

The untold story of South Africa's youth during crisis

By [Althea Farmer](#)

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This Youth Month is one of the most significant South Africa has faced since 1976 and could mark a turning point in our history if government and broader society recognise the essential role young people have played in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic, and continue to engage the youth as essential to overcoming the current crisis.

If one had to look through the lens of positivity and social cohesion, our own youth activators in our network were the best equipped in terms of moving very swiftly to step in where government was lacking in terms of service delivery to communities. That is the story to tell and, once again, make the pivotal point that youth should be part of youth policy development as stakeholders.

Stepping up during lockdown

Through some of our youth hubs and through the ecosystem of relationships that has really been mobilised, our youth stepped in when national lockdown happened to assist with soup kitchens where food parcels weren't getting through to communities in need; they translated Covid health information into the vernacular so that it was easier to understand in their rural communities; they mobilised youth to assist with getting information to the most vulnerable, like the elderly, through regular social media messaging; they were part of the community workers at the forefront of testing; and some started creative projects to capture the historical significance of the lockdown narrative through poetry and storytelling. These young people answered the call to service during this crisis and made a significant contribution during lockdown.



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This is the conversation we need to have now: Covid-19 is here to stay; what are the effects on unemployment and on communities? The poverty gap will widen - how do we respond to that?



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Historical significance of youth activism

In reflecting on Youth Month in general and the youth activism that aligned to it in times of crisis, we must look to the historical significance of youth activism in South Africa. In 1976, young people drove political change in South Africa, they were at the centre of driving change under apartheid and the struggle to bring about our democracy. Young people were at the centre of the fight against HIV/Aids through the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), which culminated in the largest HIV treatment programme in the world.

Under this pandemic, as we battle against this invisible enemy, young people are once again being called to be of service, and they are. We are all very aware that this pandemic has exposed the reality of what is happening on the ground and the rampant levels of poverty we are dealing with. The youth is at the forefront of that. So now we have to ask ourselves, in terms of having to affect policy change, why the youth are not essential stakeholders? They are often the ones who respond quickly, even leveraging off networks that exist, like our Activate Change Drivers' network, and being able to perform the change in their environments that is needed. The youth absolutely must be seen as an essential stakeholder in

a crisis within the spheres of creating the change that needs to happen on the ground.



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Youth inclusion in solutions

Within the context of the current global pandemic, we are having to refine what this new environment means for us and how to shape it. As a youth network, we have tried to be present at all important policy-making decisions and we are making a call now for the youth to be included by government, by business, by civil society, at all important conversations on youth policy and youth inclusion in solutions to fight this pandemic and aid communities on the ground.

In times of crisis, this is what we should be reflecting on as a society:

- To be an active citizen, you must understand your current environment and leverage off it and engage within the networks that exist.
- It is also important for us to be intentional in getting to know what this virus is and means, so we can tell the story in our own language for our communities and what changes will have to be effected in order for us to outlive Covid-19.
- I do feel that it is too 'far away' for a lot of people and there is still a gap of education and capacity building to inform and tell the story of what this virus means in our own spaces.
- We need to step back and recognise where we are, what networks we can access, and how we can start educating and mobilising for what this means for our future world – economically and on health and safety.



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Government must see the youth as stakeholders, as resourceful and as a resource. Activate Change Drivers has already been providing input into national youth policy for a number of years and working with young people around youth policy to gather their input.

This crisis has shown us once again that there is space for citizen activism to fill the gap, that there is space for change and for the youth to be recognised as an essential service in South Africa. Since 1976, the youth have led the revolution. We have shown our worth, we have done the work. We are ready.

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