



SPEAKING NOTES FOR EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON
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**8TH SOCIAL JUSTICE SUMMIT,
STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY, WESTERN CAPE**

Roundtable: “Rethinking Youth Economic Participation”

13 OCTOBER 2026

**SPEAKING NOTES BY THE EXECUTIVE
CHAIRPERSON OF THE NYDA ON THE OCCASION OF THE YOUTH
ROUNDTABLE AT THE 8TH SOCIAL JUSTICE SUMMIT – Panel Input | ±5 minutes**

13 October 2026

OPENING INPUT

Are we preparing young people primarily to compete for jobs, or creating the conditions for them to participate in and build new economies? And what role should youth development institutions play in ensuring that young people have meaningful choices between employment, entrepreneurship and other forms of economic participation?

Thank you to the organisers, my fellow panellists, the young people here to engage us and everyone joining this important conversation.

The question before us asks us whether we are preparing young people primarily to compete for jobs or creating the conditions for them to participate in and build new economies.

I would argue that we must do both - but we must equally confront a fundamental contradiction. We prepare young people to enter the economy without doing enough to transform the conditions that determine whether they can enter, participate and thrive.

Statistics South Africa in the second quarter of 2026, recorded youth unemployment at 47.4% among people aged 15 to 34. Approximately five million young people in this age group were unemployed. These figures point to a structural challenge: our economy is not generating enough employment opportunities to absorb the young people seeking work.

Formal employment remains essential. But meaningful economic participation must also include viable enterprises, cooperatives, agriculture, the creative economy and digital businesses. The objective is not to replace the responsibility to create jobs with a message of entrepreneurship. It is to expand young people's genuine choices on career pathways and their ability to earn sustainable livelihoods.

Entrepreneurship must not become the price young people pay for the absence of employment. A business cannot survive on ambition alone. It requires access to finance, appropriate skills, infrastructure, markets, mentorship and an enabling regulatory environment.



Thus here, local government becomes central to the discussion. Municipalities shape the environments in which local economies function - from trading spaces and business licensing to infrastructure, local economic development and access to procurement opportunities. These decisions can determine whether a young person's business remains an idea or develops into a sustainable enterprise.

This then leads us to wonder whether municipal planning, budgets and implementation are sufficiently responsive to young people's economic realities, particularly in townships and rural communities.

At the NYDA, our role is not to tell young people which pathway they should choose. It is to help make those choices meaningful. That means connecting young people to the skills, enterprise support, mentorship, finance and markets they need to pursue entrepreneurship; strengthening pathways into employment and work experience; and working with municipalities, training institutions and the private sector so that education and skills are connected to real economic demand.

Youth development institutions must therefore be more than providers of programmes. We must be connectors, enablers and advocates for a system in which a young person can make an informed choice between employment, entrepreneurship and other forms of economic participation - and have a realistic pathway to pursue it.

We must also ensure that opportunity is not determined by geography, disability, gender or access to established networks. An inclusive local economy must recognise the different barriers young people face and respond to them deliberately. Ultimately, our responsibility extends beyond preparing young people for the economy as it exists today. It requires us to work with the institutions that shape that economy so that young people can participate in it more meaningfully.

So, we have established that young people are ready for the economy. What we need to further establish is whether our institutions are ready to build an economy in which young people have a fair opportunity to contribute, create and thrive.

That is the shift we must pursue: from preparing young people to navigate economic exclusion towards building local economies in which their participation is possible, productive and sustainable.

Thank you.



AUDIENCE DEBATE STATEMENTS

Statement 1: Main debate statement

Starting a business is becoming a necessity for unemployed young people rather than a genuine choice.

I think this statement captures a difficult reality for many young people. When formal employment is inaccessible, starting a business can become a response to economic necessity rather than a freely exercised choice. But we must distinguish between entrepreneurship driven by opportunity and entrepreneurship driven by the absence of alternatives. We should support young people who want to build businesses, while ensuring that entrepreneurship does not become a substitute for decent work or a way of transferring the burden of unemployment onto individuals. The real objective is to expand young people's choices and give those who choose entrepreneurship a fair chance of building sustainable enterprises.

