



**SPEAKING NOTES FOR EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON
DR SUNSHINE MYENDE**

**YOUTH DIALOGUE ON VIOLENCE IN SOUTH
AFRICA – UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG**

**THEME: YOUTH VOICES ON VIOLENCE:
UNDERSTANDING, IMPACT, AND SOLUTIONS**

11:20 – 11:50

**Session 3: Youth Engagement & Participation
(30 mins)**

10 APRIL 2026



SPEAKING NOTES BY THE EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON OF THE NYDA ON THE OCCASION OF THE YOUTH DIALOGUE ON VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA –

Session 3: Youth engagement and participation | ±10 minutes

16 March 2026

*Programme Director,
Distinguished guests,
Colleagues, members of the academic community,
and young people,*

Good morning.

I want to begin by asking you to think about something very real, very practical.

Think about a young person in your community. Someone your age, or slightly younger. Someone whose life did not begin very differently from yours. Now think about how their life may have taken a different turn. Perhaps they dropped out of school. Perhaps they became involved in crime. Perhaps they have already encountered the justice system.

Now reflect on this honestly: at what point did we lose them? Was it at the moment of a decision? Or was it long before that? Because if we are honest, in many of our communities, violence does not begin with an incident. It begins with conditions. It begins in environments where inequality is deeply entrenched, where opportunities are limited, and where young people are required to navigate complex realities with very little support.

As many South African scholars have argued, violence in our country is not incidental. It is historically produced and socially embedded. Over time, it has become normalised within the environments that many young people grow up in. This means that when we speak about youth violence, we are not only speaking about individual choices. We are speaking about systems, structures, and accumulated disadvantage.

It is in this context that the significance of this year becomes important. As we mark the 50th anniversary of the 1976 student uprisings, we are reminded of a generation of young people who confronted a system of structural violence. That violence was



not only physical. It was embedded in policy, in education, in spatial exclusion, and in the deliberate denial of dignity and opportunity. The uprising of 1976 was, in many ways, a response to those conditions. It was young people asserting their agency in the face of systemic injustice.

Fifty years later, while the political context has changed, we must ask ourselves whether the structural conditions that shape young people's lives have changed sufficiently.

Today, violence may not always present itself in the same overtly political form, but it continues to manifest in deeply social and economic ways. It is reflected in communities where unemployment is high, where inequality remains stark, where access to opportunities is uneven, and where young people are exposed to crime, substance abuse, and instability on a daily basis.

In this sense, violence has evolved, but it has not disappeared. It has, in many cases, become more localised, more intimate, and more normalised. And yet, despite this reality, young people are still too often positioned as passive recipients of interventions, rather than active participants in shaping them.

We develop policies, we design programmes, and we implement interventions. But the question we must continue to ask is: where are young people in that process? If participation is limited to consultation after decisions have already been made, then it is not meaningful participation. It does not shift power, and it does not produce sustainable outcomes.

Meaningful youth participation requires that young people are involved in shaping policy, influencing decision-making, and contributing to the development of violence prevention strategies from the outset.

However, we must also confront the barriers that make this difficult. Many young people do not know where or how to participate. Others do not feel safe enough to speak openly about their experiences. Some have disengaged because they do not see the impact of their contributions. And there are those who are structurally excluded altogether, particularly young people who are out of school, unemployed, or who have been in conflict with the law.

When participation is not intentionally designed to be inclusive, it becomes selective. And when it is selective, it excludes those who are most affected by violence. This is particularly evident when we consider young people who have been in conflict with the law. Once a young person has a criminal record, the pathways available to them



become significantly constrained.

Opportunities are limited, stigma persists, and reintegration into society becomes complex.

As the National Youth Development Agency, we have made it our responsibility to not forget young people who are in Correctional Facilities. Our officials have been intentional with engaging in this space through partnerships with Correctional Facilities, where we provide business management training and life skills development to support rehabilitation and reintegration. This work has reinforced an important lesson: rehabilitation without access to opportunity is incomplete.

If a young person exits a Correctional Facility and returns to the same conditions, without support, without pathways into economic participation, then we cannot expect different outcomes.

This brings us to the question of prevention. Prevention requires that young people are not only seen as beneficiaries, but as leaders and co-creators of solutions. Young people have an intimate understanding of how violence manifests in their communities. They understand its patterns, its drivers, and its consequences. But leadership requires enabling conditions. It requires platforms that are accessible and sustained. It requires support in the form of skills, mentorship, and resources. And it requires institutions that are willing to listen, to adapt, and to share decision-making space.

So as we reflect on the legacy of 1976, perhaps the question is not only whether young people can lead, because history has already shown us that they can. The question is whether we are creating the conditions for young people to lead in ways that are supported, structured, and sustainable.

As we move into the next part of this session, I want to invite you to engage with this critically and practically.

What would meaningful youth participation in violence prevention look like in your context? How should young people be involved in shaping policies and strategies that affect their lives?

What are the barriers that continue to limit youth engagement, and what would it take to remove them?

And what opportunities exist, or should exist, for young people to take on leadership roles in preventing violence within their communities?



This is your space. Engage honestly,
engage critically, and think about what is possible.

Because if we get this right, we do not simply respond to violence. We begin to
transform the conditions that produce it.

I thank you