



NATIONAL YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AGENCY
OUR YOUTH. OUR FUTURE.

Strengthening Youth Participation in Decision-Making and Good Governance in South Africa

Research Policy Brief

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1. Executive Summary

South Africa's history is deeply embedded in a legacy of struggle and resilience, particularly among its youth. During the apartheid era, policies systematically marginalised Black South Africans, with youth often at the forefront of resistance movements. The 1976 Soweto Uprising marked a pivotal moment, where young students publicly protested Afrikaans-medium instruction, symbolising youth's refusal to accept oppressive policies. This activism underscored the vital role of youth in mobilising societal change, both as a catalyst for resistance and as agents of social transformation. Yet, 50 years on, it is a bitter irony that the youth, the very stratum that sacrificed most for liberation, remain amongst the least beneficiaries of the democratic dividend. In 2026, youth face systemic exclusion: unemployment rates exceeding 44% for the 15-34-year-old cohort; Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) rates of around 36.4% for 15-24-year-olds (affecting millions); persistent skills mismatches; and deepening inequality.

Following South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, the focus shifted from liberation struggles to nation-building and developmental challenges. While formal political structures were established, youth engagement in these processes remained inconsistent, compounded by socio-economic disparities, unemployment, and limited access to education, which constrain young people's capacity to participate actively in civic life. Economic dependency often compels youth to prioritise immediate survival over political engagement, a dynamic that continues to shape youth participation today. Secondly, political disillusionment and mistrust towards existing institutions and parties pose significant barriers. Many young South Africans perceive politicians as disconnected from their realities, fostering apathy and disengagement. Corruption scandals and perceived lack of accountability exacerbate this sentiment.

Thirdly, structural barriers such as limited political literacy, inadequate civic education, and exclusion from decision-making forums diminish youth influence. Legal and institutional frameworks often fail to facilitate youth involvement beyond voting, neglecting avenues for ongoing engagement in policy formulation, oversight, and

community development. Furthermore, societal issues like violence, substance abuse, and gender inequality disproportionately impact youth, further distracting from political participation and reinforcing cycles of disempowerment. South Africa has over 50 million internet and social media users, yet digital tools for civic engagement remain thin or inaccessible. The digital divide and limited access to online resources also restrict many youths from leveraging digital platforms for activism. Our youth need real-time updates on community meetings, accessible minutes of local government decisions, and digital guides that explain the tiers of government in simple language, delivered on the platforms young people use. The government has, to its credit, taken steps to formalise youth consultation channels, and the nationwide municipal youth desks are evidence of an attempt to facilitate youth participation and development.

Legislative frameworks reinforce this intent: the Municipal Youth Guidelines (2004) direct municipalities to establish youth units and councils, and the National Youth Policy (2020-2030) identifies youth participation as central to building an equal South Africa. Yet despite these channels and frameworks, evidence shows that they are either insufficiently resourced or failing to translate into tangible change that youth can see and feel. Youth participation levels at the polls are evidence of youth dissatisfaction with formal participatory tools for driving the change they want to see. Youth participation in South Africa is characterised by deep socioeconomic exclusion and political disillusionment. To address these challenges, a multifaceted approach is essential.

First, educational reforms must embed civic education into school curricula, fostering a culture of active citizenship from an early age. Equipping youth with knowledge about their rights, political processes, and leadership skills is fundamental. Second, creating inclusive platforms for youth participation is critical. Government and political parties should establish youth councils, advisory committees, and participatory chambers at local and national levels, ensuring youth voices are integral to decision-making. Mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives can empower young leaders. Third, leveraging technology and social media responsibly can broaden reach and foster sustained engagement. Partnerships with civil society organisations can facilitate digital literacy campaigns, especially targeting marginalised communities.

Fourth, addressing socio-economic disparities through policies focused on youth employment, entrepreneurship, and education will enable young people to engage more in democratic processes, as economic stability often correlates with political participation. Finally, fostering a culture of accountability among elected officials is vital. Transparent communication, regular consultations, and feedback mechanisms can reinforce youth trust and motivate ongoing involvement. Fostering meaningful youth participation means creating pathways for youth to move from advisory roles into actual decision-making positions. It means following up when young people voice their concerns and ideas and showing how their input leads to concrete results in policy and the political landscape. Effective participation of young people can be achieved through the adoption of co-management structures, in which youth and officials jointly share decision-making power at several stages of policy processes. Active participation of young people means that their influence is tangible and visible at the end of decision-making processes. Institutional change and a shift in political culture are needed to embed youth voices at the core of governance and decision-making processes, rather than remain symbolic. When young people see that their votes, ideas, and actions shape policy, they gain a sense of ownership and trust. In turn, societies benefit from the creativity and urgency that youth bring.

Young people constitute a significant proportion of South Africa's population and are central to the country's democratic, social, and economic future. Despite progressive legislation and policy frameworks that recognise the importance of youth participation, many young South Africans continue to face limited opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives meaningfully. Their voices are often underrepresented in governance processes, policy formulation, public planning, and community development initiatives. This disconnect weakens democratic accountability and limits the country's ability to develop responsive and inclusive public policies. Strengthening youth participation in decision-making is not only a democratic imperative but also a practical strategy for improving governance and sustainable development. Young people bring innovative ideas, diverse perspectives, and firsthand experiences of contemporary challenges such as unemployment, inequality, education, climate change, and digital

transformation. When governments actively involve youth in decision-making, policies are more likely to reflect society's needs and aspirations and to foster trust in public institutions, given the youthful nature of South African society.

2. Introduction

South Africa's democracy was founded on the principles of participation, equality, accountability, and human dignity. Central to these principles is the recognition that citizens should have opportunities to influence decisions that shape their communities and the country's future. For young people, meaningful participation extends beyond voting during elections. It includes active involvement in policy development, governance structures, public consultations, budgeting processes, community planning, and monitoring government performance. South Africa's problem is not primarily a lack of progressive youth policy; it is an implementation and institutional design problem. The state has built substantial youth development machinery. However, much of it still treats young people as beneficiaries to be consulted rather than citizens with institutional power to shape decisions, budgets and implementation. The contradiction is visible in the National Youth Policy (NYP) 2020–2030, where it explicitly identifies “effective and responsive youth development machinery” as one of its five priorities, while also acknowledging that conventional approaches to participation have been too narrow, often reduced to voting, political parties and formal government activities rather than the informal, civic and digital spaces in which young people actually organise.

