



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

**REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF SOUTH AFRICAN
YOUTH AT 50 YEARS OF 1976
SOWETO, JOHANNESBURG**

16 JUNE 2026

**SPEAKING NOTES BY THE EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON OF THE NYDA ON THE
OCCASION OF THE JUNE 16 COMMEMMORATION, 50 YEARS LATER –
*Reflections | ± 10 minutes***

16 June 2026

*Programme Director,
His Excellency, President Cyril Ramaphosa,
The Deputy President of the Republic,
Honourable Ministers and Deputy Ministers,
Premiers and Executive Mayors,
Leaders of government, business, labour and civil society,
Veterans of our liberation struggle,
Members of the Class of 1976,
And most importantly, the young people of our country,*

Good morning.

Imagine being sixteen years old and deciding that your future was worth dying for.

Imagine leaving home carrying nothing more than a school bag, a handwritten placard and the unshakeable belief that your voice mattered. That is what the young people of 16 June 1976 did. They were not waiting to become leaders; they were already leading. They understood that history does not wait for permission, and neither should those called to change it.

Today, as we commemorate the fifty years of the 1976 Soweto Uprising, we honour not only the courage displayed in the streets of Soweto, but the spirit of resistance that echoed across our country. We remember the young people of Mamelodi, Alexandra, Kagiso, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town, Durban, Kimberley and beyond. We remember those who, a decade later in 1986, including students at the University of the North and across South Africa, continued to pay the ultimate price in pursuit of justice, equality and human dignity.

Their struggle was never confined to one township or one generation. It became the heartbeat of a nation determined to be free.



The theme of this year's commemoration, RESET@50 - The Future Calls, reminds us that freedom lives in every generation. Yet every generation must define for itself what freedom demands.

For the youth of 1976, freedom meant dismantling apartheid and demanding the right to learn. For the youth of 2026, freedom means economic freedom in our lifetime.

The youth of 1976 fought for the right to enter the classroom. The youth of 2026 are fighting for the right to leave that classroom and enter the economy. That is the unfinished business of our democracy.

The true measure of freedom is not whether a young person can enter a classroom. It is whether that young person can leave it with a fair chance to build a life. Yet even as we confront today's realities, we must resist the temptation to tell only one side of our story.

The democratic South Africa we know today was built on the sacrifices of those who marched before us. Since 1994, our nation has deliberately worked to dismantle exclusion and expand opportunity. The doors of learning that were once closed have opened to millions. Through NSFAS, generations of young people have become the first graduates in their families. Through the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention, SAYouth and youth entrepreneurship initiatives, thousands have found pathways into work, learning and enterprise.

Programme Director, these are not small achievements. They represent a democratic state that has refused to stand still. But the greatest tribute we can pay to these gains is not complacency. It is the courage to build on them. Because the question before us is no longer whether South Africa believes in its young people. The question is whether we are moving with enough urgency to match their ambition.

For many young South Africans today, particularly young women, the struggle is no longer access to education itself. It is access to opportunity after education. It is graduating with distinction and still waiting for a first interview. It is carrying a business idea but lacking access to capital. It is having talent but not networks. It is having hope but not opportunity.

Every graduation ceremony in South Africa carries with it the sacrifices of parents and grandparents who sold livestock, borrowed money, skipped meals and worked overtime so that their children could stand on that stage.

Our responsibility is to ensure that graduation is followed by opportunity rather than disappointment. Behind every unemployment statistic is a human story.

It is the graduate refreshing an inbox that never changes. It is the entrepreneur whose dream cannot move beyond paper because funding never came. It is the



young person switching off their phone
because they cannot afford the data required to apply for another opportunity.

The generation of 1976 challenged a system that denied them access to quality education. The generation of 2026 faces a different but equally significant barrier: exclusion from the digital economy.

A young person cannot apply for work without data. They cannot attend an online interview without connectivity. They cannot build a digital business, complete an online course or compete in a global marketplace if the cost of participation remains beyond their reach.

Affordable data is therefore no longer a telecommunications issue alone. It is an education issue, an employment issue, an entrepreneurship issue. And ultimately, a justice issue.

In the same way that previous generations demanded access to classrooms, this generation is demanding affordable access to the digital highways that now connect opportunity to aspiration.