If the audience agrees

Then we must ask why so many young people feel compelled to create their own livelihoods without the support or market access they need. We should not celebrate business creation alone. We must examine whether these businesses can survive, whether their owners can earn sustainable incomes and whether young people have access to other credible pathways into employment.

If the audience disagrees

I accept that entrepreneurship can be a deliberate, ambitious and empowering choice. Many young people identify opportunities and want to build businesses. My concern is not with entrepreneurship itself; it is with the circumstances in which it takes place. We must ensure that young people can choose this path because it offers a genuine opportunity, rather than because they have no realistic alternative.

Statement 2 - Alternative, if time permits

Practical skills and work experience are more valuable than academic qualifications when it comes to finding employment.

I would caution against treating qualifications, practical skills and work experience as competing forms of value. Academic learning can provide the knowledge and foundations required for a career, while practical experience helps young people apply that knowledge in the workplace. The difficulty is that many young people are expected to have experience before they are given an opportunity to acquire it. We need stronger connections between education, training and employers, including apprenticeships, work-integrated learning and credible entry-level opportunities. The



objective should be to ensure that young people leave education better equipped to enter and progress in the world of work.

If the audience agrees

I understand why people prioritise practical experience, particularly when employers require it from entry-level candidates. But we should ask why access to experience is so difficult in the first place. Work experience must become a bridge into employment, not another barrier that excludes young people who have never been given their first opportunity.

If the audience disagrees

Academic qualifications remain essential in many professions and provide knowledge that practical experience alone cannot always replace. The point is not to diminish education. It is to ensure that qualifications are complemented by opportunities to apply knowledge, develop practical capabilities and gain relevant experience.

Statement 3 - Alternative, if time permits

Having a university degree is no longer enough to guarantee that a young person can earn a decent living.

I agree that a university degree is not a guarantee of employment or financial security. A qualification can equip a young person with valuable knowledge and capabilities, but the economic return also depends on the availability of opportunities and the relationship between education and the labour market. We must not respond by discouraging young people from pursuing higher education. Instead, we must strengthen pathways from education into work, improve the alignment between skills and economic demand, and recognise technical, vocational and entrepreneurial pathways alongside university education. A young person's investment in learning must have a fair opportunity to translate into economic participation.

If the audience agrees

That is an important concern, particularly for graduates who have invested years in their education but remain unemployed or underemployed. We must examine the barriers between qualifications and opportunity, including the availability of entry-level jobs and relevant work experience. The answer is not to devalue degrees, but to improve the conditions in which knowledge and skills can be put to productive use.

If the audience disagrees

I would agree that a degree remains valuable and is indispensable for many professional pathways. But value and guarantee are different things. A qualification



can improve a young person's prospects without guaranteeing that a suitable job will exist. Our task is to ensure that education is connected to a broader economic environment capable of creating opportunities.



CLOSING STATEMENT

If there is one practical change we should take from this discussion, it is that youth economic participation must become a measurable responsibility of local government, not merely an aspiration in policy documents.

We must work towards incorporating youth-responsive Key Performance Areas and Key Performance Indicators into municipal planning and performance-management systems. These should measure progress in employment pathways, youth enterprise development, access to markets and procurement opportunities, and the inclusion of young people's economic priorities in municipal planning and budgeting.

These indicators must be developed collaboratively with young people, recognising the different barriers facing young women, LGBTQIA+ youth, young people with disabilities, and those in rural and peri-urban communities. The NYDA stands ready to work with municipalities and young people to develop a consistent, practical approach to measuring progress and strengthening accountability.

This aligns with the Agency's work towards a Youth Responsive Planning, Budgeting, Monitoring, Evaluation and Auditing Framework. Youth development cannot rest with youth institutions alone; it must be reflected in how government plans, allocates resources and measures its impact.

Ultimately, the test of youth-responsive governance does not lie on whether young people are invited to participate alone, but whether their priorities influence decisions and translate into tangible economic opportunities as well.

We must move from recognising young people as a priority to measuring whether our institutions are delivering for them. That is how local government can move beyond creating opportunities for young people towards enabling them to shape, participate in and build the economies of their own communities.

Thank you once again to the organisers for having us, my fellow panellists and the audience for such fruitful engagements.