above. History knowledge among youth is even lower for colonialism (25%) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (24%). In the same survey, 70% of South Africans support the teaching

[32] Stats SA. 2026a. Marginalised Groups Indicator Report, 2024

of this history in schools, pointing out the importance of such knowledge. The knowledge difference affects how young people interpret inequality and public policy. Without historical context, current disparities and redress measures are harder to understand. This points to a limitation in civic education. For young people, an understanding of history is important for appreciating the struggles that led to democracy and for understanding the social and economic inequalities that continue to affect the South African society. The current efforts by the Department of Basic Education to strengthen the teaching of history provide an opportunity to better link civic education to historical context. This has potential to support informed citizenship, and reinforce social cohesion.

Youth in Conflict with the Law

Youth involvement in crime and violence continues to pose a significant social and developmental challenge. Poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, substance abuse, peer influence and unstable family environments are among the factors that increase the risk of young people coming into conflict with the law. The challenge is compounded by the large number of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), currently estimated at approximately 3.9 million among those aged 15 to 24 years. The social and economic costs of youth in conflict with the law are reflected in the pressure placed on the criminal justice system, including youth correctional facilities.

The scale of youth offending is reflected in the number of young people entering the criminal justice system and the pressure placed on correctional facilities. As at 31 March 2025, South Africa's 15 youth correctional centres accommodated 5,081 offenders aged 18 to 25 years against a capacity of 4,262. While incarceration represents only a portion of young people who come into conflict with the law, the figures highlight the social and economic costs associated with youth offending and the importance of prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. **Table 1** below shows that the pressure on youth correctional facilities is evident across several provinces, particularly Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West, the Western Cape, Gauteng and the Eastern Cape.

Province(s)	Number of Inmates	Capacity
Limpopo, Mpumalanga & North West	1,442	1,067
Western Cape	1,292	1,009
Gauteng	831	751
Eastern Cape	758	416

Table 1: Number of Youth Inmates versus Capacity by Province

Source: Department of Correctional Services, Parliamentary Reply, 2025.

Note: The table compares the number of inmates with the available capacity in youth correctional centres. It illustrates the pressure placed on youth correctional facilities across provinces. Some centres operate below capacity. For example, the Bizzah Makhate Youth Centre in the Free State housed 39 inmates against a capacity of 64.

Youth incarceration carries significant social and economic costs. Young people in correctional facilities are largely excluded from education, skills development and economic participation during a critical stage of their lives. This can reduce future employment prospects and make successful reintegration into society more difficult. Research has shown that rehabilitation and reintegration interventions can improve post-release outcomes and reduce the likelihood of reoffending. The Department of Correctional Services provides a range of programmes, including basic education, vocational skills training, counselling and life-skills development[33]. Participation in these programmes has increased over time and can contribute to improved reintegration outcomes. Youth offending and incarceration affect not only the individuals involved but also families and communities. Preventing youth crime and supporting successful reintegration are therefore important components of building safer, more inclusive and socially cohesive communities.

Youth Participation in sports, arts, and culture

Sport, arts and culture are important for youth development because they build confidence, strengthen identity, and create opportunities for interaction across class, ethnicity, race and geographic location. Sporting activities provide practical spaces where young people engage beyond social and economic divides. There is also a strong link between sport and positive physical and mental health. This is important given the rising level of lifestyle diseases and mental health challenges. Measurable progress has been made in organised sporting participation. The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC), working with the Department of Basic Education (DBE), reported that 4,330 learners participated in the National School Sport Championship in 2024/25, exceeding the annual target of 4000. However, this level of participation remains small when set against the scale of the schooling system, which includes over 25,000 public schools and millions of learners. Access to organised sport is still limited in many schools and beyond schools. Constraints include a lack of facilities, equipment, structured leagues and trained coaches, especially in township and rural areas. This reduces the potential of sport to support social integration, improve positive health outcomes, strengthen school attachment, and limit youth involvement in violence and other high-risk behaviour.

Arts and culture contribute directly to social cohesion and nation building by shaping shared narratives, enabling dialogue across difference, and strengthening a sense of belonging. They provide platforms where diverse histories, languages and identities are expressed and recognised within a common national framework. The UNESCO MONDIACULT Declaration (2022) recognises culture as a public good and highlights its role in promoting inclusion and social cohesion. This implies that nations should support arts and culture development and initiatives concretely. In

[33] Chauke (2025)

South Africa, programmes such as the Mzansi Golden Economy provide public funding to support cultural production, skills development and job creation in the creative sector. However, access to these opportunities remains concentrated in a limited number of urban centres, and the programme has not yet achieved broad-based participation among youth in township and rural areas. Many young practitioners in township and rural areas face barriers linked to infrastructure, funding and market access. This limits the reach of cultural participation and weakens its nation-building potential. Expanding access through local cultural infrastructure, arts education and digital platforms is necessary to ensure broader participation. Without expanding access, the contribution of arts and culture to social cohesion will remain confined to those already within established cultural networks.

The National Youth Service (NYS)

The National Youth Service (NYS) is a structured programme that places young people in community service roles to support local development while building civic responsibility and social integration. It operates through partnerships across government, civil society and the private sector, with participants engaged in areas such as education support, community safety, food security and social services. It is also a component of the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI). According to the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) and the NYS policy documents, these placements are intended to promote active citizenship and strengthen social cohesion through service to communities.

Recent implementation data indicates both progress and limits in scale. The NYDA reports that approximately 50,000 young people were placed in service following the revitalisation of the programme in 2022. The NYDA Annual Performance Plan (2024/25) further indicates that current implementation cycles target about 20,000 participants per phase, with plans to expand to 40,000 participants annually. Over the medium term, the NYDA Strategic Plan (2025–2030) sets a target of reaching up to 250,000 participants over five years. While these figures demonstrate programme expansion, they are small relative to the overall youth population. This limits the programme's ability to function at a big scale as a mechanism for social cohesion and nation building, particularly in communities with high levels of exclusion. Expanding participation and ensuring broader geographic coverage will be necessary to strengthen its contribution to building an active and inclusive citizenry.

2.10.1 Key Issues Emerging from the Pillar for Implementation Consideration:

- Economic exclusion is the leading barrier to social cohesion and nation-building
- The racialised nature of poverty militates against social cohesion and nation building
- Unfair discrimination is still a persistent problem manifesting through characteristics that include among others, racism, ethnicity, gender discrimination, discrimination based on disability status, and sexual orientation
- Equality Courts were established to deal with unfair discrimination but they are underutilised despite increase in unfair discrimination

- While there are formal platforms to enable the youth to be active citizens, indications are that the youth prefer alternative ways of participation (e.g. protest, social media) - this is partly attributed to lose of trust in public institutions and public representatives
- Voter turnout of youth remains critically low, impacting the development and maintenance of democratic government
- Youth in conflict with the law is still an areas of concern
- Participation in sport, particularly through schools is still limited relative to the number of youth in schools
- While the Department of Arts, Culture and Sports is supporting arts and culture, it is still not enough and its reach is still concentrated in urban centres
- The National Youth Service is an important facilitator of social cohesion and nation-building, however, its reach is still not sufficient
- Fixing one element that works against social cohesion is not enough – for genuine social cohesion to happen, all elements should be corrected

2.11 Pillar 5: Priority Challenges Affecting Effective and Responsive Youth Development Machinery

Without a strong and well-functioning and responsive youth development machinery, we may not realise many of the interventions proposed in the implementation plan. This section describes and provides a critical appraisal of the current youth development machinery.

The National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) currently serves as the primary institution responsible for coordinating and implementing youth development programs. The NYDA reports to the Ministry of Women, Youth, and Persons Living with Disabilities, which is tasked with overseeing youth policy and machinery coordination. Furthermore, the amended NYDA act requires all state organs to support NYDA in executing youth development programme. To support and concretise this, the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) has issued a circular (no. 3 of 2023) that implores all state organs to include youth development in their annual performance plans (APPs). The National Youth Directorates and Youth Focal Points at provincial and municipal levels have been established to further support the coordination and implementation of youth initiatives across all three spheres of government.