Programme Director, as the NYDA, we have embarked on a fruitful partnership with YOMO - a youth empowerment platform, through sim cards, that uses affordable connectivity as a gateway to education, employment, entrepreneurship and digital inclusion.

Through YOMO, young people gain affordable connectivity together with zero-rated access to skills development courses, gig work opportunities, entrepreneurship support, mentorship and pathways into the digital economy. It is built on a simple but powerful idea: that connectivity should not only keep young people online, but connect them to education, income and possibility.

Today, as part of this commemoration, 10,000 young people who arrived here since morning, have received a YOMO SIM card. This gesture is a practical intervention aimed at bridging the gap between talent and opportunity, between aspiration and access. At a time when the cost of data remains a barrier to employment, learning and entrepreneurship, these SIM cards represent our commitment to ensuring that no young person is left behind simply because they could not afford to connect. They are a reminder that in the digital age, access to data is access to dignity, and access to connectivity is access to the future.

Honourable President, as government, we must also remove barriers that we have created ourselves. A qualification should never become a waiting room for unemployment.

Young graduates should not repeatedly certify documents that government already possesses while speaking about digital transformation. Through stronger collaboration with SAQA, Departments of Basic Education, Higher Education and



Training, Home Affairs and the Department of Public Service and Administration - together with employers across the public and private sectors, we must build systems that speak to one another and allow young people to move seamlessly from education into employment. An intentional integrated government approach is what will result in more tangible pathways for young people.

Our vision is equally guided by the African Union Youth Charter, which recognises young people as active partners in governance, innovation and economic transformation. South African youth must not simply participate in the future of our country; they must help shape the future of our continent and compete confidently in a rapidly changing global economy.

At the National Youth Development Agency, we have made a deliberate decision that we will not simply respond to youth challenges - we will equally coordinate solutions.

Since assuming office on 1 August 2025, this Board has deliberately repositioned the NYDA from being seen merely as a grant-making agency to becoming South Africa's leading convener and catalyst for youth development. We have strengthened governance and accountability, deepened parliamentary oversight and institutional engagement, expanded strategic partnerships, and taken the Agency beyond its offices into communities where opportunity has too often been absent.

Our work has included provincial youth engagements at schools and institutions of higher learning, Youth Fund mobilisation, investment and value-chain partnerships, participation in platforms such as the Mining Indaba, tourism and enterprise development initiatives, and the elevation of South African youth voices on international platforms including the United Nations. Every engagement has been driven by one objective: to bring opportunity closer to young people and young people closer to opportunity.

Like every institution entrusted with public confidence, we will face scrutiny, differing opinions and moments that seek to distract us from our purpose. But we refuse to allow noise to become our focus when the cries of unemployed young people are so much louder.

Our commitment is to keep our eyes firmly on the mission: to coordinate, to lobby, to innovate, to build partnerships and to unlock opportunity. Those who believe that division should triumph over development will not define the future of this Agency.

The young person waiting for a first job, a grant, a business opportunity or a second chance deserves an institution that remains steadfast and focused. Because our responsibility is not to win arguments. Our responsibility is to win futures. And that is precisely what this Board has set out to do.



Since August 2025, the National Youth Development Agency has processed more than 1,300 grant opportunities worth over R28 million, backing young entrepreneurs who are not only building businesses but creating jobs, stimulating local economies and restoring hope in communities across our country.

Through our partnership with the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention, we have launched 100,000 paid National Youth Service opportunities, ensuring that thousands of young South Africans gain meaningful work experience while serving their communities and contributing to nation-building.

But Programme Director, these interventions are not isolated. Across government and its partners, we are witnessing the emergence of a coordinated ecosystem that is placing young people at the centre of South Africa's development agenda. The Department of Employment and Labour is expanding pathways through its Labour Activation Programme. The Department of Small Business Development is opening doors through the Youth Entrepreneurship Fund and the Spaza Shop Support Fund, recognising that young people are not only looking for jobs but are capable of creating them. The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture is investing in thousands of opportunities through the Presidential Employment Stimulus, ensuring that creativity and culture become engines of economic participation. These initiatives remind us that when government works together, opportunity can be created at scale.