Youth machinery has underperformed mainly because participation is consultative rather than constitutive. South Africa is good at organising youth dialogues, summits, public comments, youth days and stakeholder forums, but consultation rarely creates a binding obligation on government to respond to what young people say. That creates a familiar cycle: **consultation → recommendations → policy document → limited implementation → another consultation**. The Presidency itself once framed the aspiration more strongly, stating that nothing concerning young people should be

planned or implemented without their involvement and, importantly, that they should drive it.

The machinery is fragmented across spheres of government and institutions. Youth development cuts across education, employment, economic development, health, social development, municipalities and provincial governments, yet authority, budgets and accountability remain dispersed. This problem was recognised in the design of the NYP itself. The earlier framework noted that the NYDA's legislative status limited its ability to execute its mandate at the provincial level, leaving provincial youth structures with overlapping coordination and advocacy responsibilities. The result is a classic governance problem in which everyone has some responsibility, but nobody has sufficient authority to make the system work as a whole. The NYDA was intended to provide precisely that coordination. Its statutory functions include lobbying, mainstreaming, coordinating, monitoring and evaluating youth development interventions. But coordination without sufficiently strong enforcement mechanisms becomes persuasion rather than governance. Consequently, Parliament identified this disconnect in its 2024 oversight of the NYDA.

Youth participation is not sufficiently representative. “Representing youth” is institutionally difficult because South African youth are not a homogeneous constituency. A university student in Johannesburg, an unemployed young person in a rural municipality, a young person with a disability, a township entrepreneur and a young migrant or informal worker can have radically different priorities. Yet participation structures tend to favour young people who already possess organisational connections, such as transport, digital access, political networks, confidence in navigating government institutions, and time to attend meetings. The result can be elite capture of participation, in which the young people most capable of accessing the machinery become its de facto representatives. This is why the Agency needs to ensure that it urgently implements its recently launched disability and rural development strategies.

Local government remains the missing link: young people experience the state locally, yet much youth policy is still designed nationally. A young person encounters the

municipality, school, clinic, local labour market, transport system, and community organisation, not “the youth-development sector”. Consequently, meaningful participation needs to move beyond national youth dialogues and into municipal planning, Integrated Development Plans, local budgets, and service-delivery decisions. This is particularly important because the NYP itself envisioned youth development at the national, provincial, and local levels.

Institutional instability also undermines trust and continuity. The NYDA has repeatedly undergone institutional restructuring, including the 2024 amendment of its founding legislation. The amendment narrowed its objectives, changed governance arrangements and introduced stronger provisions concerning board composition and tenure. More recently, in 2026, Parliament raised serious concerns about NYDA governance, leadership stability, financial management, procurement, whistle-blower allegations, and the functioning of its Audit and Risk Committee. This matters for participation because young people will not invest in institutional participation if institutions themselves appear unstable, politically contested or incapable of closing the feedback loop.

Governments need to urgently introduce reforms that shift from youth development to more inclusive youth power. This should start with giving youth participation legal consequences. It is also essential to create a statutory youth participation and accountability framework requiring major national, provincial and municipal policies affecting young people to demonstrate who was consulted, which groups were represented, what they proposed, which proposals were accepted or rejected, why they were rejected, what government subsequently did and, most importantly, government should have a mandatory duty to respond. Participation then becomes an element of administrative accountability rather than a public-relations exercise. The proposed South African Youth Development Bill could be an important vehicle for this. The government said in 2025 that the draft legislation was intended both to strengthen NYP implementation and to elevate youth voice, while creating accountability for youth-development targets across government and the private sector.

Equally important is the need to establish permanent youth representation within decision-making. Instead of asking young people to attend occasional consultations, institutionalise representation. For example, this could include youth representatives on relevant departmental policy committees and youth seats on municipal planning and development structures. In addition, a strengthened National Youth Advisory Council would enable youth to be at the centre of every developmental agenda, including youth representatives in parliamentary oversight processes. Furthermore, structured representation of youth in major economic and skills institutions is needed. These representatives should have defined mandates, selection rules, tenure, disclosure requirements and access to information. Crucially, representation should not simply mean young people occupying symbolic seats. They need access to the information and budgetary processes necessary to exercise those roles.

The NYDA must be given stronger powers of coordination and accountability. It should not become another giant delivery department. Its comparative advantages are coordination, youth intelligence, accountability and mobilisation. Its mandate should therefore concentrate on setting cross-government youth priorities, maintaining a national youth outcome framework, auditing departmental youth commitments, monitoring budgets, publishing departmental scorecards, facilitating youth participation, identifying implementation failures, and escalating persistent failures to Cabinet, Parliament, and Treasury. The 2024 legislative changes have already shifted toward a more focused mandate, as the previous objectives were considered too broad and difficult to implement. The next step should be to make the focused mandate enforceable.

The NYDA's current effort to develop a youth-response budgeting and monitoring framework is therefore potentially significant. The stated intention is to track government spending and outcomes for young people and hold institutions accountable where resources fail to achieve their intended purpose. But this should ultimately connect to the budget process rather than remain a NYDA reporting exercise. National Treasury and the NYDA should be able to ask: What did this department spend on young people, and what changed as a result?

Every municipality should have a properly constituted Youth Participation Mechanism, directly linked to the municipal budget, local economic development strategy, ward planning, and service-delivery monitoring. Young people should be able to propose priorities, interrogate allocations, and monitor implementation. This would shift participation from “come to our youth dialogue” to “help decide what the municipality spends money on.”

Participation must be digitally and geographically inclusive, supported by a deliberate “last mile” approach that ensures no young person is excluded because of where they live, limited connectivity or disability. This should include multilingual platforms, zero-rated or low-data participation channels, physical consultation points, mobile NYDA services, and partnerships with libraries, TVET colleges and community organisations. Platforms must also be accessible to young people with disabilities, with deliberate outreach to rural and underserved communities. Parliament’s 2025 oversight findings specifically highlighted rural accessibility and connectivity as barriers to young people’s access to NYDA services and participation opportunities.