The National Youth Machinery Forum, situated within the broader youth governance framework led by the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (DWYPD), serves as a coordination platform bringing together government departments, youth focal points, the NYDA, civil society actors, and other relevant public institutions involved in youth development. By connecting institutions responsible for planning and implementation, it supports coordination, information-sharing, and alignment across the youth development system. Its effectiveness, however, depends on whether coordination informs planning, budgeting, and implementation decisions. Without this, its role is likely to be administrative rather than a driver of improved youth development outcomes. Additionally, several key government departments and institutions play a significant role in supporting the delivery of youth-focused projects. These include:

- Department of Basic Education
- Department of Higher Education with specific interest in NSFAS, skills for the future, SETAs contribution and impact, TVET Education
- Social Development: SRD grant: a commitment to link beneficiaries to employment opportunities
- Department of Small Business and the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition
- Department of Health
- Department of Telecommunications and Digital Technologies
- Department of Sports, Arts and Culture
- Department of Labor & Employment

Other important players in the youth development machinery include:

- Civil Society
- Private Sector
- National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) - representing civil society, labor and private sector

Civil Society

Civil society organisations play an important role in lobby and advocacy for inclusion of youth in policies and implementation. They are also an important player in holding state institutions accountable. Youth Chamber of Commerce & Industry South Africa (YCCISA), political party youth organisation, South African Youth Council (SAYC), and the SAYCC are some of the key civil society organisations in youth development.

The Youth Diagnostic Advisory, initiated by the National Planning Commission, introduces an evidence-based dimension to strengthening the youth development machinery. Its work seeks to improve understanding of how the youth development system operates, how well policies and programmes are aligned, and why many young people continue to face barriers to education, employment and economic opportunities. For Pillar 5, its value lies in providing evidence on what is working, where shortcomings exist, and what changes may be required to improve the effectiveness of youth development institutions and programmes. Its contribution, however, will depend on whether its findings inform actual planning, coordination, and implementation rather than remaining at the level of policy analysis.

Critical appraisal of the youth development machinery

Despite the mainstreaming, coordination and lobby roles that the NYDA is expected to play, it is limited both financially and structurally. The budget allocated to the agency is too limited to achieve effective mainstreaming and coordination, which must be underpinned by a strong research and policy elements. For example, according to its Annual Performance Plan 2025/26, the agency was allocated R1.144 billion for the year 2025/2026, of which R*** goes to salaries and operational costs. This leaves very little for coordination and for programmes. The Economic Research - Sector Intelligence (ER-SI) Unit is too small (only four personnel) and does not have financial resources and capacity to generate national studies or make well-researched and well-considered policy inputs that can be used to support the lobby and coordination function. Lobbying, advocating and co-ordination of youth development programmes are central to putting and sustaining youth development at the centre of development. Even if the studies were to be outsourced the NYDA's capacity to fund, manage and appraise the studies is thin. The shifting of policy function to the executive authority in 2016, which is also supported by small youth unit, did not make the situation any better. Youth development is explicitly and implicitly embedded in the government's development programme, which suggests that the role of the NYDA should not be duplication of programmes, but to mainstream, coordinate, and lobby for interventions by various state institutions where there are gaps.

Ideally, the NYDA's focus should be on research and policy work to inform mainstreaming and integration of youth development. Secondly, to initiate and design youth development programmes for piloting purposes not for permanent implementation. The purpose should be to hand programmes that have proven to work to relevant state organs or private sector to implement at a bigger scale. This make sense given that the NYDA does not have the financial resources to implement programmes at a scale that can effectively deal with youth challenges.

It is clear from the above discussions that the national budget is one of the key policy instruments that the youth development machinery must leverage. While departments are required to support the NYDA and are expected to factor youth development in their annual plans, the question becomes how is the NYDA influencing these processes? A continuous analysis of all state organs' spending on youth development will be useful as a base to lobby them and to hold them accountable. Youth specific budget monitoring mechanism may be useful in this regard.

Although youth focal points/units have been established within departments and municipalities, the integration of youth development into policies, strategic plans and budgets remains insufficient. As a result, the implementation of effective youth development interventions progresses slowly. Another persistent challenge is limited skills and competencies among some of those responsible for coordinating and implementing youth initiatives. This may be attributed to the fact that youth development has yet to become a fully professionalised field, and there is an absence of established norms and standards to guide practitioners. Consequently, gaps remain in understanding and capacity related to youth development work. While professionalisation of youth work has been advocated for over the years, there is little tangible progress to show. One of the Youth Diagnostic Advisory's proposals is that the all proposed national policies and bills should include a mandatory Youth Impact Assess (YIA). This is potentially a very power way of integrating and mainstreaming youth development. It is important to monitor the impact of the National Planning Commission's Youth Diagnostic

Advisory. Lobbying the structure or finding way to participate in it is important to avoid fragmentation. Additionally, the role of civil society and private sector needs to be clarified and enhanced for maximum impact.

There is also an indication that there are too many structures involved in the co-ordination of youth development. In addition to the role played by the NYDA, the youth branch in the DWYPD (including the National Youth Machinery Forum), there is the Project Management Office (PMO) in the office of the President. This may create duplication, fragmentation, and increase operating in silos, which may defeat the intention of integration.

Part of an effective and responsive youth development machinery should include leveraging decision-making structures in government to advance youth development. How does the NYDA, for instance, as the lead institution leverage powerful structures like the Forum for South African Directors-general (FOSAD) to advance youth development.

Youth development machinery must extend beyond programmes and coordinating institutions. It must include the representation of young people at senior levels of government, where laws are passed and budgets are decided. Without this, youth priorities are likely to remain secondary in practice. It is not the task of the Integrated Youth Development Strategy (IYDS) and the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) to determine political representation. However, youth development outcomes depend in part on who holds decision-making authority. The broader governance system must recognise this link. It must, in line with the mainstreaming and integration of youth development, create conditions that expand opportunities for young people to enter leadership and decision-making roles. This includes removing barriers that limit their entry into positions of authority. This gap confirms that youth development cannot rely on institutional arrangements alone. It requires deliberate inclusion of young people in decision-making authority.

Current evidence shows that young people are largely absent from these positions. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021), only 2.6% of parliamentarians globally are under 30, fewer than 1% are under 25, and, based on data cited in the Parliament of South Africa (2025), about 1% of ministers worldwide are below 30. In South Africa, the pattern is similar. Following the 2024 national elections, people aged 20–39 made up just under 20% of the National Assembly (SABC, 2024). ParliMeter, 2025 reports that only 33 Members of Parliament are 35 years or younger. Earlier official data from Parliament (2019) indicated youth representation at about 11%. These figures are low when set against the country's demographic profile, where a large share of the population falls within the youth category.

The DWYP is currently involved in the development of the South African Youth Development Bill to consolidate the youth development machinery by strengthen the mainstreaming and integration of youth development[34]. This is an opportunity to deal with some of the shortcomings

[34] NYDA 2026/27 APP

of the current youth development policy framework. The Bill is intended to align youth development across departments and spheres of government. It is intended establish a binding framework requiring all institutions to incorporate youth development in their planning and implementation. This is aimed at improving coordination, coherence, and accountability across the youth development system. This is in addition to the lobby and advocacy through the DWYD to make all policies and legislation to reflect youth development. On the other hand, this may sound like duplication given that the NYDA Act already exists. Perhaps another amendment of the act may be a prudent approach rather than developing multiple legislation seeking to address the same issues. On the positive side, the DWYD is in the process of developing a Standard Operating Procedure to strengthen its oversight of the NYDA and support the effective implementation of the Agency's mandate.