At the NYDA, our role is to ensure that these opportunities do not exist in silos but become connected pathways for young people. That is why we have deliberately prioritised rural communities, townships and peri-urban areas, because geography should never determine destiny. We have strengthened partnerships with traditional leaders, municipalities, universities, the private sector and civil society, taking opportunities to communities that have historically been overlooked.

Our commitment to inclusion has also moved beyond words into institutional action. The Agency has adopted a dedicated Disability Strategy, ensuring that accessibility and inclusion are embedded across our programmes, while we are finalising a Rural Strategy that will ensure young people in villages and remote communities are no longer left behind in South Africa's development journey. We continue to ensure that young women and LGBTQIA+ youth are intentionally included because meaningful development cannot exclude those who have historically been marginalised.

Through Phanda Thursday, we are bringing jobs, bursaries, internships, grants and entrepreneurship support directly to young people every week because information hidden can be seen as opportunity denied. Through our nationwide consultations on the Integrated Youth Development Strategy, we are ensuring that policy is shaped with young people and not merely for them. Through our engagements with the Department of Public Service and Administration and the Department of Employment



and Labour, we are working to ensure that unemployed graduates are connected to opportunities and that unnecessary barriers between qualifications and employment are removed.

As discussions around early retirement and succession planning continue, we believe they must be accompanied by deliberate investment in young professionals, ensuring that institutional knowledge is preserved while creating meaningful pathways for a new generation to serve the state. At the same time, we continue to work with SAQA and other partners to reduce unnecessary administrative barriers that delay young people from transitioning from qualifications into employment.

Our vision is simple Programme Director: no graduate should spend years outside the economy while opportunities, skills and experience exist in separate silos. The state must become more agile in matching talent with need, and every vacancy should be viewed not only as a recruitment exercise, but as an opportunity to invest in the future leadership of our country.

Equally encouraging are the opportunities emerging through science, technology and innovation. Working with strategic partners, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) is championing programmes that prepare young South Africans for the industries of tomorrow rather than the jobs of yesterday. Through initiatives in cybersecurity, digital innovation and artificial intelligence, young people are being equipped not only to participate in the digital economy but to lead it. Programmes linked to the CSIR are creating pathways for unemployed graduates to establish youth-owned cybersecurity enterprises while strengthening South Africa's capacity in one of the fastest-growing sectors of the global economy.

At the same time, partnerships such as GRIT Lab Africa are training thousands of young graduates in artificial intelligence, robotics and advanced digital technologies, ensuring that our young people are not left behind as the Fourth Industrial Revolution reshapes the world.

We are also enlightened by the emergence of the South African National Service Initiative (SANSI), which is reimagining national service as a pathway to skills, dignity and economic participation. Through targeted programmes in agriculture and community development, SANSI is creating opportunities for young people to gain practical experience, contribute to food security and build sustainable livelihoods. It recognises that service to one's country and personal economic empowerment are not mutually exclusive - they can, and should, reinforce one another.

Taken together with initiatives in science, technology, entrepreneurship and digital innovation, SANSI demonstrates that South Africa is beginning to invest not only in creating jobs, but in preparing young people to become producers, innovators and active participants in the economy of the future.



Honourable President, in July, the NYDA will launch I AM THE CODE - a bold, status quo-disrupting initiative that will equip more than 600,000 young South Africans with future-ready skills in artificial intelligence, coding, robotics, fintech, agritech and digital entrepreneurship. We refuse to prepare young people only for the economy we inherited. We are preparing them to lead the economy that is emerging as well.

Together with initiatives like YOMO, these interventions represent something bigger. They represent a new social compact. A commitment that every young South African, whether in a village in Limpopo, a township in Gauteng, a farming community in the Northern Cape or an inner-city neighbourhood in Durban, deserves a fair opportunity to learn, to work, to innovate, to build and to prosper.

These should not be seen as victories for the NYDA alone. They are investments in the future of South Africa. Because every entrepreneur we fund, every graduate we connect, every young person we train and every opportunity we unlock brings us one step closer to fulfilling the unfinished promise of June 16: that freedom must be lived not only in our Constitution, but in the daily realities of the young people it was meant to serve.