Given the above context, this publication explores the current state of youth participation in South Africa, examines the barriers that continue to limit meaningful engagement, and highlights opportunities to strengthen youth inclusion across all spheres of governance. It argues that creating accessible, inclusive, and accountable participatory mechanisms will empower young people as active citizens rather than passive beneficiaries of development programmes.

The publication concludes by recommending practical measures to institutionalise youth participation and strengthen democratic governance in line with South Africa’s constitutional values, the National Youth Policy, the Integrated Youth Development Strategy (IYDS), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although South Africa has developed progressive policies that promote youth development and civic participation, many young people still feel excluded from decision-making spaces.

The consequences of limited youth participation extend beyond young people themselves. When their perspectives are absent from governance processes, public policies may fail to address emerging challenges or reflect the realities experienced by younger generations. This can contribute to declining trust in institutions, reduced civic engagement, and growing frustration among youth who feel their concerns are overlooked. Conversely, meaningful youth participation strengthens democratic legitimacy, improves policy outcomes, promotes transparency, and encourages greater accountability within public institutions. South Africa is home to one of the youngest populations on the African continent, making youth participation a strategic investment in the country's future rather than a symbolic exercise. Harnessing the energy, creativity, innovation, and leadership potential of young people can contribute significantly to responsive governance, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

3. Background

South African constitutional democracy is a system of government grounded in constitutionalism, democracy, human rights, equality, and the rule of law. It emerged after apartheid and was established by the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the country's supreme law. South Africa's constitutional democracy marks a fundamental shift from the apartheid system, in which political rights were denied to most of the population. Chapter 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, outlines the rules, values, and principles governing public administration and the public service. It spans Sections 195 to 197, ensuring that government employees and organs of state act ethically, efficiently, and fairly. A high standard of professional ethics is required, and public servants must act ethically, honestly, and professionally. Government must be responsive to the needs and concerns of the public. Public participation, especially among youth, should be encouraged, particularly in policymaking and government processes.

Youth participation as a constitutional right affirms that young people have the right to freedom of expression, including the right to receive and share information and ideas. This is important for youth activism, political debate and holding government

accountable. Youth participation is important because young people are active citizens and stakeholders in South Africa's democracy, not merely beneficiaries of government programmes. The Department of Justice has recently emphasised that the Constitution gives young people tools to participate through voting, organising, peaceful protest, advocacy and holding those in power accountable. Youth participation as a constitutional right means that young South Africans have the right to participate in the country's democratic processes. This is protected particularly by Section 19, which provides political rights, as well as Sections 16, 17 and 18, which protect freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. These rights enable young people to vote, join political organisations, express their views, protest peacefully, campaign for causes and participate in public decision-making.

Chapter 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa stipulates that Government is constituted of National, Provincial, and Local spheres, which are distinctive, interdependent, and interrelated. All spheres of government must observe and adhere to the principles in this Chapter, conduct their activities within the parameters it provides, and adhere to the principles of co-operative government and intergovernmental relations. They must exercise their powers and perform their functions in a manner that does not encroach on the geographical, functional, or institutional integrity of government in another sphere, and co-operate with one another in mutual trust and good faith by fostering friendly relations and assisting and supporting one another.

South Africa's international commitments to youth development provide strong impetus to sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 global goals adopted by the United Nations to achieve sustainable development by 2030. Youth are relevant to all 17 SDGs, although some goals specifically address issues affecting young people. The UN recognises young people not only as beneficiaries of the SDGs but also as agents of change. Young people contribute through activism, innovation, community projects, awareness campaigns, monitoring government progress and participating in decision-making. The SDGs on youth aim to improve young people's education, employment, health, equality, participation and opportunities. Although youth are relevant to all 17 SDGs, SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and

Economic Growth), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) are particularly important. Youth are also recognised as agents of change who should participate meaningfully in achieving sustainable development.

The African Youth Charter (AYC) is a legal framework of the African Union (AU) that promotes and protects the rights, freedoms and responsibilities of young people in Africa. It was adopted on 2 July 2006 in Banjul, Gambia, and entered into force on 8 August 2009. One of the most important aspects of the Charter is that young people should be active participants in decision-making and development, rather than simply recipients of government programmes. It encourages governments to create opportunities for young people to participate in government and political processes. These include development programmes, policymaking and decision-making, civil society and community organisations, and peacebuilding and conflict prevention. South Africa ratified the African Youth Charter on 28 May 2009 and deposited its instrument of ratification with the AU on 8 July 2009. This means the Charter is relevant to South Africa's approach to youth development, empowerment and participation. The African Youth Charter is an African Union legal instrument adopted to promote, protect and fulfil the rights of young people aged 15–35. It promotes youth participation, education, employment, health, gender equality, peace and development. It also recognises young people as important participants and agents of development and requires member states to create policies and programmes that empower youth.

Agenda 2063 is the African Union's long-term development framework for transforming Africa over 50 years, with the vision of building an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens. The aspirations of Agenda 2063, among others, include a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development. In addition, build an integrated Africa that is politically united and based on Pan-Africanism. Africa of good governance, democracy, human rights, justice and the rule of law, and a peaceful and secure Africa. An Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values and ethics. Furthermore, a people-driven Africa, relying especially on the potential of women and youth and caring for children. Henceforth, a strong, united, resilient and influential

Africa as a global player and partner. One of the key aspirations of Agenda 63, which is particularly important for youth, is 'Engaged and Empowered Youth and Children'. It aims to create opportunities for young Africans to achieve self-realisation and improve their access to education, health and employment.

The Commonwealth Youth Council (CYC) is an autonomous, youth-led organisation representing young people across the Commonwealth. Established in 2013 with support from the Commonwealth Youth Programme, it helps young people participate in development at national, regional and Commonwealth levels. The Commonwealth Charter recognises young people's positive role in development, peace and democracy, and commits Commonwealth countries to invest in young people, including through opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship. Commonwealth Youth refers to the Commonwealth's efforts to empower and develop young people through the Commonwealth Youth Programme and youth networks. It promotes youth participation in decision-making, leadership, education, employment, entrepreneurship, democracy and development. It recognises young people as important partners and agents of change rather than merely beneficiaries of development.