2.11.1 Key Issues Emerging from the Pillar for Implementation Consideration:

- The role currently played by the NYDA is limited to realise the potential for mainstreaming and integration of youth development
- Although the National, Provincial and Local Government has clear framework for youth development, the inclusion of youth development initiative in planning and budgeting still has room for improvement
- Establishment of youth directorates and youth units/focal points does not guarantee implementation of youth development
- There is no mechanism to evaluate the capacities and competencies of youth development practitioners to deliver their responsibilities
- While it is legally difficult to compel the private sector to have clear plans and obligations towards youth development, lobbying the sector to do so is necessary
- Youth Civil Society seems to play a limited role of highlighting the plight of the youth and ensuring their inclusion in plans and budgets
- Decision-making structures are still not optimally leveraged to advance youth development
- Monitoring the national budget for inclusion of the youth may provide a powerful lobby and advocacy tool
- Strengthening youth development machinery should include deliberate measures that encourage and support young people to participate in leadership and decision-making roles.
- While the anticipated South African Youth Development Bill has potential to deal with the limitations of the current youth development machinery, it equally has potential to duplicate what the NYDA Act seeks to achieve – perhaps another amendment of the NYDA could be considered instead

2.12 Cross-Cutting and Overlapping Youth Development Themes

While the pillars help to capture the challenges faced by young people in specific areas, it is important to provide an overview of other issues that fall in more than one pillar. While the issues are not necessarily captured by the pillars, they are relevant and important for youth development.

2.12.1 The 4th Industrial revolution, Artificial Intelligence and youth development

The key driving force behind 4th industrial revolution is digitisation and artificial intelligence (AI). This has created new opportunities such remote work globally and opportunities to create tech businesses. It is estimated that AI will contributed USD $19.9 trillion to the global economy by 2030. Artificial Intelligence has enormous potential to level the playing field and to create new opportunities and making life easier, but it also has potential to widen the inequalities in the world. The inequalities could be fueled by digital divide where the poor communities have limited access to global networks, though this is now being mitigated by increased access to smart phones. AI's ability to execute even the tasks that are not routine is seen as a threat to replace human being in many jobs. In addition to being a potential threat to employment, there is also the danger that it can be abused – for example, it may be used for crime, invasion of people's privacy and to undermine national security. Even more concerning is that some studies have linked the use of AI to a decline in cognitive abilities[35]. This is linked to the increase in the use of AI to produce academic work which has serious implications for learning and the development of students. By letting AI do their academic work students loose an opportunity to learn skills like analytic and critical thinking, which are crucial for society.

Given the challenges raised above, regulating the use of AI therefore becomes important and urgent. "AI's impact will be defined not by what it can do but by the decisions we make in its design, development and deployment.[36]". It is important that the government does not only protect the youth and the country against abuse of AI, but it should also assist young people to take full advantage of the opportunities that it is creating. The Draft South Africa National Artificial Intelligence Policy Framework of August 2024, which seeks to respond to some the challenges discussed above, forms a basis for the national policy on AI, is currently being developed. Among the issues raised in policy framework are:

- An acknowledgement that AI is affects all sectors of society and its regulation will necessarily include all sectors, and that it is multi-disciplinary
- Ethically grounded national AI policy that ensures responsible innovation
- Protection of public interests
- Advancement of social and economic transformation including addressing digital divide
- Capacity building for AI deployment across sectors
- Seeks to enable safe and secure adoption of AI technologies,

[35] Roy and Pillay (2025)
[36] Achim Steiner in UNDP (2025: v)

- Modernisation of regulatory frameworks while protecting rights and national values

2.12.2 Evidence-based Youth Development

How many studies on youth development issues have been done in the last three years? While there are quite a number conducted by institutions like the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), and Statistics South Africa, it is notable that there is none from the key youth development institution, the NYDA. Given the limited amount of resources at the NYDA's disposal, research does not get as much attention as it should be, judging by the amount of research output. How can the NYDA influence the policy environment and discourse without solid and credible research? There are still many gaps in the available knowledge on youth development, which the NYDA should be a leading light on. The NYDA should find a way to harness the resources from other institutions, for example, there should be a way to use partnerships to expand research capacity. While over the years, the NYDA was able to work with institutions like Statistics South Africa, including by contributing certain youth development indicators in Stats SA's surveys, there are still gaps in the data generated by Statistics South Africa. For instance, there is no recent data on youth participation in entrepreneurship or research on why so many youth businesses fail. The NYDA has a major interest in these key areas. Perhaps one way of dealing with this is that the NYDA should consider a way to influence research agendas of institutions that do similar work, especially if they were established by statutes – e.g. HSRC, SAMRC. This could be done through invoking and taking advantage of the legal provision that state institutions should assist the NYDA to effectively exercise its powers and the performance of its functions. This could be combined with building research networks with specified outcomes.

2.12.3 Youth in International relations and multilateralism

The international space and multilateralism offers many opportunities to advance youth development. These include leveraging multilateral and bilateral agreements to enable youth to access business opportunities, education and skills through scholarships and other financial agreements, and cultural exchanges. The platforms also create space to exchange good practices, sharing experience in youth development work, and developing joint youth programmes. The mere participation in these platforms is in itself educational. Among the multilateral platforms that have youth specific chapters is Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa plus (BRICS+), which has a Youth Forum. It is not clear to what extent this forum has been leveraged to advance youth development. Other key multilateral platforms that the youth sector could leverage include among others, SADC, African Union, Group of 20 (G20), Commonwealth, and United Nations.

2.12.4 Gender issues

Whilst gender issues are not necessarily about young women only, data suggests that they are more affected or likely to face discrimination because their gender compared to young men. Almost in all the youth challenges discussed across the pillars, young women are more likely to be more affected than young man. For example, young women are more likely to live in poverty, drop out of school, be unemployed, head a household that reports hunger, be exposed to violence, and to be infected with HIV. This suggests that the IYDS must have a gender sensitive dynamic to deal with these issues.

3. The Socio-Economic Landscape: What It Means for Youth Development

The previous sections affirmed that youth development cannot be done is piecemeal way as all the areas are interconnected and impact on each other in one way or another. Whilst the youth development pillars frame the priorities, youth development should not be seen as a finite phenomenon. Secondly, locating youth development in the overall government development programme will have a bigger impact than the NYDA trying to implement programmes. Thirdly, although there is progress in many areas of youth development, there are still challenges. Access to education at all levels has improved considerably, but is still has challenges and it compounded by inequalities. Limited youth economic participation is still a challenge both in terms of labour markets and participation in entrepreneurship. The concentrated nature of the economy and limited transformation in ownership contribute to limited access to economic opportunities. Like in education and the economy, the youth are more likely to experience limited access to health services. While social cohesion and nation building are necessary in the long run, they are still limited by economic exclusion and deep rooted discriminatory practices.

Fourthly, youth socio-economic exclusion is multi-dimensional, which means interventions should also be multidimensional. These multiple dimensions include social class, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, area of economic participation, geographic location, etc. To put this into perspective, a rural young woman with disabilities, heading a poor household is facing exclusion at multiple levels. So, when interventions are developed all this dimensions must be considered while appreciating their intricate interconnectedness. Education and skills development, creating economic opportunities both in the labour market and in business, ensuring that young people live a healthy and safe life characterised by access to health care services, encouraging youth participation in civic and nation-building activities should be at the centre of the interventions in this strategy. Lastly, the efficacy of youth programmes proposed in this strategy will also depend on the efficacy of the youth development machinery. Strong youth machinery coupled with constant evaluation of the interventions is also important to ensure that the proposed implementation plan is making the desired impact.

4. Scope, Assumptions, and Limitations of the Strategy

The strategy is framed by the five pillars in the NYP (2030), the terms of reference, which effectively determine the scope of the strategy. This might create an impression that youth development might neatly be contained in five pillars, which in practice is a fallacy. Although the strategy focuses on five pillars, youth development extends beyond these areas and is affected by a range of interconnected factors that shape young people's experiences and outcomes. Secondly, using the pillars to frame IYDS should be seen as way of focusing the strategy rather an exclusion devise. This implicitly suggest that the core of the strategy is to provide a focused implementation plan rather than a panacea to solve all the youth challenges. Similarly, the background on youth development provided here should be seen as broad context rather than a comprehensive research on the status of youth.

Given that there is always a lag between data collection and reporting, available data is not necessarily the most recent. For example, Census reporting may take from two to five years between collection and reporting and publishing of the findings. In other words, even if the publication date of the report could reflect a recent date, the data used will be a little older than that publication date. Although with certain statistics like the Mid-Year Population Estimates, the Labour Force Surveys and the GDP data, the statistics are relatively more recent. So when available data is used, it is important to take that lag into account or to have an understanding of how data is collected and reported. Secondly, because the NYDA does not have capacity to collect national data, the data used in this strategy is collected by other institutions, notably Statistics South Africa. This means that the available data often has gaps with regard to issues that the youth sector seeks to address.

