

The dire state of SA's born frees

 By [Abram Molelemane](#)

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The recent stats on youth unemployment in South Africa: 36.1% (an increase of 4% between 2008 and 2014), suggest a daunting reality - our born frees face a bleak future.

As a young South African, I'm increasingly seeing many of my peers facing growing challenges. With jobs being scarce and unemployment increasing, coupled with onerous policies such as a BEE code that has done very little to empower the previously disadvantaged, and a poor education system, I can't help but ask myself if the new South Africa is failing us.

While some youths have taken significant strides to craft better lives for themselves, others sadly have resorted to what can best be described as "illicit income-generating activities" to help themselves get by, while others simply waste their lives away on drugs and alcohol.

Unfortunately, none of these activities have lasting rewards or benefits; they either end up jailed, dead, or victims of their addictions. What a waste.

In truth, the challenges we face as young people are even greater than politicians actually think they are. Not only do we have to make something out of a society that has classified us according to gender, race, ethnicity or class, but we also continuously find ourselves hustling, seeking opportunities and, unfortunately, most of the time our efforts are fruitless.

In the midst of these challenges, young South Africans continue to dream and hope for better lifestyles. The reality is, however, it is only those with qualifying factors such as tertiary degrees, work experience, well-spoken English, a driver's licence, own transport, to mention a few, who may find an opportunity to make their dreams come true.

So what can be done to address these challenges we young people face?

Education is the key

Firstly, everyone agrees that South Africa needs to improve its education system dramatically, but how? Well, I would suggest that we start by dismissing the idea of a 30% pass rate!

This can be followed by creating an education system that has an orientation that helps young people become job creators and not job seekers. It is well documented that education plays a vital role in a country's economic growth and development. One of the world's economic giants, China, has invested heavily in education - in fact it is the largest education system in the world. In June 2014, there were 9.39 million students taking the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (GAO

Kao) in China. China's investment in education accounts for about 4% of total GDP.

In addition, China has a constant teacher development system. Teaching has historically been and remains today a highly respected profession in China. Teachers have strong preparation in their subject matter and prospective teachers spend a great deal of time observing the classrooms of experienced teachers, often in schools attached to their universities. Once teachers are employed in school, there is a system of induction and continuous professional development in which groups of teachers work together with master teachers on lesson plans and improvement. A lead SA should be following!

Encourage entrepreneurship at an early stage

Secondly, for a developing economy like ours, entrepreneurship and social innovation are vital to unlocking growth and economic inclusion. Unfortunately, at this stage there is inadequate focus and a lack of an innovation culture within schools and tertiary institutions on the practical skills required to start, manage or work in entrepreneurial ventures.

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2013 report indicates that South Africa's rate for nascent at 6.6% for 2013, for new business entrepreneurs at 4.1% and total early-stage entrepreneurs at 10.6% remain significantly below that of other SSA countries showing 16.2%, 17.1% and 16.0% respectively. This is extremely low compared to most developing countries.

Over 60% of businesses that are started in SA fail within the first year of opening. According to the GEM report this can largely be attributed to four major challenges:

- **Culture** - entrepreneurship is not encouraged as a career in our schools, where there is more focus on seeking employment than creating employment. There is room for increased participation through a deliberate policy to introduce an entrepreneurial culture through competitions, training, workshops and seminars while these teenagers are still in schools;
- **Skills** - lack of knowledge, experience, business and entrepreneurial skills, largely due to a lack of formal education and training. Again a remedial and deliberate policy of introducing a suite of introductory entrepreneur workshops and seminars would go a very long way in breeding and instilling a culture of entrepreneurship;
- **Support** - lack of government and private sector, parental and school sector support for enterprise skills hinder the growth of entrepreneurial skills at a young age; and
- **Finance** - while finance is available, it is difficult to access. For the few who try by hook or by crook to establish and mimic some business prowess, the red tape around access and other restrictions continue to hinder a vibrant society of young entrepreneurs.

Address skills shortage

Lastly, South Africa has a skills shortage and it is one of the main reasons for the high unemployment in the country, especially amongst the poor. This is largely attributed to the scourge of apartheid, where the education system mainly served the white minority. Although there are significant changes that have taken place since 1994, and a whole new plan has been implemented and put into action, this has simply not been enough to address this challenge. For South Africans to be adequately skilled to get jobs in a modern labour market, or to start their own enterprises, will require much more effort.

The government's suggestion of graduates undertaking a year of community service sounds like a worthwhile idea, but the downside of this is that this would delay the period within which graduates can enter the labour market by a year. It will also most likely not improve graduate employability or effectively address skills shortages in the public service, as graduates will not be receiving in-service training, but rather undertaking a year of community service.

What the government should rather do is implement strategies that will help expand opportunities for in-service training or internship programmes for graduates. Although community service seems sensible under certain circumstances, in truth it only becomes valuable to both parties when graduates are also given an opportunity to gain genuine work experience.

I am excited about a new project from Fetola (www.fetola.co.za) called GAP, the Graduate Asset Programme. GAP is aimed at growing the SME sector in South Africa by using the skills of unemployed graduates. By helping place thousands of these capable and willing unemployed graduates into internships, GAP helps the host businesses to gain much-needed skills and the graduates to gain valuable experiential learning. In this way both parties benefit.

With Youth Day having recently passed, many celebrated and honoured the young lives of those who fought for a democratic South Africa with parties and celebrations. I would like to think that a better way to do this is to roll up our sleeves and start resolving the many problems faced by youths today; problems that prevent them from realising their potential to be productive and fulfilled citizens.

ABOUT ABRAM MOLELEMANE

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