Strengthening youth participation in decision-making is a key variable in the national discourse on youth development. Against this background, youth economic participation plays a central role in the debate. Youth unemployment in South Africa is a severe socioeconomic crisis driven by an outdated basic education system, a persistent skills mismatch with industry needs, and a stagnant economy that struggles to absorb new entrants. This systemic joblessness stifles economic growth, erodes human dignity, and fuels social instability. The crisis is characterised by several core challenges and contributing factors, inter alia:

- i) **Severe Lack of Experience:** According to labour statistics, a vast majority of unemployed youth lack prior work experience. Employers often require experience, creating a vicious cycle in which youth cannot get hired to gain experience and cannot gain experience without being hired.

- ii) **Systemic Skills Mismatch:** There is a significant disconnect between the qualifications produced by educational institutions and the actual demands of the modern, tech-driven economy. Many school leavers lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills, while higher education graduates often hold degrees in fields with an oversupply of labour.
- iii) **Rising Discouragement:** Millions of young people fall into the category of "discouraged work-seekers", individuals who have entirely given up looking for employment because repeated rejections and geographical isolation make the pursuit feel hopeless.
- iv) **Economic Stagnation:** Slow economic growth, weak private investment, and energy and infrastructure constraints limit the number of new jobs created annually, leaving both educated and uneducated youth to compete for dwindling opportunities.
- v) **Geographical and Financial Barriers:** Many young South Africans reside in rural areas or marginalised townships far from economic hubs. The high cost of public transportation and the lack of resources to fund daily job searches or reliable internet access lock them out of the labour market.
- vi) **Social Networks and Support:** Many young people come from impoverished households where no one else is employed, leaving them without the social capital, networks, and professional connections that are often essential for securing job placements. To address these hurdles, interventions focus on reforming the educational curriculum, strengthening vocational training, and expanding public-private partnerships (such as the Employment Tax Incentive and the Youth Employment Service) to subsidise initial job placements.

While the national unemployment rate stood at 33.6% in the second quarter of 2026, the burden fell disproportionately on youth, with those aged 15-34 facing the highest rate at 47.4%. Young people are not only more likely to be unemployed but also far less likely to be employed than their share of the working-age population would suggest. Their absorption and participation rates remain lower than those of adults, while their

unemployment rate remains significantly higher, creating a persistent disadvantage for young people. The absorption rate, which measures the share of the working-age population that is employed, highlights an unmet need for youth inclusion in the labour market. Among those aged 15-24, the absorption rate was 10.1%, the lowest among all age groups. While the participation rate for youth aged 25-34 was high at 72.0%, the absorption rate was 42.8%, indicating a gap of 29.2 percentage points between those actively participating in the labour market and those who were employed.

4. The Role of Digital Technology for Youth Participation in South Africa

There has been growing interest in applications of digital tools, especially using artificial intelligence (AI), to promote civic engagement in policymaking. As digital technologies reshape civic engagement, young people also possess unique capabilities to influence governance through digital platforms, social innovation, entrepreneurship, advocacy, and community mobilisation. Politically structured digital youth participation can improve policymaking in South Africa, but institutionalising citizen engagement requires substantial work and commitment.

The democratic landscape of Europe has changed significantly over the past decades, posing substantial challenges to the European Union's (EU) established democratic mechanisms, including a decline in trust in political processes. This has prompted civil society organisations and policymakers to create and experiment with new mechanisms for young people to engage in and shape democracy, e.g. through citizen participation in policy and decision-making. The proliferation of digital technologies and their broad uptake in society have prompted exploration into using digital tools to enhance participatory processes, an exploration which recent advances in Artificial Intelligence have reinvigorated.

Digital Technologies are transforming the way governments interact with citizens, particularly young people, making governance more participatory, transparent, and accessible. For young people in particular, digital participation platforms, e-petitions, online consultations, youth governance dashboards, artificial intelligence (AI) for public

participation, and open government data are becoming central tools for civic engagement. Digital Technologies may be segmented as follows:

- **Digital participation platforms** provide online spaces where young people can engage directly with government institutions. These platforms enable people to share ideas, participate in discussions, vote on community priorities, and collaborate on policy development. Because young people are already active online, these platforms reduce barriers to participation and make civic engagement more convenient.
- **Real-time Issue Tracking:** E-petition platforms use AI algorithms to analyse, categorise, and translate public grievances instantly. This allows municipalities to spot emerging community issues, such as local service delivery or climate policy, as they emerge. **E-petitions** allow citizens to raise issues and gather public support electronically. Unlike traditional paper petitions, digital petitions can quickly reach large audiences through social media and other online channels. When they receive enough support, many governments formally consider them, giving young people an accessible way to influence public policy and bring attention to issues such as climate change, education, employment, and social justice.
- **Online consultations** enable governments to collect public feedback on proposed laws, policies, and development plans. Through surveys, discussion forums, virtual town halls, and comment portals, citizens can contribute their opinions without attending physical meetings. This increases participation among young people, who may face time, financial, or geographical barriers to traditional forms of engagement.
- **Youth governance dashboards** use real-time data and visualisations to monitor government performance on youth-related priorities. These dashboards may track indicators such as employment, education, health, housing, and public spending. By making information easier to understand, dashboards help young citizens hold governments accountable and encourage evidence-based discussions about policy outcomes.

- **Artificial intelligence (AI) for public participation** is enhancing civic engagement by analysing large volumes of public feedback, identifying common themes, translating content into multiple languages, personalising information, and improving access through chatbots and virtual assistants. AI can help governments process citizen input more efficiently and respond more effectively. However, its use also requires careful attention to transparency, fairness, privacy, and bias to ensure public trust.
- **Open government data** refers to government information that is freely available for anyone to access, use, and share. Examples include budgets, environmental data, crime statistics, transportation information, and public service performance. Open data empowers young people, researchers, journalists, entrepreneurs, and civil society organisations to monitor government activities, develop innovative digital solutions, and advocate for policy improvements based on reliable evidence.