The data reporting categories used by Statistic South Africa (15-34 years), who are the collectors of official statistics, does not align with youth definition in the National Youth Development Act as amended (14-35 years). The consequence of this is that a large number of youth aged 14 years and 35 years fall outside what is understood to be youth statistics, which makes planning a bit challenging as the NYDA is by law required to cater for these groups as well. Although Statistics South Africa's system allows estimates for 14- and 35-year-olds to be extracted separately, these figures are not readily available in official statistical releases. As a result, information on these groups is not readily available for planning, monitoring and policy development.

5. Governance and Coordination of the Integrated Youth Development Strategy

Given the multiple institutions' involvement in the implementation of the IYDS and the multiple programmes, it is important to clarify the governance and co-ordination mechanism to avoid misunderstanding about roles and responsibilities, and possible duplications and neglect of certain areas that may need strategic intervention.

The NYDA as the Key driver of the strategy

While other institutions have an important role to play in the implementation of the strategy, the NYDA has a primary responsibility to co-ordinate and to ensure that the strategy is implemented.

This may include giving guidance, support and even holding the implementers accountable through the NYDA's executive authority. This means that the NYDA should evaluate the performance of the strategy.

The DWYP

As the executive authority, the Department of Women, Youth, and People with Disabilities will lobby and advocate for the implementation of this strategy at cabinet and other high levels of government, where in most cases the NYDA is not directly represented. This could also include using section 19 of the NYDA act to develop regulations that could assist the department in ensuring that all the state organs contribute to the implementation of this strategy.

The National Treasury

Without resources implementation of the IYDS is

6. Operationalising the Integrated Youth Development Strategy: Implementation Framework, Targets, and Responsibilities

6.1 PILLAR 1: Quality Education, Skills and Second Chances

Interventions on this pillar are focused on equal access to quality education as a mechanism to that contribute towards empowering young people and reducing poverty and inequality. It is recognised in this document that there is a notable progress recorded, and education clearly all other pillars in that one's education level influences the economic opportunities one can access and more likely influence their health choices and risky behaviour, and their participation in civic and nation building activities. Interventions consider the following:

Ensure access to EDC, especially in rural areas

- Provision of quality basic education through an international, decolonized and futuristic curriculum focused on solving youth challenges
- Strengthened second chance programme ensuring no one is left behind
- Safeguarding the school environment for a health and safety that allows conducive learning and teaching
- Enhanced collaboration with industry partners for provision of practical skills to TVET students

IYDS IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2026-2029						
STRATEGIC OUTCOME 1 **Increased access to quality education**						
INTERVENTION	LEAD IMPLEMENTER	INDICATOR(S)	BASELINE	2026/2027	2027/28	2028/29
Ensuring universal access to quality ECD and early learning programme for all	DBE, Social Development	A number of EDC centres in schools and rural areas	New Indicator			

		A number of children benefitting from the Early Childhood Development (ECD) subsidy A number of children accessing registered Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes		1 000 000 1 050 000	1 200 000 1 150 000	1 250 000 1 200 000
Reduce school dropout, repetition, and poor progression through integrated learner support	DBE					
Developing safe learning environments	DBE, DHET, SAPS, Civil Society					
Develop teachers and review curriculum to promote problem solving, employability, entrepreneurship, and adaptation to the 4IR	DBE, DHET, DSTI					
Implement inter-disciplinary early intervention programmes for	DSD, DBE, DSAC, Civil Society	A number of stakeholders reached to raise awareness towards ending School-Related Gender-Based Violence		6000	6000	6500

healthy development for young people						
Provide second chances to facilitate completion and re-engagement with educational institutions	DBE, DHET, Civil Society	A number of learners obtaining subject passes towards National Senior Certificate (NSC) or Senior Certificate (amended) SC (a) supported through the Second Change Matric Programme per year		90 000	95 000	100 000
Provide ongoing career guidance for technical, technology-based, and productive sectors of the economy	DBE, DSTI, DOL, Industry					
STRATEGIC OUTCOME 2 **Improved skills for the economy**						
Increase opportunities for quality post-school skills training for all	DHET, Industry, SETAs					

6.2 PILLAR 2: Economic Transformation, Entrepreneurship, and Job Creation

The main focus of this pillar is ensuring that South Africa benefits from its demographic dividend through facilitating full participation of youth in the economy. Interventions must therefore provide strategies that will instigate youth interest in fully being active in entrepreneurship and economic growth, whilst recognizing current barriers and how to navigate them. Interventions to consider the following:

- Prioritisation of interventions to stimulate more rapid inclusive growth by all state organs and sectors
- Enhanced support for all youth small business and cooperatives through adequate funding and training
- Ensure limitation of red tape to allow participation of youth businesses in sectors
- Resuscitation of youth set-asides in preferential procurement policies of companies
- Employment Equity targets and implementation focused on youth and disabled individuals

IYDS IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2026-2029						
STRATEGIC OUTCOME 1 **Increased employment and work opportunities (Reduce Unemployment)**						
INTERVENTION	LEAD IMPLEMENTER	INDICATOR(S)	BASELINE	2026/2027	2027/2028	2028/2029
Implement the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative and Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan	Presidency, SEDFA, DOL			55% youth, 58% women and 1% persons with disabilities (MTDP)		60% youth, 50% women and 7% persons with disabilities 2 million by DEL and its entities

Continue to implement public employment programmes (including the Presidential Employment Stimulus, the National Youth Service, Expanded Public Works, etc.) and prioritise work experience for young people	DPW, Dept of Rural Dev & Agriculture, DOL NYDA	A number of public employment programmes implemented		Public Employment Services: 280 000 jobs; UIF: 67 000; Compensation Fund: 4000; National Pathway Management Network: 650 000		
Support unemployed people to secure work opportunities and productive livelihoods	DoL					
STRATEGIC OUTCOME2 **Enabling and supportive business environment**						
Reduced red tape and streamline support for small enterprises, entrepreneurs and cooperatives, especially in townships and villages, to thrive.	The Presidency Department of Small Business Development	Number of administrative and regulatory reforms/reviews burden to reduced interventions per department. A percentage of Informal MSMEs provided with	 1 804 434			 5% of informal MSMEs provided with

		formalisation support				formalization support (Mid-term, cumulative) 10% of informal MSMEs provided with formalization support (End-term, cumulative)
Implement set-asides for youth across the sectors	Treasury, DPME NYDA	Percentage of Public Procurement set-aside for youth-owned enterprises implemented across sectors				
Facilitate the reduction of concentration and monopolies	DSBD					
Involve youth in land reform, rural development, and agriculture value chain	Dept. of Rural Development & Agriculture,					
Support township and rural economies for economic transformation, job creation,	SEDFA, Dept of Rural Dev, DOL,	Number of start-up and new MSMEs	41 205 youth business start-ups that have been supported			25000 youth start-ups and new MSMEs

and employment in a high absorption capacity		supported financially and non-financially	financially and non-financially			supported financially and non-financially (Mid-year term, cumulative) 50000 youth start-ups and new MSMEs supported financially and non-financially (End-year term, cumulative)
Develop and support youth-owned businesses and cooperatives particularly those in township and rural, and those owned by youth with disabilities	SEDFA, DBE, DHET, Dept of Rural Development, NYDA					

6.3 PILLAR 3: Physical/Mental Health and Response to Pandemics

Promotion of a healthy lifestyle among youth has become more urgent. For South Africa to benefit from its demographic dividend, it needs young people who are physically and mentally capable to actively participate in all aspects of development. Literature in this pillar highlighted different obstacles prohibiting youth from achieving a healthy state, it is therefore imperative that interventions under this pillar are intentional and measurable for achievement of maximum impact. The following considerations are made:

