



SPEAKING NOTES FOR EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON
DR SUNSHINE MYENDE

**NMU AFRICA WEEK DIALOGUE – MESSAGE OF
SUPPORT**

27 MAY 2026

**SPEAKING NOTES BY THE EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON OF THE NYDA ON THE
OCCASION OF THE NMU AFRICA WEEK DIALOGUE – *Message of support* | ±10
minutes**

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One of the greatest contradictions facing our continent is that Africa has one of the youngest populations in the world, yet millions of young people continue to navigate inequality, unemployment, limited infrastructure, and exclusion from opportunity.

And yet despite these realities, young Africans continue to innovate.

They continue to create, adapt, organise, and solve problems - often with very limited resources, and often in environments where the odds are heavily stacked against them.

Programme Director, Dr Adelaide Karomo
Vice-Chancellor of Nelson Mandela University, Professor Sibongile Muthwa
Director of Student Governance and Development, Dr Mthokozisi Ntuli
SAUS President, Mr Moses Nkambako
SAYC President, Mr Thabo Sukanazo
Fellow colleagues of the University, colleagues in academia and contributors on today's programme, distinguished guests, students, young leaders, and partners gathered for Africa Week 2026

Good morning

Thank you for creating a platform that recognises that conversations about Africa's future cannot happen without young people at the centre of them. I also want to acknowledge all colleagues and contributors participating in today's discussion.

Conversations about water security, sanitation, climate resilience, sustainability, and youth innovation require collaboration across sectors and institutions. They require governments, universities, student formations, civil society, researchers, entrepreneurs, and communities themselves to work together in finding practical and sustainable solutions for the continent. Because the challenges facing Africa today are far too complex for any one institution to solve alone.



As we gather under this year's Africa Week theme, we must confront the realities many communities across our continent continue to face. Across Africa, including here in South Africa, there are still communities where access to clean and reliable water remains uncertain. There are schools and households where sanitation infrastructure remains inadequate and undignified. There are rural communities walking long distances for water. There are growing climate pressures exposing just how vulnerable many of our systems have become. And at the same time, we are asking young people to imagine and build better futures while many are still navigating unemployment, exclusion, and economic uncertainty.

This conversation then becomes of utter importance and relevance, because when we speak about youth innovation, we are not speaking about trends or fashionable concepts. We are speaking about the ability of young people to respond to real societal challenges with creativity, courage, and practical solutions. Too often, young people are invited into conversations, celebrated in speeches, photographed in reports, yet excluded from the very systems that shape implementation, funding, and decision-making.

And yet despite these barriers, young Africans continue to innovate. They innovate in classrooms and laboratories. They innovate in townships and rural communities. They innovate in informal economies. They innovate through survival, adaptation, entrepreneurship, research, technology, and community organising. In many parts of Africa, innovation has become a survival skill long before it became a policy conversation.

And if we are serious about Africa's future, then we must become equally serious about creating conditions in which youth innovation can survive, grow, and scale. Because innovation cannot become a privilege reserved only for those who already have access to infrastructure, funding, networks, and opportunity.

We cannot continue to ask young people to innovate while systems of access remain unequal. We cannot celebrate youth potential publicly while underinvesting in it structurally. And we cannot speak about sustainable development while excluding young people from shaping the very solutions we claim to seek.

Young people have spent many years fighting for a seat at the table. But perhaps the conversation we must now also have is what happens once young people finally arrive at that table. Because leadership is not only about access. It is also about responsibility. It is about preparation. It is about vision.



And yes, it is also about what I would call “table manners” - the ability to lead with discipline, collaboration, integrity, and accountability once opportunities are opened.

As young people, we must not only demand inclusion. We must be prepared to influence, to build, to contribute meaningfully, and to carry responsibility with seriousness and purpose.

We must be prepared to move beyond symbolic participation and into active leadership. Because Africa does not only need young people present in rooms. Africa needs young people who are ready to shape decisions, influence systems, build institutions, and lead transformation responsibly.

Innovation is also broader than technology alone. Innovation is a student researcher developing practical solutions for sanitation challenges in underserved communities. It is a young entrepreneur creating water-saving systems in drought-affected areas. It is young people using indigenous knowledge systems and applying them to agroecology and agroclimate processes. It is young people using digital tools and community experience to solve environmental and developmental challenges affecting their communities directly.

Africa’s greatest resource is not beneath the ground. It is sitting in classrooms, communities, informal economies, laboratories, and township streets across this continent. And that is why institutions matter. Institutions of higher learning, in particular, have a critical role to play in shaping Africa’s developmental future. Universities are not only spaces of learning; they are spaces where ideas are tested, where innovation is nurtured, and where future leadership is developed.

But the question we must continue asking is whether the ideas produced within our institutions are reaching the communities that need them most. Are innovation ecosystems accessible to poor and working-class youth? Are student-led solutions receiving practical support beyond academic recognition? Are we building graduates alone, or are we building problem-solvers connected to the realities facing society?

These are important questions for all of us.

At the National Youth Development Agency, we believe that youth development cannot happen in isolation. It requires partnerships, ecosystems of support, and institutions willing to work collaboratively in creating pathways for meaningful youth participation.

Our responsibility is not simply to speak about youth potential, but to help create conditions in which that potential can translate into entrepreneurship, innovation,



leadership, economic participation, and sustainable development. And this is why partnerships between institutions such as the NYDA, universities, civil society, innovation hubs, researchers, and communities remain critically important.

Because the future of Africa will not be built by policy documents alone. It will be built by young people who are trusted, supported, equipped, and given the opportunity to lead.

To the students and young people gathered here today: your ideas will always matter. Your voice matters. Your contribution matters. Africa's future is not waiting somewhere ahead of you. It is already being shaped by the decisions, creativity, leadership, and courage you choose to bring into the present.

The question before us is not whether Africa's young people are capable of solving the continent's challenges. The evidence is already around us every single day. The real question is whether our institutions are prepared to trust, support, and invest in young people boldly enough. Because ultimately, Africa's future will not be built for young people. It will be built with them - and increasingly, by them.

Thank you once again to Nelson Mandela University for convening this important dialogue, and thank you to all colleagues and contributors who continue to advance conversations about youth-led solutions for Africa's development.