

EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON OF THE NYDA DR SUNSHINE MYENDE WOMENS MONTH OPINION PIECE

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We began our term as the newly appointed NYDA Board on the first day of Women's Month — a time when South Africa honours the courage and resilience of the women of 1956. This year we commemorate women's month under a powerful and urgent theme: **Building Resilient Economies for All**. But let us ask ourselves who do we truly mean by "all"? Because if we are serious about resilience, about economic justice, and about inclusive growth — then young women, especially those in rural villages and townships, cannot be an afterthought. I contend they must be at the center of our national development agenda. When we unpack this theme, it isn't a mere slogan, as the newly appointed board we believe in the current context in our country it is a national imperative, because indeed true resilience must be inclusive and it must be rooted in equity and driven by justice.

Across our provinces, young women—particularly those in rural and township communities - continue to carry a disproportionate burden of unemployment, exclusion, and unpaid care work.

These young women are not lacking in potential, talent, or drive. What they often lack is access to finance, to information, to safe spaces, and to real opportunities. When we speak of building resilient economies, we must ensure these women are not an afterthought. They must be central to everything we design, fund, and deliver. While incredible work must be acknowledged and applauded, we must for the sake of progress and development and strengthening our democracy ensure we are honest about these realities so we can find solutions and move forward, together.

We contend that while there is a crisis of access young women demonstrate resilience already. In communities that are far from major urban centres, we see young women sustaining local economies because it is young women that we see; running informal businesses (like salons and selling fruits and vegetables), often with no formal support or training, leading community responses to crises, often unpaid and caring for families, while seeking opportunities for self-improvement

However, resilience alone should not be the standard they are asked to uphold. Our role as public institutions is to ensure they are also resourced, recognised, and respected.

As we enter women's month I was reminded of the work by Dr. Mabasa, a respected labour and economic sociologist. He brings our attention to the foundational principles of the developmental state—a concept rooted in the experiences of rapid industrialization and structural transformation in

Southeast Asia. These principles are echoed in our own economic policy frameworks such as the National Development Plan (NDP), the New Growth Path (NGP), and others.

In his work he documents both the progress and setbacks South Africa has faced in its journey to build a post-apartheid developmental state. One of the critical insights emerging from this body of work is that while policies like Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) have made important strides, they often fall short of the deeper, more strategic state interventions characteristic of successful developmental states. I agree with Dr. Mabasa's argument that our model of empowerment has leaned too heavily on a limited set of state functions—primarily procurement, partial privatisation, regulation, and legislative development—without embedding broader developmental goals.

In contrast, developmental states typically go further by actively nurturing emerging indigenous enterprises (which we've seen recently that there are some efforts in this regard), offering strategic support that builds long-term productive capacity. Here in South Africa, we've focused too narrowly on regulatory compliance and insufficiently on building the capacity of black entrepreneurs—particularly those in historically marginalised communities—to thrive and innovate.

Crucially, the state must strengthen its ability to navigate and align a diverse set of economic interests, especially those shaped by historical exclusion, unequal access to capital, and power imbalances with transnational corporations. If the state does not take a more active, strategic role, we risk weakening the social compact between government and emerging black businesses. Furthermore, focusing solely on transforming large firms or creating a narrow class of empowered individuals is not enough. We must adopt clear, well-targeted policy instruments that enable beneficiaries to actively contribute to national development priorities: job creation, structural transformation of the economy, inclusion of rural communities, and the eradication of racialised poverty and income inequality.

This perspective is especially urgent when we consider the structural barriers that continue to marginalise young women—particularly in rural areas—from participating meaningfully in the economy. Building a resilient and inclusive economy demands that we centre their experiences and potential. Expanding state capacity must go hand-in-hand with focused, gender-responsive interventions that empower young rural women not just as participants but as drivers of economic transformation.

As we reflect on global examples, particularly the experiences of developmental states in Southeast Asia, we must ask ourselves: how do we increase and fast track efforts to reindustrialise and rebuild inclusively after years of economic stagnation? How do we ensure that empowerment translates into

shared prosperity, tangible transformation and long-term resilience? For us as young people—and especially for young women—this is not just an economic question; it is a matter of justice and national survival.

One can boast about the work done by the NYDA and indeed we are pleased to form part of such a progressive institution but as always more needs to be done. It can no longer be fashionable and in fact I argue we must begin to feel a sense of shame when we must still in this modern democracy highlight these complex challenges which young women are disproportionately affected by.

As part of fulfilling the NYDA's vision of creating "A credible, capable, inclusive and activist development agency that is responsive to the plight of South Africa's youth," the NYDA embarked on various programmes and engagements aimed at fulfilling the NYDA's vision. The work of the NYDA has been underpinned by the following strategic areas; skills development, job placements, grant allocations for entrepreneurs, programs focused on empowering the girl child, women in sport and mentorship programs.

We must however, do more. We must ensure greater access to our opportunities, ensuring that young women in rural areas and townships can access funding and mentorship and skills development without barriers. We must also in designing our programs consider the real conditions that young women face to make participation practical and safe and consider things like; lack of transport, childcare responsibilities and digital exclusion. These factors must not be seen as personal obstacles—they are systemic issues we are mandated to address.

Furthermore, we must also do more in working with our partners in local government, education and civil society and ensure our initiatives reach the last mile—not only those near metropolitan centres.

Moreover, we must ensure we create platforms where we develop programs **with young women and not for young women**. The voices of Young women must be elevated in government and in policy and practice. Their lived experiences are policy expertise.

I contend, the gender question is not as a standalone stream of work. It is not a line item. It is not an optional pillar. It is the foundation of effective, sustainable youth development.

As we commemorate women's month as a board, and as public servants, we call on all political heads and officials working in government to recommit to ensuring that every programme is assessed through a gender-responsive lens—from its planning, to its budgeting, to its implementation and impact evaluation. Women and children must not be left behind. This is our commitment as the NYDA Board.

We contend that we must build boldly—but also wisely. **A resilient economy is one that does not leave people behind.** And if we are to build one for all, then we must prioritise those who have too often been excluded, that is **young women in our rural and township communities.**

They are not waiting to be saved—they are ready to lead. Our job is to ensure the path is open, the tools are accessible, and the support is unwavering.

Dr Sunshine Minenhle Myende

Chairperson of the NYDA Board