- Promotion of heathy lifestyles through early prevention mechanisms
- Support for youth affected by HIV & AIDS through provision of services such as counselling, testing and treatment
- Improved participation in Sports Activities
- Entrenched rehabilitation and reintegration of Ex-offenders in society
- Combating Substance Abuse especially in schools and communities
- Provision of workshops and awareness campaigns on social ills and preventative measures

IYDS IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2026-2029				
STRATEGIC OUTCOME 1 **Improved healthy lifestyles among youth**				
INTERVENTION	LEAD IMPLEMENTER	INDICATOR(S)	2026/2029	BASELINE
Support healthy lifestyles through promoting physical and mental	DoH, DSAC, DSD			
Promotion of mental health among youth	DoH, NGOs			
Combat substance abuse among youth	DSD, DOH,			

Promote sexual and reproductive health and rights	DOH, DSD			
Mitigate against impact of pandemics	DOH, DSD, DSTI			

6.4 PILLAR 4: Social Cohesion and Nation Building

The creation of a socially cohesive society depends on social inclusion, social capital and social mobility. Social Cohesion is positioned by NYP as a strategic principle and emphasizes the need for youth development interventions to promote social inclusion by ensuring their involvement in nation building. It is however highlighted that poverty, inequality and unemployed hinders social cohesion, it is therefore imperative that interventions under this pillar are mindful of such hindrances. The following considerations are made:

- Promote inclusion of youth in economic and social life of the country
- Capacitate youth on how to actively participate in decision making platforms in communities
- Implement programmes aimed at highlighting racism and its negative impact
- Improved youth participation in civic matters including increased participation in voting among youth through voter education
- Scale up National Youth Service Programme to promote nation building

IYDS IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2026-2029				
STRATEGIC OUTCOME 1 **Strengthened Social Cohesion and Nation Building (Improved patriotism)**				
INTERVENTION	LEAD IMPLEMENTER	INDICATOR(S)	2026/27	BASELINE
Use multi-pronged approach to entrenching social cohesion and nation-building	DSAC,			
Adequately resource and scale up the	Treasury, Presidency, NYDA			

National Youth Service Programme				
Expose youth to positive constitutional values that promote South African identity	DSAC			
Support young South Africans in confronting all forms of discrimination including systemic racism	DSAC,			
Foster leadership and active citizenry amongst the youth	COGTA, Municipalities, IEC			
Expand and adequately resource compulsory school and community sports	DBE, DSAC, DPW			
Utilise the 4th Industrial Revolution technologies to foster Social Cohesion and Nation-Building	Dept. of Communications, DSTI,			

6.5 PILLAR 5: Responsive Youth Development Machinery

This pillar concerns itself with ensuring the youth machinery is strong, well-functioning and responsive to be able to achieve all proposed interventions in this implementation plan. It recognizes that youth development requires a collaborative effort and integration. The interventions consider the following:

- Improve budget allocation for youth development across sectors
- Professionalise youth development to allow standardization uniformity
- Strengthen Institutional mechanisms in government for improved coordination
- Capacitate and skill youth practitioners for impactful delivery of youth development programmes
- Promote integration of youth development into policies, budgets and strategic plans of departments and entities

IYDS IMPLEMENTATION PLAN 2026-2029							
STRATEGIC OUTCOME 1 **Effective and Responsive Youth Development Machinery**							
INTERVENTION	LEAD IMPLEMENTER	INDICATOR(S)	2026/2027	2027/28	2028/29		BASELINE
Strengthen Youth Institutions and structures to ensure effectiveness and responsiveness	DWYPD, National, Provincial & Municipal Youth Focal Points						
Coordinate service delivery for high impact service provision	COGTA, DWYPD						

Facilitate recognition of youth development practice as a profession	DHET, QCTO							

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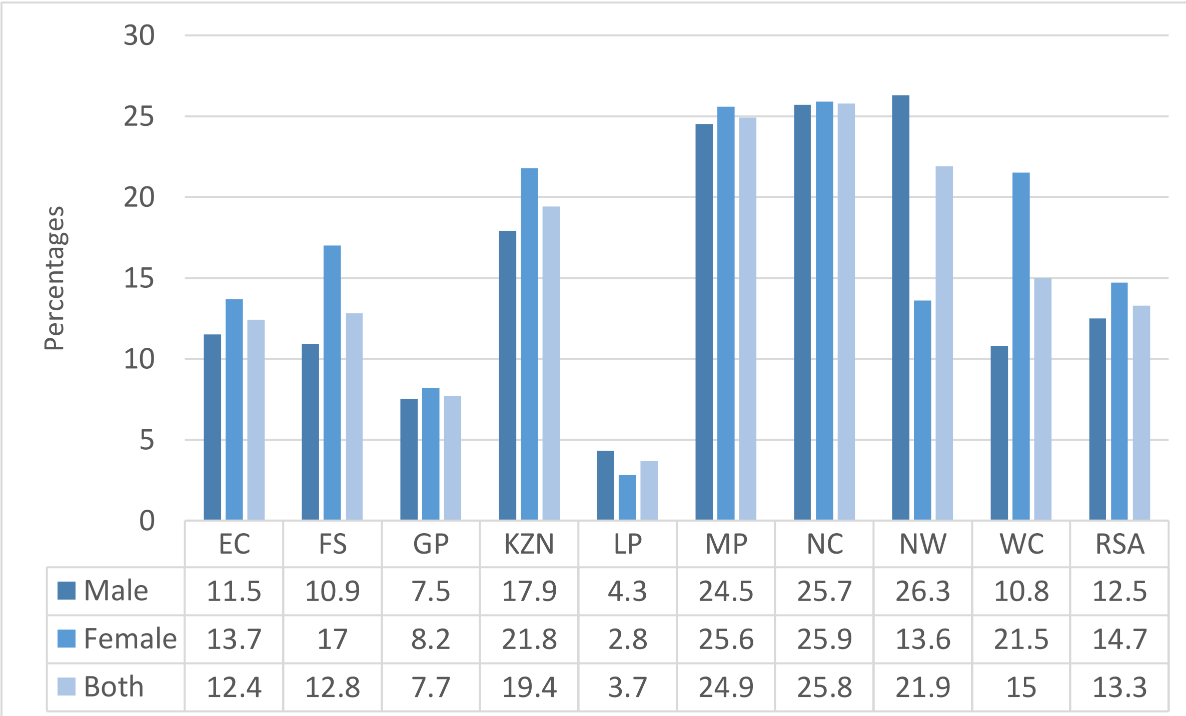
APPENDIX A: POLICY FRAMEWORK INFORMING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

POLICY FRAMEWORK INFORMING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT		
Policy/Legislation/Plan	**Key Provisions**	**Youth relevance and IYDS coordination/accountability implications**
The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996)	Supreme law guaranteeing rights that directly underpin youth development, including education (s29), healthcare, food, water and social security (s27), housing (s26), and children's rights (s28). Establishes equality, dignity and freedom as core values. Provides for cooperative governance (Chapter 3) and allocates service delivery responsibilities across spheres (Schedules 4 and 5).	Provides the constitutional basis for youth development, obligating the state to progressively realise services and opportunities for young people. Enables integrated, cross-sector implementation of the IYDS through cooperative governance. Strengthens accountability by allowing youth-related rights to be enforced through legal and institutional oversight mechanisms.
South African Human Rights Commission Act 40 of 2013	Establishes the SAHRC as a Chapter 9 institution to promote, protect and monitor human rights. Empowers it to investigate violations, conduct hearings, issue recommendations, require information from organs of state, and report to Parliament. Mandates monitoring of socio-economic rights (including education, health, housing, water and social security).	Strengthens accountability for youth development outcomes by monitoring whether government fulfils constitutional rights affecting young people. Supports IYDS implementation through oversight across sectors, ensuring departments are held accountable for service delivery to youth. Provides a mechanism for complaints and redress, enabling young people to assert their rights where programmes or services fail.
National Development Plan (NDP) 2030	Long-term national plan aimed at eliminating poverty and reducing inequality by 2030. Prioritises job creation, education and skills development, economic inclusion, health, and building state capability. Emphasises improving basic education quality, expanding post-school opportunities, and increasing employment through economic growth and	Positions youth as central to development, with strong focus on education, skills, and employment pathways, directly aligning with IYDS priorities. Supports cross-sector coordination by providing a unified national framework guiding all departments. Strengthens accountability through measurable long-term targets, though implementation depends on alignment of departmental plans and capacity.