But Programme Director, government cannot do this alone. The fight against youth unemployment cannot remain the responsibility of the public sector alone. The private sector owes this generation more than commentary. It owes this generation investment, internships, procurement opportunities, mentorship. And it owes this generation jobs.

Economic inclusion should never be perceived as corporate generosity. It is in fact corporate responsibility. Every mining company, bank, retailer, telecommunications provider, municipality, university, state-owned enterprise - every one of us should be able to answer one simple question: What have we done this year to expand opportunity for young people?

The economy of the future - from critical minerals and renewable energy to artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing and digital innovation - must not be built without young people. Young people must not only work in these industries. Young people must own them, lead them, and innovate within them.

Because South Africa cannot speak about beneficiation without young beneficiaries. Today, we pause to honour two remarkable daughters of our nation whose lives remind us that leadership is not measured by age, position or title, but by the difference one makes in the lives of others.

We remember Tholithembelihle Ngwenya from Ekurhuleni, whose commitment to organising, mentoring and empowering young people reflected a quiet but extraordinary form of leadership. She understood that transformation is not sustained only by those who stand on platforms, but by those who work tirelessly in



communities, creating pathways where none existed before and believing in the potential of young people long before the world notices it.

We also remember the late Deputy Minister Bavelile Hlongwa, from Umzinto - an engineer, student activist, former Executive Deputy Chairperson of the National Youth Development Agency and one of the youngest Deputy Ministers in democratic South Africa. She embodied the belief that youth is not a rehearsal for leadership but leadership itself. More than the offices she occupied, it was the opportunities she created that defined her legacy. She reminded us that government must never lose sight of those on the margins and that the true measure of leadership is not the position we hold, but the lives we transform.

Together, their lives remind us that youth development is not carried by government alone. It is carried by people who embodied the Batho Pele principles. People who choose service over self-interest, collaboration over competition and hope over despair.

As we look ahead, let us make three commitments. Let us commit that every young person will have access to quality learning and future-ready skills. Let us commit that every graduate and every entrepreneur will have a genuine pathway into opportunity. And let us commit that every institution in South Africa will take responsibility for expanding opportunity for young people.

History will not ask whether we commemorated 16 June. It will ask whether we understood what 16 June demanded of us. It will ask whether the graduate found work. Whether the entrepreneur found capital. Whether the child in a rural village believed their dreams mattered as much as those born in our cities. Whether the young woman found dignity. Whether the young person with a disability found inclusion. Whether hope itself became measurable.

The youth of 1976 handed us political freedom. The youth of 2026 are not asking for favours. They are asking for a fair chance to build a life. Let us answer them with courage, with urgency, and most importantly, with action.

Freedom does indeed live in every generation. It lived in the courage of the young people who marched through Soweto in 1976. It lived in the students and activists who continued the struggle in 1986. It lived in leaders like Tholihembelihle Ngwenya and Bavelile Hlongwa, who dedicated their lives to expanding opportunity for others. And today, it lives in every graduate searching for work, every entrepreneur seeking capital, every young woman refusing to be defined by circumstance, every young person demanding access to the digital economy and every child who still believes tomorrow can be better than today.

But freedom cannot end at the ballot box. It must reach the workplace, the farm and the factory, the mine, the laboratory and the boardroom. It must reach the township



entrepreneur, the village innovator and the young coder building Africa's next solution. It must reach every single young South African.

That is why we continue to believe in economic freedom in our lifetime - not as a slogan, but as a moral obligation to the generation that follows us. It is why we pursue social transformation not as an aspiration, but as a necessity. It is why we insist that inclusive growth must become the lived reality of every young person, regardless of race, gender, disability, geography or social circumstance.

When future generations look back on us, may they not say that we merely commemorated June 16. May they say that we completed its mission. May they say that we transformed remembrance into action, policy into possibility and sacrifice into shared prosperity. May they say that we chose partnership over division, courage over complacency and hope over despair. May they say that we refused to inherit freedom without expanding it. And may they say that ours was the generation that finally made good on the promise of economic freedom in our lifetime.

Because fifty years ago, young people believed that their future was worth dying for. Let ours be the generation that proves their future, and ours, is worth living for.

I thank you.