Together, these digital tools are reshaping modern governance by making decision-making more transparent, inclusive, and responsive. They encourage greater collaboration between governments and citizens, strengthen accountability, and create new opportunities for meaningful public participation. For young people, they provide practical ways to influence decisions, stay informed, organise around shared concerns, and contribute to democratic processes beyond traditional voting. As digital technologies continue to evolve, they are likely to play an even greater role in fostering active citizenship and strengthening democratic governance.

5. Effective and Responsive Youth Development Machinery

The "youth machinery" in South Africa is the cross-sector coordination framework used by the government, civil society, and the private sector to implement youth development and employment strategies. The current National Youth Development Machinery Forum, spearheaded by the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (DWYPD), includes stakeholders such as the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), other government

departments, provincial governments (OTPs), the private sector, and civil society. In line with the NDP's role in creating a capable state by professionalising the public service, building capacity for the youth sector entails strengthening key institutions that deliver services to young people and ensuring that youth development practitioners, as primary service providers, are adequately skilled and competent.

Furthermore, the National Youth Policy (NYP 2020-30) requires the establishment of youth units across sectoral departments to develop sector-specific policies/ strategies and to mainstream youth development. To further intensify implementation of youth interventions, the NYDA was established to integrate youth into the mainstream economy. The Integrated Youth Development Strategy 2022-25 (IYDS), an implementation tool for youth development, is currently under review to align with the Medium-Term Development Plan 2025-2029. It serves as the blueprint for coordinating youth development work across South Africa.

6. Analysis of Current Youth Development Machinery in South Africa

South Africa's youth coordination machinery is a government framework that integrates, aligns, and executes youth development efforts across national, provincial, and local levels. It ensures that departments, the private sector, and civil society work together to address youth employment, education, and empowerment. Government departments, statutory bodies, provincial and local structures, civil society, and private-sector actors are involved in youth development, but fragmentation and weak accountability limit their impact. Strengthening the machinery can improve coherence, resource allocation, and measurable outcomes.

6.1. Existing Machinery at a National Level

The DWYPD's mandate is to lead socioeconomic transformation aimed at empowering and ensuring the participation of women, youth and persons with disabilities through mainstreaming, advocacy, monitoring and evaluation. The Department's mandate is rooted in the Constitution of South Africa, particularly the principles of human dignity, equality, non-discrimination and the advancement of human rights. Section 9 of the Constitution specifically allows measures to advance people who have been

disadvantaged by unfair discrimination. One of the key tenets of the DWYPD is to coordinate national efforts for government-wide responses to issues such as gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF), youth unemployment, women's economic empowerment and disability inclusion. In addition, it tracks whether government departments are implementing policies and programmes that advance the empowerment and participation of these groups.

On the other hand, the NYDA's primary mandate is to initiate, design, coordinate, evaluate and monitor all programmes aimed at integrating youth into the economy and society. Secondly, the Agency is tasked with coordinating youth development initiatives across government, the private sector and civil society.

6.2. Existing Machinery at a Provincial and Local Level

Youth Directorates are located within the provincial Office of the Premier in South Africa; their main role is to coordinate, integrate, and monitor youth development across the provincial government. The exact structure differs by province. For example, Gauteng has described its Youth Directorate as coordinating departmental youth initiatives, while Limpopo has reported a fully-fledged Youth Directorate working with the NYDA and provincial departments. The key role of the Youth Directorate is to coordinate youth development programmes and youth programmes implemented by different provincial departments. In addition, it supports the development of a Provincial Youth Development Strategy and ensures it aligns with the National Youth Policy and provincial priorities.

The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs does not have the same primary youth-development mandate as the NYDA or the DWYPD. Its youth-related role comes mainly from its mandate to coordinate government, support municipalities, strengthen local government, and promote integrated development. CoGTA facilitates cooperation among the national government, provincial government, and municipalities. This helps ensure that youth priorities are reflected in integrated government planning and implementation.

Table 1: Institutional Roles, Challenges and Proposed Reforms

Institution	Current role	Challenge	Reform
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DWYPD	Policy mainstreaming and advocacy for vulnerable groups including women, youth and persons with disabilities.	- Weak coordination. - Capacity & resource constraints which limit nationwide monitoring and evaluation across all government sectors. - Government departments not reporting on youth development activities.	- Shifting from fragmented interventions to government-wide mainstreaming. - Prioritize integrated, evidence-based planning and budgeting across all state departments
NYDA	IYDS Implementation. Initiate, design, coordinate, and monitor programs that integrate youth into South Africa's economy and society across government departments, civil society, and the private sector.	Limited resources. The mismatch between its annual budget allocations and the severe youth unemployment crisis in South Africa, where joblessness among young people ages 15–24 exceeds 60%	- Make the NYDA the central coordinating body for youth development. - Strengthen legislative authority. - Improve intergovernmental coordination. - Give the NYDA a stronger role in coordinating youth development funding across government.
COGTA	Local government coordination.	- Weak municipal uptake. - Fragmented coordination. - Inconsistent implementation.	If the NYDA's mandate is expanded, COGTA would remain responsible for the governance and coordination of local government, while the NYDA would serve as the national coordinating

		• Poor intergovernmental collaboration. • Insufficient monitoring and reporting	authority for youth development. COGTA would facilitate the implementation of NYDA-coordinated youth policies through municipalities, ensuring that local government plans, budgets, and programmes respond to youth priorities. This complementary relationship would strengthen coordination across all three spheres of government and improve the delivery of services and opportunities to young people.
Provinces	Coordination	• Uneven capacity. • Fragmented institutional arrangements. • Unclear roles and responsibilities. • Weak provincial coordination mechanisms. • Low levels of youth participation. • Programme duplication and inefficiencies.	• Integrate youth priorities into provincial strategic plans, budgets, and performance indicators. • Develop a common monitoring and evaluation framework aligned with the National Youth Policy. • Improve data collection and information sharing across departments. • Strengthen collaboration with municipalities,

			business, civil society, and educational institutions. • Increase meaningful youth participation in provincial planning and governance. • Align provincial programmes with the NYDA's national coordination and reporting framework to improve consistency and establish or strengthen Provincial Youth Coordinating Forums chaired by senior provincial leadership. • Clearly define the roles of provincial departments, municipalities, and the NYDA in youth development. • Strengthen accountability.
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Source: Integrated Youth Development Strategy 2022/25

7. International Best Practice

International best practices for youth coordination among countries focus on creating structured, inclusive, and sustainable mechanisms that enable young people to participate meaningfully in regional and international cooperation. These practices have been developed through the work of organisations such as the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, the Commonwealth Secretariat, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, to name but a few. Below is a comparative overview of how Scotland, New Zealand, Rwanda, Kenya, and Finland coordinate youth development and youth participation. While each country has a different governance system, they share common features such as dedicated youth policies, intergovernmental coordination, partnerships with civil society, and mechanisms for youth participation in decision-making.

Country & Voting Age	Coordinating Institution	Coordination Model	Key Features	Lessons	Core Bottlenecks
Scotland 16	Scottish Government	Cross-government youth policy	Youth participation embedded across government; strong partnerships with youth organisations	Mainstream youth across all sectors rather than confining it to one ministry	High political disconnect fuelled by modern online misinformation.
New Zealand 18	Ministry of Youth Development	Whole-of-government coordination	Youth advisory groups, evidence-based policy, indigenous youth inclusion	Strong accountability and youth co-design improve policy relevance	Stagnant youth numbers inside the formal Parliament chamber.
Rwanda 18	Ministry of Youth & Arts, National Youth Council	Centralised national coordination	Structured youth councils from local to national level, performance monitoring	Multi-level coordination ensures national priorities are implemented locally.	Highly institutionalised; heavily aligned with state narratives.
Kenya 18	State Department for Youth Affairs	Multi-sector coordination	National Youth Council, county governments, youth funds, digital engagement	Decentralised structures increase local responsiveness	Severe economic barriers, high campaign costs, and political alienation.

Finland 18	Ministry of Education & Culture	Integrated governance model	Legal framework for youth work, municipal youth councils, cross-sector cooperation	Legislation helps sustain youth participation beyond political cycles	Low actual voter turnout (around 33%); gap in meaningful feedback loops.
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Table 2: Comparative International Models of Youth Participation and Coordination

Source: Global Youth Participation Index (GYPI)

The Scottish government coordinates youth policy through a cross-government approach, recognising that youth issues span education, health, employment, justice, housing, and community development. Scotland emphasises co-production, in which young people help design, implement, and evaluate policies rather than being consulted only. High political disconnect, fuelled by modern online misinformation, remains a challenge. Furthermore, in New Zealand, the Ministry for Youth Development leads national youth coordination within a whole-of-government framework. Young people contribute directly to policy development through advisory structures and public engagement processes. Consequently, this is supported by strong research and data, as well as recognition of indigenous perspectives.

The National Youth Council of Rwanda, on the other hand, provides a structured mechanism for youth representation from the village to the national level. Youth representatives are elected through formal structures, enabling participation at local, district, provincial, and national levels. This consequently leads to a clear institutional hierarchy. State Department for Youth Affairs in Kenya coordinates youth policy alongside county governments and combines national coordination with county-level engagement, allowing local priorities to inform national policy; however, severe economic barriers remain a problem. Finally, the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland oversees youth policy through an integrated governance model supported by legislation. Municipal youth councils provide formal opportunities for young people to influence local government decisions, while national organisations engage with central government. Low youth voter turnout creates a systematic barrier to meaningful feedback from youth.

7.1. Comparative Analysis Matrix

Dimension	Scotland	New Zealand	Rwanda	Kenya	Finland
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Whole-of-government coordination	High	High	Medium	Medium	High
Formal Representation strength	Progressive access. Early voting rights at 16.	World-class civic space. High engagement via informal networks.	Excellent. Mandatory reserved seats in parliament.	Growing legal mandate. Parties allocate 15% of roles to youth.	Strong local link. Statutory input in municipal budgeting.
Legal framework	Strong	Moderate	Strong	Strong	Very strong
Local youth councils	Yes	Limited	Yes	Yes	Yes
National youth council	No single statutory council	Advisory mechanisms	Yes	Yes	National youth organizations
Youth participation	Very high	Very high	High	High	Very high
Monitoring and evaluation	Strong	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Very strong
Civil Society Partnerships	Extensive	Extensive	Moderate	Extensive	Extensive

Source: Global Youth Participation Index

7.2. Cross-cutting international best practices

Across these five countries, several common elements emerge as effective approaches to youth coordination that South Africa could draw on for comparison. In terms of the whole-of-government coordination model, youth policy is integrated across education, health, employment, justice, and social development rather than managed by a single ministry, thereby promoting coordination among government departments. In institutionalised youth participation, young people have formal roles in advisory bodies, councils, or policy development processes. Multi-level governance policies are implemented through regional, local, or municipal structures to ensure responsiveness to local needs. Evidence-based policymaking, regular research, data collection, and monitoring guide programme design and resource allocation. Partnerships encourage governments to work closely with youth organisations, civil society, academia, and the private sector. Furthermore, long-term investment, Stable funding and legislative backing help sustain youth initiatives across political cycles. Finally, special attention is given to ensuring participation by marginalised groups, including rural youth, young women, indigenous communities, and persons with disabilities, essentially propagating

inclusion. The segment above illustrates that the strongest youth coordination systems combine clear governance structures, meaningful youth participation, cross-sector collaboration, and sustained institutional support.

8. Impediments to Effective and Responsive Youth Development Machinery

South Africa faces challenges compounded by many weaknesses in the context of youth development. The exclusion of young people from local development structures is persistent. Consequently, young people are unable to sit down with the government to define their issues. Some of the impediments include:

- i) **Fragmentation:** overlapping mandates across departments and agencies, unclear roles and poor interdepartmental coordination. There is a lack of proper mainstreaming and coordination between local municipalities and provinces. The silo effect between provinces and local structures is still a compounding factor.
- ii) **Inadequate policy implementation and resourcing:** commitments not matched by budgets or capacity at the provincial/local level. Programmes for young people in local municipalities are inadequate; local forums and structures do not align with our youth's aspirations because they are shaped by adult-centrism.
- iii) **Weak monitoring, evaluation and data systems:** limited disaggregated youth data (age cohorts, gender, location, disability), inconsistent indicators and poor use of evidence. There is no coordinated effort between government departments, particularly on reporting. The defunct Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF), which served as a guiding tool for the Integrated Youth Development Strategy (IYDS 2022/2025), was specific regarding set-asides and budgets for youth; however, most departments do not report on youth development activities. The IYDS 2025/29 is currently under review, guided by the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP), to address the gaps created in the previous strategy.
- iv) **Limited youth representation and meaningful participation:** youth bodies are often consultative rather than decision-making, and access barriers for

marginalised youth. Youth exclusion in local structures is a systemic issue characterised by adult-centric governance, inaccessible civic processes, and economic marginalisation. Despite making up the vast majority of the population, young people are often sidelined from decision-making processes, such as Integrated Development Planning (IDP) forums and Ward Committees, fuelling civic apathy and political disillusionment. Youth in informal settlements, remote rural areas, or marginalised groups face compounded barriers such as lack of IDs, limited outreach, and weaker civic infrastructure that reduce visibility and access.

- v) **Programme duplication and gaps:** redundant small-scale initiatives, limited scaling, gaps in transition support (education to work), mental health services, sexual/reproductive health, and rural youth opportunities. Decisions made by municipalities directly affect youth (i.e. services, jobs, safety, recreation, and more).
- vi) **Capacity constraints at local government:** staff shortages, poor coordination between municipalities and provincial/national programmes. Youth participation in local government structures is essential for accountable service delivery and responsive municipal governance. Yet many young people face persistent obstacles that limit their ability to hold local representatives to account.
- vii) **Corruption and governance risks:** procurement, nepotism undermining service delivery and youth trust. Perceptions of corruption, unfulfilled service-delivery promises, and elite capture foster cynicism about youth participation in producing tangible change.
- viii) **Private sector engagement uneven:** skills demand not aligned with training programmes, limited apprenticeships and quality internships. Digital divide as well as uneven access to connectivity and digital skills. Young people lack the required skills, and private companies are moving back. Municipalities must develop youth engagement strategies, designate youth liaison officers, include youth representatives on ward committees, and publish quarterly online

dashboards to track progress on youth-related commitments, thereby building trust and demonstrating responsiveness.

9. Measures to Improve and Create Stronger Youth Development Coordination

The coordination effort between government, the private sector, civil society, and youth-led structures should be premised on aligning youth priorities with economic growth, green jobs, the digital economy, and SMME development. In addition, government should strengthen public-private partnerships for apprenticeships, internships and enterprise support. With decentralised implementation and capacity building at the provincial and municipal levels, young people should be at the centre of every development programme. Furthermore, clarify mandates and strengthen coordination across all spheres of government. It is also pivotal to define roles and lines of accountability among DWYPD, NYDA, Sector Departments, Provinces, and Municipalities.

Chapter 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa stipulates that in line with the principles of cooperative governance and intergovernmental relations, all spheres of government and all organs of State within each sphere must, amongst other things, cooperate in mutual trust and good faith by fostering friendly relations, supporting and assisting one another, coordinating their actions with one another. This would strengthen resourcing and decentralisation. In terms of resource allocation, it is significant to ringfence budget lines for youth programmes in sector departments and provincial budgets with performance conditions. There is also an urgent need to invest in municipal youth directorates through staffing, training, and small grants to implement local youth plans.

The development of a National Youth Outcomes Framework with standard indicators (such as employment, educational attainment, entrepreneurial survival, health metrics, civic participation, etc.), disaggregated by age, gender, race, disability, and location, will ensure that outcomes, rather than outputs, are measured.

Provincial and local governments should also transition youth advisory bodies into participatory decision-making mechanisms with voting seats or formal consultative power in relevant planning forums. Provide resources and capacity-building for youth-led

organisations, with inclusion quotas for marginalised youth (rural, disabled, LGBTQIA+, youth in informal settlements). Align skills development with labour market demand and expand accredited work-based training (apprenticeships, internships) tied to employer commitments. Furthermore, SMMEs must be incentivised to hire and mentor youth through tax breaks or wage subsidies. Moreover, career guidance in schools and community centres must be strengthened to better connect learners with jobs, internships, and entrepreneurship pathways.

The role the NYDA must play in coordination efforts cannot be overstated. The Agency serves as a vehicle for coordination. One of the integral parts of the Integrated Youth Development Strategy (IYDS) is to foster coordination among youth across all spheres of government and to establish reporting lines for government departments. Consequently, departments are expected to report annually to the NYDA on youth development programmes, activities, and achievements. The annual IYDS report should be consolidated for submission to the President for approval.

10. How will government know whether participation improves?

There is currently no verified national figure on the percentage of municipal councillors who are youth, nor an official figure on the percentage of municipalities with functional Youth Desks. In terms of youth representation in municipalities, a further compounding factor is that there is currently no general statutory quota requiring a fixed percentage of municipal councillors to be young people. Municipal councillors are elected through the local government electoral system, rather than through a youth quota. CoGTA has nevertheless identified the increasing representation of youth in municipal political structures as an area requiring attention. Its local-government review notes that youth participation and representation in political structures remain underdeveloped. One notable municipal example, rather than a national requirement, is Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, whose Child and Youth Development Strategy proposed that 40% of Metro Council representation should be youth councillors. This was a target in that municipality's strategy, not a national statutory target. The idea of having a Youth Desk in every municipality has been promoted by government. In 2017, the national government specifically identified the establishment of Youth Desks in every

municipality, in partnership with the NYDA, as a way to strengthen youth development at the local level. CoGTA also convened the Local Government Youth Development Conference to strengthen youth participation in local government and to build partnerships among municipalities, provinces, NYDA, and other stakeholders. However, the evidence indicates that implementation has not been uniform across municipalities. A CoGTA local government review found that most municipalities lacked clearly articulated youth strategies and policies.

One important finding is that South Africa does not currently publish a single national audit showing how many of the 257 municipalities have functional Youth Desks. The strongest official national figure on youth representation is from the IEC, which indicates that in the 2021 local government elections, 1,421 of approximately 9,473 elected councillors (15%) were younger than 35. The IEC notes that young people aged 18–35 accounted for 28% of registered voters as of April 2025. The IEC's 2026 preparations specifically encourage greater youth participation, but the 2026 municipal election has not yet produced a new elected councillor youth-representation figure.

The general youth satisfaction and optimism index in South Africa is currently among the lowest in Africa, heavily weighed down by a severe unemployment crisis and the rising cost of living. According to the latest 2026 African Youth Survey, only 25% of South African youth feel excited or optimistic about the future, placing the country at the very bottom of the continental rankings. Just 23% believe the country is heading in the right direction, while 75% say it is on the wrong track. Recent comprehensive studies and data from Stats SA highlight several critical factors crushing youth morale. In the second quarter of 2026, youth unemployment escalated further, with 5 million young people aged 15 to 34 being unemployed. The unemployment rate stands at a staggering 60.9% for youth aged 15–24. Secondly, the 2026 World Happiness Report ranks South Africa 101st out of 147 countries in overall life evaluation, dropping lower due to youth-specific socioeconomic exclusion. In terms of governance, most youth give the government highly negative performance ratings. The Afrobarometer indicates that 63% want the government to prioritise job creation, followed closely by demands to combat crime, insecurity, and failing infrastructure. While satisfaction with life and career outlook remains low, South

Africa has paradoxically achieved its highest-ever levels of youth educational attainment. The proportion of youth completing secondary education and obtaining bachelor's degrees more than doubled in recent decades. However, the transition from educational institutions into the active labour market remains severely broken, leaving millions with high qualifications but no economic inclusion.

For any youth development policy intervention to be effective, strong, and functioning, institutional arrangements are necessary. The IYDS (2022/25) is an instrument for implementing policy imperatives recommended in the NYP (2020-30). Various organs of the state, led by the National Treasury, are required to play a role in youth development. The integrated and mainstream approach to youth development aims to make it part and parcel of all state organs, so that it is included in their budgets and performance agreements. While current institutional arrangements for youth development are intended to mainstream and integrate it across all sectors of society, their implementation still needs strengthening.

The overarching goal of Pillar 5 is to create a robust and effective framework within the youth sector that aligns with national development objectives and optimally serves the needs of the youth population. It is worth noting that to deliver impactful services and programmes, South Africa continues to use its adopted two-pronged approach to youth development, namely, mainstreaming youth development across various sectors and providing dedicated, youth-focused specialised programmes and services. This requires a collaborative and coordinated effort from key role players in youth development as part of a social compact; hence the need to optimise intergovernmental relations among national, provincial, and local governments to ensure collaboration across all spheres of government alongside youth. In this regard, young people must be involved in planning and decision-making, building connections and challenging stereotypes that depict them as “social problems.” Instead, an enabling environment should channel their energy, develop their leadership, and inculcate fresh perspectives that encourage them to tackle social problems and act on opportunities.

To strengthen leadership, governance and accountability, the government must establish clear institutional mandates and accountability mechanisms for all entities involved in

youth development. The oversight role of Parliament and provincial legislatures in monitoring youth development outcomes is therefore necessary to enforce accountability. Hence, the policy brief proposes introducing a **Youth Development Accountability Framework** with defined performance indicators for departments and government agencies. In addition, build ethical, transparent leadership through continuous capacity-building and anti-corruption initiatives. Moreover, streamline the youth development architecture by harmonising policies, plans and reporting frameworks across government departments. Furthermore, strengthen interdepartmental and intergovernmental coordination through a centralised Youth Development Coordination Mechanism led by the Presidency or NYDA. Consequently, promote shared accountability and reduce duplication through integrated planning, budgeting, and implementation.

Government, together with the NYDA, must foster intergovernmental coordination and collaboration. In particular, institutionalise a Youth Development Intergovernmental Forum for joint planning and reporting. Encourage partnerships between government, private sector, academia, and civil society to co-create youth-centred solutions. Finally, promote youth participation and social compacting, and institutionalise mechanisms for youth engagement in policy formulation and programme design across all levels of government. Support youth councils and representative structures to ensure young people's voices influence planning, budgeting, and implementation. Promote a youth-led development culture that views young people as active agents of change rather than as beneficiaries of aid. Digitalise administrative systems for better monitoring, transparency, and data-driven decision-making. Finally, foster innovation by supporting pilot projects that test new models of youth service delivery.

11. Conclusion

Young people in South Africa and around the world demonstrate unprecedented engagement, mainly through informal channels. The pioneering campaigns, community projects and cross-border activism for equality are stronger than ever. The vibrancy of youth activism shows that young people care about democracy and social issues. The paradox is that despite being at the forefront of many contemporary social movements,

youth do so mainly through informal channels. When it comes to institutional politics, young people often disengage. Formal decision-making processes do not reflect their aspirations, values and ideas. The exclusion runs deep in the systemic discrimination of marginalised young people who face social stigma, lack of access to resources and structural exclusion. South Africa already has institutions and programmes such as the NYDA, Presidential Youth Employment Intervention, SETAs, TVET colleges, municipalities and provincial youth structures. The problem is often fragmentation, duplication and weak coordination.

To build effective and responsive youth development machinery for South Africa's future, the system needs to move from fragmented programmes to an integrated, accountable machinery that connects young people to education, skills, employment, entrepreneurship and participation in decision-making. This urgency is clearly reflected in Q2 2026 labour statistics: youth unemployment among people aged 15–34 reached 47.4%, with 5.0 million young people in this age group unemployed. This means youth development cannot be treated as a peripheral social programme; it must be central to South Africa's economic and developmental strategy. Furthermore, South Africa does not suffer from a shortage of youth policies; it suffers from fragmented implementation and weak institutional coordination. The next phase of youth development should therefore focus less on creating new policies and more on strengthening governance, accountability and measurable participation across all spheres of government.

The future of South Africa's youth-development machinery should therefore be youth-centred, employment-oriented, locally responsive, digitally enabled, evidence-based and accountable. If those principles are implemented consistently, youth development can move from a collection of programmes to a major engine of South Africa's economic transformation. It is evident from the discussion above that, to create a more responsive and effective youth machinery, more work remains to be done. A coordinated mix of administrative reform, practical supports, targeted outreach, civic education, and accountable governance can lower barriers and turn the potential of the youth demographic into durable, meaningful participation at the national, provincial and local levels. Finally, to convert youth demographic potential into meaningful local

participation, policymakers should adopt targeted, practical measures to address administrative, informational, logistical, and accountability gaps in youth development in South Africa.

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