	entrepreneurship. Promotes integrated planning and coordination across sectors.	
Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) 2024–2029	Five-year government implementation plan aligned to the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030. Sets priority outcomes, targets and actions for the current administration, including economic growth, job creation, service delivery, and state capability. Translates long-term NDP goals into time-bound, measurable interventions with assigned responsibilities across departments.	Provides the operational framework for implementing youth development priorities within the IYDS over the medium term. Strengthens coordination by assigning responsibilities and targets across sectors affecting youth (education, employment, health). Enhances accountability through clear deliverables and monitoring mechanisms. Differs from the NDP in that it is short-term and implementation-focused, while the NDP is long-term and strategic; the MTDP is effectively the execution instrument of the NDP.
National Youth Development Agency Act, 2008 (Act No. 54 of 2008) as amended by Act No. 22 of 2024	Establishes the NYDA as a national public entity responsible for initiating, designing, coordinating, monitoring and evaluating youth development. The Act mandates the Agency to set annual youth development priorities, contribute to the National Youth Policy and Integrated Youth Development Strategy (IYDS), develop implementation guidelines, and promote a uniform approach across government, private sector and civil society. The 2024 amendment strengthens objects and functions, introduces expanded operational functions (including youth employment programmes, funding and support mechanisms, research and advisory services), formalises reporting (biennial youth status reports and financial reporting to the Minister and Parliament), strengthens Board governance and introduces term limits and disqualification criteria, and requires organs of state to assist the Agency.	Provides the central statutory mechanism for implementing and coordinating the IYDS. Strengthens alignment between the National Youth Policy and implementation instruments. Enhances coordination by requiring cooperation across sectors and spheres of government. Improves accountability through structured reporting to the Minister and Parliament and clearer governance provisions. However, coordination remains facilitative rather than enforceable across departments.

Skills Development Act, 1998 (Act 97 of 1998), as amended	Establishes the national framework for skills development and training. Provides for Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), the National Skills Authority, and workplace-based learning (including learnerships). Aims to improve workforce skills, increase productivity, and facilitate entry into employment. Supported by funding mechanisms through the Skills Development Levies Act, 1999.	Central to youth development by enabling skills acquisition, workplace learning and employability pathways, directly supporting IYDS priorities. Promotes coordination between education, training institutions and industry through SETAs. Strengthens accountability through structured planning (sector skills plans) and monitoring of training outcomes, though effectiveness depends on SETA performance and alignment with labour market needs.

APPENDIX B: Youth-headed households that reported hunger by province and by sex



	EC	FS	GP	KZN	LP	MP	NC	NW	WC	RSA
Male	11.5	10.9	7.5	17.9	4.3	24.5	25.7	26.3	10.8	12.5
Female	13.7	17	8.2	21.8	2.8	25.6	25.9	13.6	21.5	14.7
Both	12.4	12.8	7.7	19.4	3.7	24.9	25.8	21.9	15	13.3

Figure 4: Percentage of households headed by youth that reported hunger by province and by sex, 2025
Source: Stats SA, 2026

APPENDIX C: Grade 9 South Africa's Maths and Science score in TIMMS, 2011, 2015, 2019 & 2023 – by province (2023)

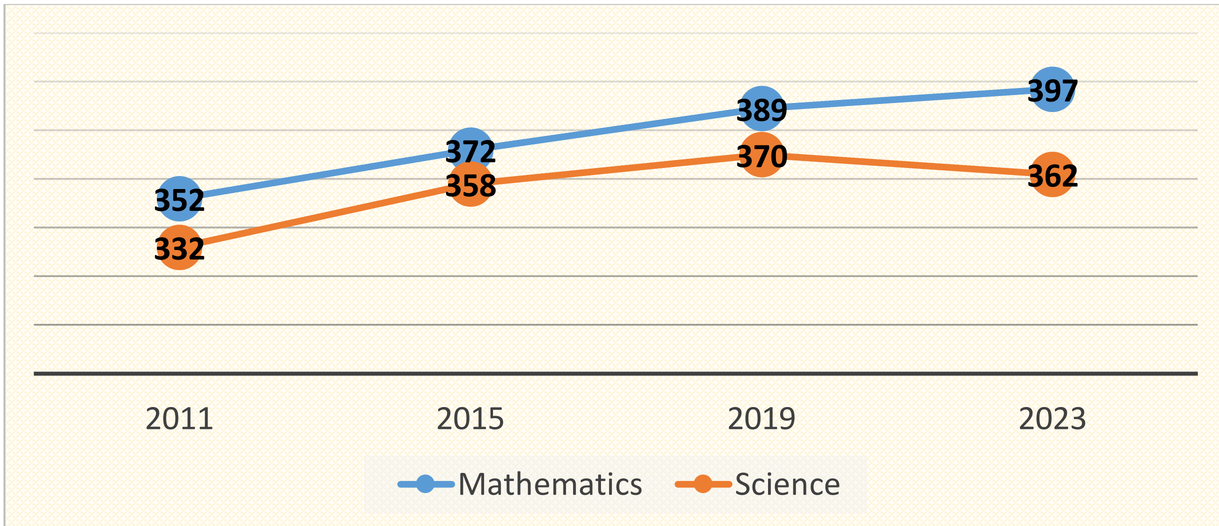
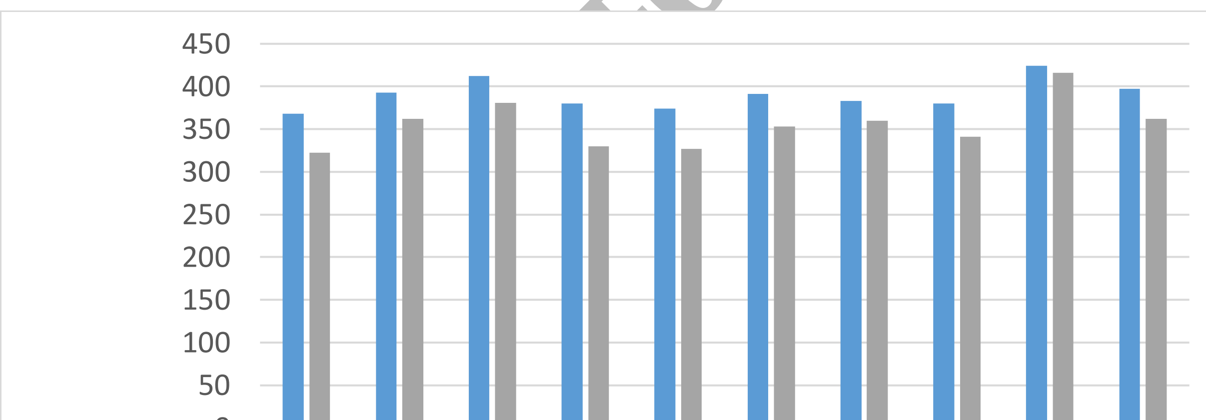


Figure A: Grade 9 South Africa's Mathematics and Science score in TIMMS, 2011, 2015, 2019 & 2023

Source: DBE (2024): TIMMS Report (2023)

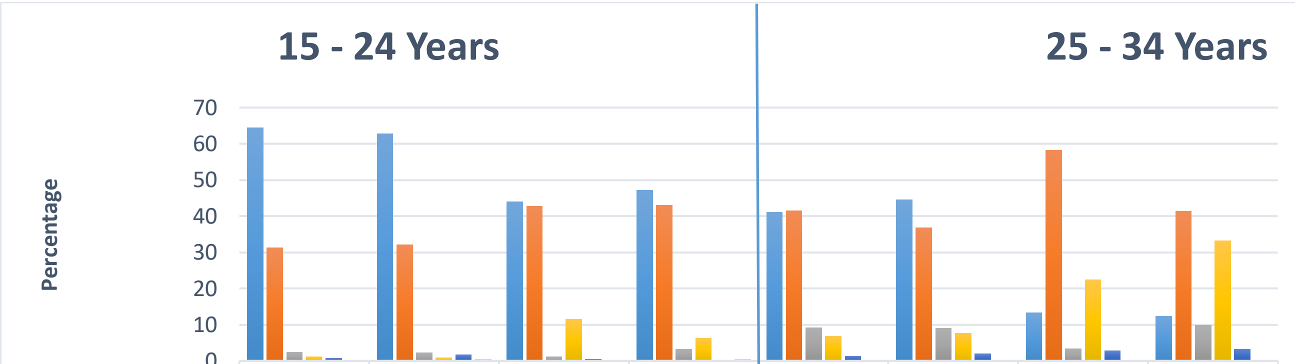


	EC	FS	GP	KZN	LP	MP	NC	NW	WC	SA
Mathematics	368	393	412	380	374	391	383	380	424	397
Science	322	362	381	330	327	353	360	341	416	362

Figure B: Grade 9 Mathematics and Sciences Scores by province, 2023

Source: DBE (2024): TIMMS Report (2023)

APPENDIX D: Youth Education Attainment by Age

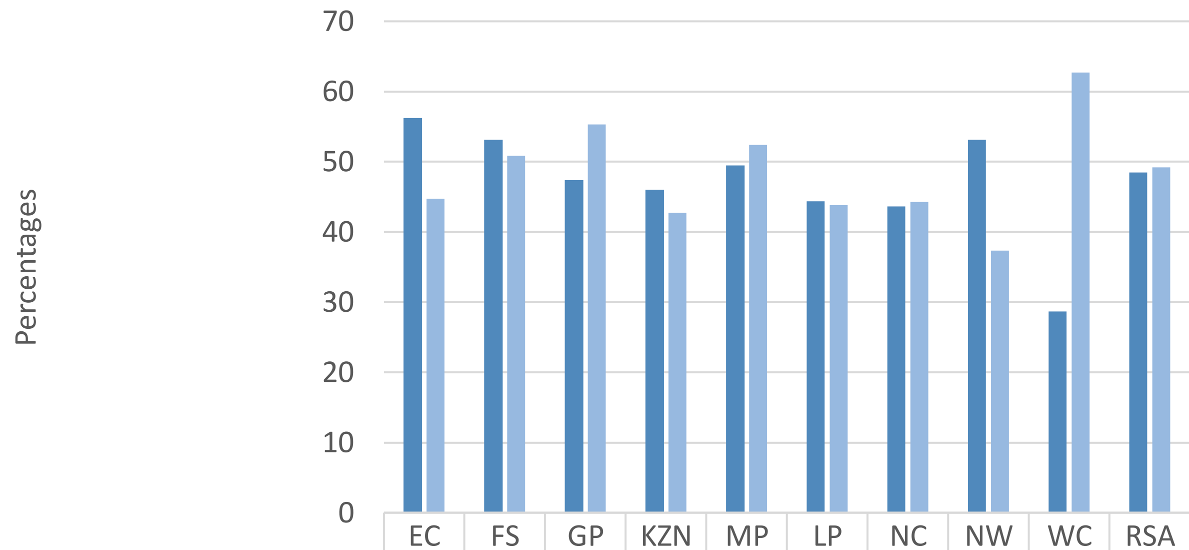


	15 - 24 Years				25 - 34 Years			
	Black African	Coloured	Indian/ Asian	White	Black African	Coloured	Indian/Asian	White
Less than matric	64.4	62.8	44	47.2	41.1	44.5	13.3	12.4
Matric	31.3	32.1	42.8	43	41.5	36.8	58.2	41.3
Other tertiary	2.4	2.2	1.1	3.2	9.2	9	3.3	9.8
Graduates	1.2	0.9	11.5	6.2	6.8	7.7	22.4	33.2
Other	0.8	1.7	0.5	0.1	1.3	2	2.8	3.2
Unspecified	0.1	0.3	0	0.3	0	0	0	0

Figure A: Distribution of the highest levels of education attained by the youth, by population group and age group, 2024

Source: Stats SA (2026)

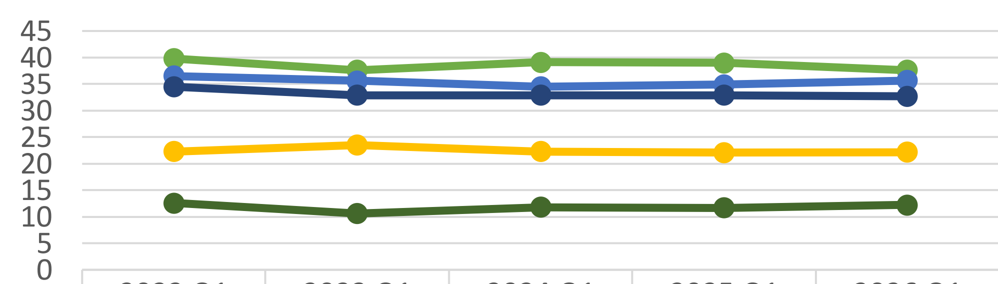
APPENDIX E: Unemployment and Labour Participation rates by province and by age, 2026, and Unemployment by Education level, 2022-2026



	EC	FS	GP	KZN	MP	LP	NC	NW	WC	RSA
Unemployment	56.2	53.1	47.4	46	49.5	44.4	43.6	53.1	28.7	48.5
Labour Participation rate	44.7	50.8	55.3	42.7	52.4	43.8	44.3	37.3	62.7	49.2

Unemployment and Labour Participation Rates by Province 2026 (1st Quarter data)

Source: Stats SA (2026) 1st Labour force Survey

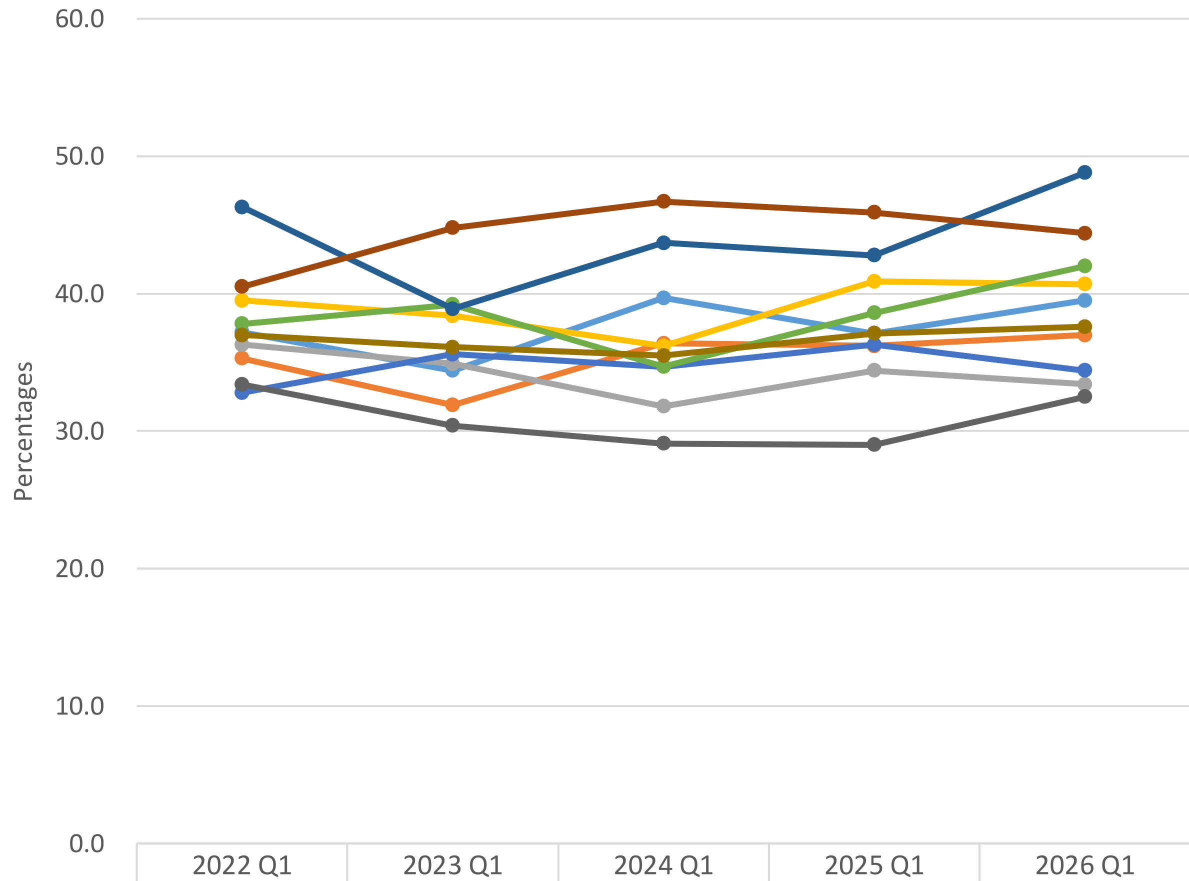


	2022 Q1	2023 Q1	2024 Q1	2025 Q1	2026 Q1
Less Matric	39.8	37.6	39.1	39	37.6
Matric	36.5	35.6	34.5	34.9	35.7
Other Tertiary	22.3	23.5	22.3	22.1	22.2
Graduates	12.6	10.6	11.8	11.7	12.2
RSA	34.5	32.9	32.9	32.9	32.7

Figure: Unemployment rates by level of education from 2022 to 2026

Source: Stats SA (2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026) Quarterly Labour force Surveys

APPENDIX F: Percentage of NEET aged 15-24 from 2022 to 2026 by province



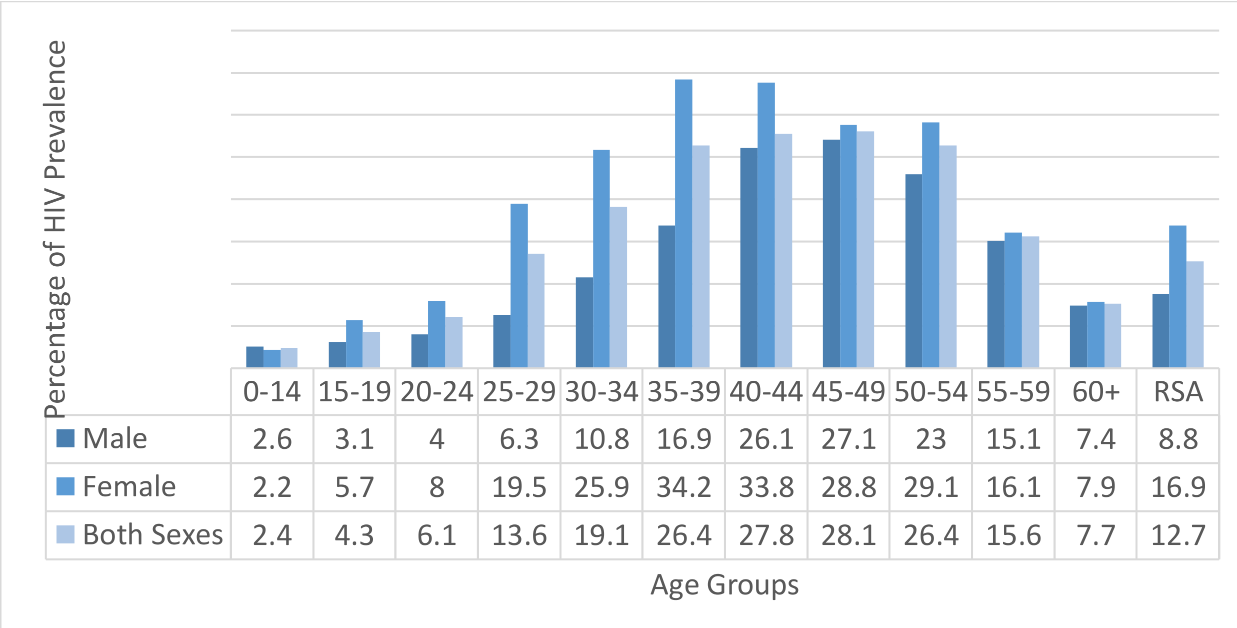
	2022 Q1	2023 Q1	2024 Q1	2025 Q1	2026 Q1
EC	37.2	34.4	39.7	37.1	39.5
FS	35.3	31.9	36.4	36.2	37.0
GP	36.3	34.9	31.8	34.4	33.4
KZN	39.5	38.4	36.2	40.9	40.7
LP	32.8	35.6	34.7	36.3	34.4
MP	37.8	39.2	34.7	38.6	42.0
NC	46.3	38.9	43.7	42.8	48.8
NW	40.5	44.8	46.7	45.9	44.4
WC	33.4	30.4	29.1	29.0	32.5
RSA	37.0	36.1	35.5	37.1	37.6

Percentage of NEET aged 15-24 from 2022 to 2026 by province

Source: Statistics SA (2026) Quarterly Labour Force trends data

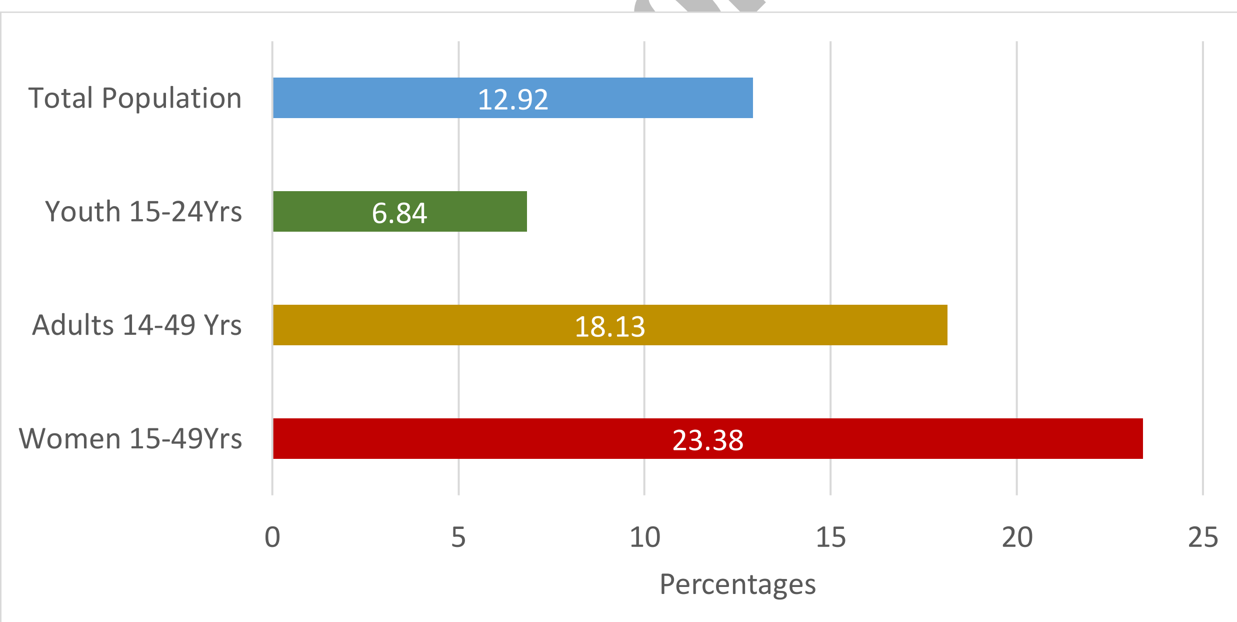
APPENDIX G:

APPENDIX H: HIV prevalence by age and sex, 2022 & the 2025 Estimates



	0-14	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60+	RSA
Male	2.6	3.1	4	6.3	10.8	16.9	26.1	27.1	23	15.1	7.4	8.8
Female	2.2	5.7	8	19.5	25.9	34.2	33.8	28.8	29.1	16.1	7.9	16.9
Both Sexes	2.4	4.3	6.1	13.6	19.1	26.4	27.8	28.1	26.4	15.6	7.7	12.7

HIV Prevalence in South Africa by age and sex, 2022
Source: Zuma, et.al, 2024



HIV Prevalence Estimates in South Africa by age and sex, 2025
Source: Midyear Population Estimates, 2025

APPENDIX I: