



# YOUTH DIALOGUE ON ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY



## The Role of the Youth in Electoral Democracy in South Africa

# THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH IN ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA



A national youth dialogue towards the 2009 elections

A report of the proceedings of the Electoral Commission's  
National Youth Dialogue on Electoral Democracy,  
held at the Midrand Conference Centre, Gauteng  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2009, South Africans will be voting. This will be the fourth democratic elections. As part of its preparatory work for the forthcoming elections, the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) has embarked on a number of programmes that are aimed at engaging with stakeholders to level the ground for free and fair elections in 2009. These programmes include rolling out a massive voter education campaign, registration campaigns, the popularisation and (later) signing of an electoral code of conduct and the hosting of various stakeholder management forums. Some of these are being replicated at provincial level.

In the history of South Africa's democratic elections, there has been growing concern over the poor participation of the youth in elections. It is for this reason that the IEC's stakeholder management and civic education campaigns this year had a dedicated focus on the youth. The National Youth Dialogue on Electoral Democracy is among the many initiatives that aim to address this challenge. It should therefore be contextualised on the premise of the IEC's efforts to intensify its civic education campaigns. The dialogue was organised to provide a platform to raise awareness among the youth about the importance of participating in electoral processes, while affording them an opportunity to share their predicaments and experiences in a new democratic South Africa.

The dialogue to which this report refers was held on 30 October 2008, which took place a week before the voter registration weekend of 8 and 9 November 2008. The forum was attended by over 500 youths, who came from across the length and breadth of South Africa. They either represented organised formations or attended in an individual capacity.

From the deliberations, it was obvious that the youth are committed to building a prosperous and democratic South Africa. They expressed an interest to participate in democratic processes and committed themselves to work, in partnership with the IEC, to ensure that the 2009 elections were free and fair.

The following are some of the important points raised and some of the recommendations made:

- With full comprehension of the implications of not voting, the youth committed themselves to ensure that they would mobilise others to go in their multitudes to register and to vote.
- The IEC, together with other institutions, should regularly engage the youth on civic and voter education. This should, however, not only happen during elections, as engagement in between elections is as important as it is on the day of voting.
- Voter education campaigns should adopt edutainment methods to appeal to the interests of the youth. Similarly, the role of the media in elections should be intensified, while youth formations should play a meaningful role in educating the youth on their rights and responsibilities, including the rights of women and people with disabilities.

- Notwithstanding the contribution of civic education in raising awareness, the youth should also take responsibility for obtaining information about the political parties and what they have to offer.
- While there was no agreement on whether the electoral system should be changed or not, there was a strong view that mechanisms should be found to increase accountability on the part of political parties. This is important, as it has an impact on the participation of the youth in elections.
- Although there were discussions on whether compulsory voting should be introduced to increase the participation of the youth, the unanimous view was that it should remain a choice. However, a call was made for those who decide not to vote to desist from influencing others not to vote.
- The dialogue called for a review of the eligible age for voting, suggesting that it should be 16 years.
- The IEC was advised, in future, to consider registration dates that are outside the busy school examination calendar.
- The IEC should consider making use of unemployed youths and graduates to serve as electoral officers instead of giving this opportunity to those who are already employed.

As part of the way forward, the IEC, through its Chief Electoral Officer, committed itself to developing a declaration that will be an expression of the commitments made during this dialogue. This initiative would be coupled with the launch of youth ambassadors, as announced at the dialogue.

## SECTION 1

### 1.1. INTRODUCTION

On 30 October 2008, the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) successfully hosted a National Youth Dialogue on Electoral Democracy. The dialogue was attended by over 500 young people who came from the length and breadth of South Africa. A number of these participants attended the conference as representatives of organised formations, while others attended in an individual capacity.

The National Youth Dialogue on Electoral Democracy was organised to raise awareness among young South Africans of voting age about the forthcoming (2009) national and provincial elections and to encourage them to participate effectively by mobilising their peers and by voting in the elections. The timing of the dialogue was well calculated, as it took place a week before the voter registration weekend of 8 and 9 November 2008.

For the IEC and the youth who participated, the dialogue provided a platform for robust discussion on the mechanisms and strategies to promote and create an enabling environment for the realisation of electoral democracy principles. It further explored values, ethos and practices among young people in their individual capacity and organised formations. To explain why the IEC found it relevant to engage the youth on these matters, Ms Noluthando Sweetness White, IEC official and facilitator of the programme, underscored that it was in the interest of the IEC to understand the needs of young people and how the youth view their role in this young democracy.

During the dialogue, Ms White pointed out the importance of the IEC's engagement of young people in matters of electoral democracy, saying that it was in its best interests to understand the needs of young people and how the youth view their role in this young democracy.

This report, therefore, presents an account of the proceedings of the dialogue, highlighting some of the key issues and discussions that ensued at the dialogue. It intends to contribute to building a memory of the IEC in its engagement with stakeholders and generating a wealth of knowledge by documenting and keeping record of such activities.

### 1.2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE DIALOGUE

Youth engagement on election issues is important for South Africa at this stage in its democracy. This is because of the reality that young people born in the early 1990s would only be qualifying to vote for the first time in the 2009 elections. The overall objective of the dialogue was to raise awareness among young people of the importance of voting, as well as the processes and procedures to be followed during the elections. Of equal importance was to educate them on the requirements of registering and the voting process. The dialogue sought to stimulate debate to ensure the maximum participation of the youth during voter registration weekends and on Election Day.

Some of the strategic objectives of the dialogue included the following:

- Promote sound knowledge of electoral processes among young people
- Establish sustainable partnerships with various youth formations
- Promote electoral democracy development and education
- Encourage and nurture ongoing dialogue between the IEC and young people in South Africa
- Promote the values of the Constitution in relation to young people and electoral democracy
- Invest and promote responsible citizenship among young people

In his outline of the objectives of the National Youth Dialogue, Mr Terry Tselane, IEC Commissioner, noted and emphasised that the youth are the future of the country and that their participation in elections provides them with an opportunity to shape the future of South Africa's democracy. In line with the objectives of the dialogue, Mr Tselane urged the youth and their formations not only to mobilise young people to register for the elections and to vote, but also to create an environment conducive to free and fair elections. He assured delegates that the IEC would strive to build trust among South Africans.

The dialogue offered a perfect platform to launch and popularise the concept of youth ambassadors who will be selected to travel the length and breadth of South Africa, encouraging young people to vote. Thus, in line with the concept of youth ambassadors, Lungile Radu, a young television presenter, delivered a message to encourage young people to go out in their multitudes to have their voices heard by registering for the 2009 elections and casting their votes.

## SECTION 2

### 2.1. CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO VOTE

Mr Michael Hendrickse, IEC Senior Manager: Electoral Matters, led the discussion on the right to vote as protected by the Constitution. That voting is a constitutional right might seem too obvious to mention and even discuss in a forum such as the National Youth Dialogue. However, assuming that every young person was aware of this and the implication of it being a constitutional right was a risk the IEC was not prepared to take. Thus, it was necessary that the dialogue, as an information-sharing platform, also provided an opportunity for young people to reflect on voting as a right. Leading the discussion on this topic was Mr Hendrickse of the IEC.

#### 2.1.1. Constitutional mandate of the IEC

As expected, the presentation by Mr Hendrickse drew inspiration from the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, as he continuously made reference to it. The Constitution makes provision for regular elections in which the right to vote is guaranteed by universal adult suffrage for all. This means that every adult from 18 years and above has the right to vote.

In the past, this right was a limited franchise enjoyed by few under the aegis of the apartheid regime. Today, the right to vote is for all and it is important that it is correctly utilised. The provisions in the Constitution enable citizens to vote for the National Assembly, provincial and local government, as well as local councillors. This means that people have the right to choose their leaders and have a voice as to who is in government.

The responsibility of the IEC, as stipulated in the Constitution, is to manage regular elections of national, provincial and municipal legislative bodies in accordance with national legislation, to ensure that such elections are free and fair, and to declare the results of those elections within seven days, as prescribed by national legislation. As a Chapter 9 institution, the IEC has a mandate to safeguard and promote electoral democracy in South Africa.

#### 2.1.2. Youth participation in the elections

There is an ongoing concern about the poor participation of the youth in elections. This is despite the youth comprising a large proportion of the population of the country and the fact that the right to vote is provided for in the Constitution. In its studies and experience gained from working in the area of elections, the IEC has discovered that a number of factors contribute to the poor participation of young people in elections. These include the high

disillusionment among the youth, lack of political knowledge, limited choices presented by political parties, alienation, and the unfortunate view that an individual vote does not make a difference. Despite these factors, delegates at the dialogue sought to dispel the notion that the youth is apathetic, arguing that the youth have opinions in political matters, but organs of state and political organisations are failing to engage them in a manner that is of interest to them.

Some of these factors can, however, be addressed by forging partnerships between the IEC and youth formations to engage the youth through voter education campaigns. Political parties also have a significant role to play, especially in intensifying their campaigns to address youth interests. While many young people who could not vote in the 1999 elections will now be eligible to vote, the challenge remains for the political parties to canvass among these multitudes in an effort to win their minds and hearts to vote in the upcoming (2009) general elections. This should, however, start from mobilising them to register to vote, and later to cast their vote on Election Day.

#### 2.1.3. Challenges that affect young people's participation in elections

In his presentation, Mr Hendrickse continued to highlight some of the associated challenges and factors that affected young people's participation in elections. The issues he raised were aimed at stimulating dialogue among the youth for them to confirm or dispute some of the issues and even to explore the degree to which such issues affect them. It should be noted that some of the issues raised could be categorised as emanating from structural and legislative bottlenecks. Some of the issues related to the perceptions of the accountability of political parties and the delivery of services and promises made during the electioneering period.

From the structural and legislative point of view, the electoral system was raised as one of those issues. Delegates debated the issue of proportional representation and the effect of the party list on young people's participation in elections. Discussion on this issue divided the house in terms of those who suggested a review of the electoral system, while others argued for the retention of the status quo. For the former group, an argument was advanced that while young people may prefer a particular candidate to lead the country, their choice was limited as the decision as to who becomes president remained a responsibility of the political party. For this group, lack of influence on who should ascend to the presidency demoralises young people from participating in electoral processes. The counter-argument was that this should be reason enough to challenge young people to participate in party politics and influence decisions there.

The other structural matter related to the voting age. Here, Mr Hendrickse

posed a rhetorical question as to whether the age limit should be reduced. Arguments raised by delegates pointed to a unanimous view that consideration should be given to young people of 16 years of age being eligible to vote. It was the view of the delegates that young people at this age have the ability to formulate political views and decisions. When they are not allowed by law to exercise this right, they become disillusioned and lose interest before they become eligible to vote. It was, therefore, proposed as a recommendation to the IEC that the voting age should be reviewed.

Accountability, or lack thereof, by elected representatives of government, especially at local level, has an impact on young people's participation in the elections. When elected representatives are accountable, deliver services to their communities and engage young people on a regular basis, the interest of young people to participate in electoral processes is perceived to be high. However, this is not the case if representatives are unaccountable and young people have disengaged. It is worse where representatives are perceived to be invisible.

In addition, youth delegates raised concerns on the sporadic manner in which they were engaged by political parties and the IEC. They are only engaged in the time leading up to and during the elections, but not afterwards. This is a major concern that impacts on the participation of the youth in electoral processes, as they feel neglected. They also feel that their importance is only realised when their votes are needed.

Despite these challenges, isn't it still important for young people to participate in elections, thereby influencing the changes where they are discontented with the status quo? To respond to this question, the dialogue moved to look into the significance of voting.

#### 2.1.4. Importance of voting

Entering into this debate as one of the interlocutors, Ms Kopano Marumo of Music Television (MTV) networks spoke on the importance of voting. She highlighted the fact that the freedom we enjoy today is enshrined in and protected by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. This goes with freedom of expression and freedom of association. For Ms Marumo, the point of raising these issues was mainly to highlight the fact that when young people were discontent with a particular political party, they still had the freedom to express their dissatisfaction and exercise their right to associate with another party of their choice.

Therefore, it is important for young people, even if they are unhappy, to go in their numbers and express their choices on Election Day. In her view, young people should take responsibility to protect the legacy of Nelson Mandela and

those who fought for this freedom by participating in elections. We should all be patriotic enough to love our country and ensure that democracy prevails. In her submission to the debate on the importance of voting, Ms Simi Siwisa, Director: Economic Policy at Business Unity South Africa, introduced the business perspective. She posed numerous provocative and rhetorical questions about the participation of young people in electoral processes. As to why voting is or should be the business of young people, Ms Siwisa pointed to the fact that young people comprised a large proportion of South Africa's population and the future should be forged by them. To accentuate this point, Ms Siwisa asked the delegates if there can be anything for the youth without them. Regarding the low participation trend of young people in voting, she said questions about how political parties and leaders interact with the youth should be asked to help address this challenge. Are political parties speaking in a language and using methods that appeal to young people? To further argue the importance of voting, Ms Siwisa pointed out that the failure of young people to vote was tantamount to neglecting the right to vote. But how do you stimulate the participation of the youth in elections if they do not see the changes and benefits of democracy? While the role of government is to develop policies, it should also deliver on the promises it makes to young people. From the business perspective, democracy should enable young people to benefit from it through their participation in businesses and entrepreneurship development. Thus, the economic impact of voting also needs to be scrutinised.

Mr Hendrickse cautioned that while elections in themselves are reflections of democracy, they are even more so if they are free and fair. Thus, young people should contribute to ensuring the legitimacy of government by voting and ensuring that the government that comes to power is elected in a free and fair election process.

Some delegates also highlighted the fact that the current political climate in South Africa had reinvigorated and reignited the youth activism that seemed to have faded since 1994. It would, therefore, be important not only for the IEC to capitalise on these developments by mobilising young people to register and vote, but political parties also need to take advantage of this and engage the youth to participate in the upcoming elections.

## SECTION 3

### 3.1. THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH IN ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

In contextualising the role of the South African youth in electoral democracy, Mr Ongkopotse JJ Tabane, Altron Group Executive: Corporate Affairs and Chairman of the Youth Development Forum Working Group, who presented the keynote address, highlighted the historical evolution of the participation of the youth in the struggle for the liberation of South Africa. Similarly, he pointed to 16 June 1976 as the period that epitomised the engagement of the youth in the democratisation of South Africa. Thus, he appealed to the young delegates at the dialogue to join him on an imaginary journey of the period of 1976 and its concomitant episodes until 2008 and what could come thereafter. For the youth, the invitation to think through the activities of June 1976 provided an opportunity to show compassion for what the youth of that time had gone through and the value they added to the lives of the current generation.

However, according to Mr Tabane, the role of the youth in electoral democracy can be summarised by the vowels taught in the earliest stages of cognitive development: a, e, i, o and u. These letters represent the following: awareness, education, involvement, obligations and ubuntu. He describes these as the pillars that summarise the role of the youth in strengthening democracy. His presentation sought to meticulously explain these pillars in the context of democracy and democratic participation.

#### 3.1.1. Awareness

The challenge was put forward for young people to be aware of the environment, including the political environment in which they find themselves. Mr Tabane used quotes from different scholars and philosophers to underscore the need for young people to fight ignorance and to be aware. Thus, to Confucius, “ignorance is the night of the mind, but a night without moon or star”. Mr Tabane also made reference to a familiar Persian proverb about ignorance: “He who knows not and knows not that he knows not is a fool; shun him. He who knows not and knows that he knows not is a child; teach him. He who knows and knows not that he knows is asleep; wake him. He who knows and knows that he knows is wise; follow him.”

According to Mr Tabane, there is no excuse today for young people to be ignorant, as they are living in the era of technological advancement, where information dissemination takes place in various forms, including newspapers, magazines, blogs, Internet sites and mobile phones. It would be unfortunate for young people not to take advantage of these platforms to keep themselves informed. Young people were urged to dispel the attitude that ‘if it is important it will come to me’. Mr Tabane challenged young people to take a step in fighting ignorance and to strengthen their participation in democracy.

He challenged young people to do the following:

- Attend relevant seminars, debates and lectures in the public circuit
- Read everything they can lay their hands on; have favourite publications that will give them a well-rounded view of the world, from politics to sport, from entertainment to information about the world and current affairs
- Select and regularly follow education channels on radio and television
- The Internet is a great place to learn: find sites of importance and follow debates

This will help to build an informed electorate that is able to make informed choices. Such an electorate will have a better comprehension of what various political parties are offering, so that they can have intelligent questions to ask them. By being aware, young people can move from being spectators to stars who can direct their own future.

#### 3.1.2. Education

The second role of young people is to embrace education. According to Mr Tabane, education enhances a meaningful participation in democracy. He spoke of lifelong learning and having a love of books. He challenged the youth that, today, in this era, there is no excuse for not going to school. The debates on ‘liberation now and education later’ were relevant in the past, but it is only through education that young people can enhance their lives and earn sustainable livelihoods.

Mr Tabane also pointed out that even those who had the ambition to lead the country should embrace education. The role of young people is to go to school and learn. Mr Tabane cited the famous words of Nelson Mandela to highlight the significance for young people to embrace education: “Education is the most powerful tool through which you can change the world.”

For those who pursue their studies, Mr Tabane warned that they should also be able to raise self-introspective questions about their acquired knowledge. This knowledge must contribute positively to the growth of humanity. Thus, the question for every young person should be: “How will my studies contribute to the wellbeing of the broader society?” Those who ask this question will be educated and not merely certificated. Education must produce critical thinkers who can help change the world for the better. According to Mr Tabane, such young critical thinkers will indeed become the true agents of change. They will not be spectators, but will star in their respective disciplines and fields of specialisation.

### 3.1.3. Involvement

To the amusement of the delegates, Mr Tabane opened his argument on the involvement of young people by saying he was aware that “many young people are involved with each other,” but the involvement to which he was referring was the participation of young people in democratic processes. He emphasised that young people should take responsibility for and participate in political and other democratic processes. As Lenin asserted, “if you do not involve yourself in politics, politics will involve itself unto you”. There are many platforms and structures in which young people should participate and make their voices heard. These include ward meetings, street committee meetings and body corporate meetings in the areas in which young people live.

The involvement to which Mr Tabane was referring was not only for young people to attend meetings and forums, but also for them to take responsibility for implementing some of the decisions taken at these meetings and to follow up on them. It was up to young people to develop an alternative voice to participate in these structures and make their voices heard. It is no use complaining, but it is important to make your voice heard. With reference to elections, Mr Tabane underscored the fact that young people should involve themselves by going in their multitudes to vote during elections.

### 3.1.4. Obligation

Young people have an obligation to protect and nurture the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. There is a need to build a sustainable culture of human rights among the youth. Mr Tabane further argued that rights do not exist in isolation, but come with responsibility. Thus, he emphasised that, under a democratic dispensation, there was a need for young people to develop a sense of ownership in state institutions and infrastructure. Instead of vandalising property, young people should jealously protect it. Similarly, with regard to protecting the constitutional democracy, young people should vigorously oppose threats that seek to undermine democracy. Young people must denounce and disown statements such as “kill for this or that person” that some youth leaders claim to be making on their behalf. Young people have an obligation to entrench a culture of tolerance and to militate against a culture of entitlement.

### 3.1.5. Ubuntu

It is also the role of the youth to restore the values of *ubuntu*: ‘you are because I am and I am because you are’. There is a growing concern that South Africa is witnessing a decay of the moral compass. If this is not attended to, it will impact negatively and immensely on the generations to come. There is a

need for young people to rediscover their roots and to embrace the values of respect and humility that have shaped the character of many generations that have come before us. Young people need to learn our customs from older generations. It is the responsibility of the youth today to recognise the need to appreciate diversity and the coexistence not only of ethnic and religious groups in society, but also of ideas.

To conclude his presentation, Mr Tabane invited the delegates, once again, to join him on an imaginary journey, looking ahead to the year 2020. He argued that if young people were able to play the five roles he outlined, then 2020 would represent a brighter future for the youth of this country. The important responsibility and challenge for young people is to “ask what they can do for their country, not just what their country can do for them”.

## SECTION 4

### 4.1. WHAT THE YOUTH SAID ABOUT THEIR PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS

This section presents some of the views expressed by young people during the breakaway sessions when they discussed some of the presentations and questions raised during the plenary session. The breakaway sessions were organised to ensure that young people had enough chance to engage in dialogue among themselves on the issues they consider pertinent to their participation in the forthcoming elections. For the purposes of coherence and focus of the discussions, the IEC provided thematic areas and guiding questions that served as a frame of reference to help shape the discussions. The presentation in this section is comprised of the views expressed by young people. Many of these are presented as recommendations made at the dialogue.

#### 4.1.2. Implications and importance of voting

Young people expressed an interest to discuss the implications of voting or not voting. In addressing this issue, they fully comprehended that voting was a constitutional right that they needed to exercise. From their perspectives, they identified the implications of voting as exercising their constitutional rights and as a means to have their voices heard. They also identified the consequence of neglecting this responsibility as “ending up with people you do not wish to be your leaders”. Thus, participating in elections would allow the youth to have leaders of their choice.

What was also considered, was that it is just as important to engage young people in between elections as on the day of voting. Young people should not only be engaged when their votes are required, but also when policies are developed and implemented, so that they can take charge of their future.

These discussions emphasised the significance of the participation of the youth in the electoral processes. The popular view was that the participation of the youth in democratic processes in general would serve to indicate the commitment of young people in preserving the legacy, the history of the hard-won struggles of the heroes and heroines of this country. In line with this, the youth have a responsibility to get to know their parties and what they have to offer.

In response to the issue raised by the keynote address about the lack of information, young people expressed an interest to adopt the suggestion that

they should obtain information that would empower them to make informed choices. This means getting to know their parties and representatives, getting to know what the political parties are offering, etc. They vowed to take this as part of their responsibility, notwithstanding the importance of civic education.

#### 4.1.3. Citizenship and civic education

Shouldn't a debate on voting be located within the context of citizenship? This question arose in one of the breakaway sessions. It was argued that voting should be seen as part of responsible citizenship.

Similarly, the need to develop an adaptable and intense civic education was mooted at the dialogue, with young people urging the IEC to take a lead in rolling out such a programme. However, while the IEC could take the lead, it was emphasised that this was a collective responsibility that all stakeholders, especially Chapter 9 institutions and youth formations, should undertake. Partnerships should be developed in this regard.

Young people should also participate in mass voter education campaigns in their communities to raise awareness of the importance of voting. It was emphasised that voter education programmes should be conducted in a manner that would appeal to the youth: edutainment methods should be employed to stimulate the interest of young people in these programmes.

#### 4.1.4. The role of the media

The role of the media also came under scrutiny, with young people calling for robust engagement in the manner in which the media engages young people on issues relating to elections. It was argued that some of the media coverage impacted negatively on the perceptions of young people and discouraged them from participating in political activities.

#### 4.1.5. Electoral system and processes

There were contrary views with regard to the electoral system. Some people argued for a review that should culminate in the direct election of the country's president, while others argued that this could compromise elections to the extent that only those with enough wealth to raise campaigns would be elected, while genuine leaders might be compromised because they lacked financial resources.

In respect of whether South Africa should introduce compulsory voting, there was a unanimous view that voting should remain a choice. However, those

who choose not to vote should not seek to influence others not to vote. This was an unequivocal message that was shared throughout the discussions.

The youth delegates called for a review of the voting age, suggesting that it should be lowered to 16 years. For those who argued in favour of this view, there was consensus that it wouldn't make sense for the laws of the country to acknowledge that young people are capable of deciding to have an abortion, while they are not considered capable of choosing the leadership of the country.

On the issue of registration, there was a concern that the selected days were not favourable for school-going youths who would be busy preparing for their examinations. Thus, it was recommended that, in future, the IEC needed to consider registration days that did not coincide with school examinations, so that young people could have the time to mobilise and register.

Furthermore, it was recommended that the IEC should consider giving unemployed youths the opportunity to participate as election officers during elections. Concomitant to this suggestion was a concern that while there are a number of unemployed youths and graduates, the IEC gives preference to teachers, who are already employed, to serve as electoral officers.

#### 4.1.6. The role of youth formations

The role of youth formations, including the National Youth Commission, the South African Youth Council and many others, should be examined. These institutions are established to develop programmes that engage the youth on their rights and responsibilities. As we approach the 2009 elections, youth formations should mobilise young people to register and vote, while political parties should popularise their manifestos. The role of youth formations should also be to ensure that the rights of young people with disabilities are protected and that they can also participate effectively during elections. Thus, there is a need for stakeholders to engage one another in partnership programmes, and in related programmes to share and learn from each other's experiences. It is, therefore, important that the IEC should maintain the relationship it has developed with youth formations and to bring even more on board.

## 5.1. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The ability of the dialogue to bring together a number of speakers, youth formations and youth leaders made it a platform for successful engagement. The manner in which the discussions were undertaken and the time provided during the breakaway sessions earned this activity the true meaning of a dialogue. These were some of the expressions given by young people who could not conceal their excitement about this successful event.

### 5.1.1. The right to vote

In closing the youth dialogue, Mr Aubrey Mashiqi, Senior Associate Political Analyst at the Centre for Policy Studies, also made an input, adding to the discussions earlier in the day. Mr Mashiqi's presentation was well timed to lead towards the conclusion of the indaba. He reaffirmed that the right to vote was a right that also extended to mean that people still had a right not to vote. Mr Mashiqi argued that abstinence from voting could rightfully be interpreted as a vote of no confidence in the political parties contesting the elections. To advance a reason why people should vote, it would be important to note that this should come as a civic or a national duty.

The power of the vote cannot be undermined. "Through your vote, you can change the life of someone else. Your vote has an impact on the lives of other people." Mr Mashiqi said this to encourage the youth to realise the seriousness and importance of voting, citing an example that a vote might translate into someone getting a house, sanitation, etc.

While people would argue that the reason they are despondent is because political parties have failed to engage them, Mr Mashiqi argued that people should ask themselves whether and to what extent they have engaged such political parties. He further argued that the relationship between political parties and the electorate must be a 'doctor and patient relationship'.

### 5.1.2. A challenge to the youth

A challenging question posed to the participants was what they were doing that would inspire future generations to want to preserve their legacy. This challenge sought to provoke critical reflections among the delegates as to whether there was a cause that united them that would make future generations proud and that they would want to preserve. Unfortunately, this

question was not to be answered, but was an issue for young delegates to think about as they went back to their communities.

In his way forward, Mr Mashiqi challenged all young people to strive for an education. This was the second challenge he posed to the youth. He argued that in order to exercise responsibility as a young person, one needs to be educated. The youth today have a responsibility to go to school and get an education that will enable them to lead the country into prosperity. Taking this responsibility is important, and he accentuated the point that the youth of today are not a lost generation.

The youth also need to be tolerant and should not expect that because 'we are in a democratic dispensation' they will always get what they want. There are some things one needs to struggle for.

Another challenge that warrants the attention of the youth today is that while the majority of voters in the country are women, this is not reflected in the leadership of political parties and in government. This should not be misconstrued to suggest that nothing has been achieved in the past decade and a half, but it suggests that more work still lies ahead and the youth has a responsibility to win the battle for women emancipation.

#### 5.1.3. Youth ambassadors

As part of its strategies to mobilise young people to participate in their multitudes during the 2009 elections, the IEC sought to appoint what would be known as youth ambassadors. Announcing this concept to the National Youth Dialogue was Advocate Pansy Tlakula, the Chief Electoral Officer of the IEC. Advocate Tlakula indicated that these youth ambassadors would travel the length and breadth of South Africa, talking to the youth about the importance of voting. They will be selected from their communities where they live and will form a network that will champion the participation of the youth in electoral processes.

Advocate Tlakula emphasised that the reason the IEC was launching the Youth Ambassadors Programme was because the institution realised that it did not have the capacity to be everywhere and to reach out to all the young people in preparing for the 2009 elections. The nomination of youth ambassadors will be done by young people, and the IEC will soon announce the opening of nominations and the process to be followed. However, some of the guiding principles for youth ambassadors will be that they should not promote party politics, they should demonstrate non-partisanship, not hold any political office and, above all, be between the ages of 18 and 35.

#### 5.1.4. A youth declaration

Further to the concept of youth ambassadors, Advocate Tlakula indicated that the IEC was planning to launch a youth declaration that would emanate from the discussions and recommendations of the National Youth Dialogue. It was pointed out that once this report was ready, the IEC would draft a declaration of young people in preparation for the 2009 elections, which would possibly be unveiled during the launch of the youth ambassadors or during the signing of the Electoral Code of Conduct for political parties. This will be read by a youth ambassador.

#### 5.1.5. Vote of thanks

A vote of thanks was delivered by Ms Kate Bapela, Head of Communication at the IEC. She expressed sincere gratitude to the team that organised the event, the speakers who delivered the provocative papers that stimulated debate and the participants who showed commitment to the future of South Africa. Ms Bapela thanked everybody for making the event a success and, more importantly, for giving hope to the future of South Africa. This was the end of a successful and fruitful day. Her message to the organising team and the IEC was that more work lay ahead to ensure that the recommendations of the dialogue filter through all the IEC's activities, leading to free and fair 2009 elections.



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### KEYNOTE ADDRESS

#### The role of youth in electoral democracy

By Onkgopotse JJ Tabane

Altron Group Executive: Corporate Affairs

Chairman of the Youth Development Forum Working Group

30 October 2008

Fourteen years after democracy, many young people cannot imagine a country where there is no democracy. Many of those that fall into the category called young people, those between 18 and 35 years of age, have not lived long enough in an era where there was no democracy. They cannot relate with that reality: the reality of whites as master and gods; a reality of our country as a skunk of the world; a reality of carrying a *dompas* everywhere you go... Anyone therefore seeking to encourage young people to take their rightful place has an even harder time trying to find the right words. It may well be that many of you gathered here, by virtue of being here to discuss your role in electoral democracy, are largely the converted. I hope I am right. Nevertheless, the purpose of this conference, I imagine, is not only to preach to the converted, so to speak, but to arm all of us in mobilising millions of young people to take their rightful place in the body politic of our fledgling and growing democracy.

I want you to come with me to the quiet morning of 16 June 1976 when thousands

of young people essentially said "enough is enough" and took matters into their own hands to protest against injustice. Close your eyes for a moment and feel the breeze of that morning... the eerie silence followed by the chanting of freedom songs calling for the abolishment of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. Feel the power of people chanting alongside you with a common and united purpose; a purpose bigger than all of you; a purpose of freedom. The fear is palpable as no one knows what the consequences of what would constitute a provocation of the security police would be. Smell the tear gas, feel the rubber bullets being shot into the air, and when that moment arrives, see what was an organised group of uniformly toyi-toying youth becomes scattered in the streets of Soweto: every one of the young people of courage and determination now on their own in a moment of darkness that could even mean death. Smell the stench of freshly pouting blood filling the air. Imagine next to you one of your own cousins, sisters, brothers falling like flies as they are being shot as if this is just a military practice. You

know it is not and a few days later you will be gathered by the graveside and bidding your final goodbye to the fallen heroines and heroes of your freedom. These and many others like them sacrificed their lives, not their free time, so that you and I can today enjoy freedom. The stories of those who so sacrificed are many and are varied. They include beatings, rape, cold-blooded murder in police cells and elsewhere. The stories of the stripping of human dignity include naked torture, cross-border killings and unmarked graves scattered all over the hinterlands of the subcontinent. The story of what people did so that we can enjoy the vote is astounding, but lately it has become one of the most untold stories of our time... Many don't want to talk about it, because they say why bring up the past... it's in the past... leave it there. Let me tell you something right here, the past needs to be borne in mind in order for us to remember where we come from and maybe learn from the mistakes of our forbearers.

Why did I bring up this story today? Those who ought to be the defenders of our freedom are at each others' throats, comrade insulting comrade in the battle for the soul of these hard-won freedoms. This battle for power, control and maybe values that ought to guide the rulers of our land happen on the eve of our fourth democratic election. A head of state has just been deposed in a bloodless coup, a new one quietly sworn in and life seems to... well, just go on... The question is, as young people of our country, are you watching a movie of

historic proportions unfold before your eyes, or are you starring? Are you in the movie of your social lives or are you watching from the sidelines? Are you a participant in this unfolding history or are you a spectator? Tomorrow you may wake up to yet another new president, a new premier, a new mayor, a new Governor of the Reserve Bank, a new country. Are you going to twiddle your thumbs or are you going to stand up and be counted? Are you starring?

An author named Cyndi Rhodes is quoted in the book *The everyday activist*:

"What is the biggest problem facing the world today? Is it HIV/Aids? Is it global warming? Is it poverty and inequality in the world? No, it is none of these. The world's biggest problem is apathy: that too few people are prepared to do anything about all these and other problems."

The role of youth in electoral democracy is for me very clear: as clear as what we used to be taught in Grade 1: a, e, i, o, u and through these five simple pillars, the battle against apathy will be won. If that battle is won, the war against all the ills of society will be in reach. These pillars – awareness, education, involvement, obligations and *ubuntu* – sum up your role as a young person in strengthening our young democracy. And so, if you absorb these, you will need no one to chase behind you next week to register in order to be ready to exercise the right for which those youngsters of 1976 died and sacrificed their lives.



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### BE AWARE

"Ignorance is the night of the mind, but a night without moon or star," Confucius (BC 551–BC 479), Chinese philosopher. I refer to a familiar Persian proverb about ignorance: "He who knows not and knows not that he knows not is a fool; shun him. He who knows not and knows that he knows not is a child; teach him. He who knows and knows not that he knows is asleep; wake him. He who knows and knows that he knows is wise; follow him."

There is no excuse for ignorance. Just look around you – the amount of connectivity is astounding. Over 30 million people have access to cellular phones; there are countless newspapers, magazines, blogs, Internet sites and many platforms, including numerous broadcast platforms, that aid young people to be aware. In a recent study conducted by Prof Guy Burger, he notes that young people, despite all these platforms, don't always make a conscious effort to go after information to quash ignorance. Their attitude is a simple one: "If it is important it will come to me!" I was astounded by this finding, but it gives all of us a challenge. How do we ensure that young people are aware of what is going on in their world? Ignorance in the face of all these platforms for information means that there has not been a concerted effort to maximise these platforms to create awareness about what is going on in the world. We need to look west a bit and see how technology has turned the American elections upside down. We can do

that here and even more. You cannot be effectively involved in electoral democracy if you have no idea what is going on:

- Attend relevant seminars, debates and lectures in the public circuit.
- Read everything you can lay your hands on; have favourite publications that will give you a well-rounded view of the world, from politics to sport, from entertainment to information about world and current affairs.
- Select and regularly follow education channels on radio and television.
- The Internet is a great place to learn. Find sites of importance and follow debates.

It follows, therefore, that an informed electorate can make choices. They will have a better comprehension of what various political parties are offering and so they can have intelligent questions to ask them. Information is power: use it wisely. By being aware, you are starring in the movie of the information super-highway, you are not a mere spectator.

### EMBRACE EDUCATION

When asked how much educated men were superior to those uneducated, Aristotle answered, "As much as the living is to the dead".

Let no one fool you. In an address to the top 200 *Mail and Guardian* young achievers, I shared the following with them about the

importance of education: "Education – lifelong education – is crucial for the continued and relentless enhancement of the knowledge that will keep you on top of your game. There are just too many young people who fall too quickly into their comfort zones and do little or nothing to equip themselves with education. Ladies and gentlemen, there is no substitute for studying. There is just something that happens to someone who has taken the trouble to study that can't be acquired in any other way. It is through this exposure to the written word that I believe that you can be empowered to have a sense of priority that would result in your success being sustainable. Many of the ills of our society can be solved by just ensuring that we study. I am not for a minute saying that all of us must be doctors of philosophy or MBAs. I am talking about ongoing learning, attending conferences and seminars, registering for relevant and useful short courses... all this enhances you so that the day you decide to do that MBA or PhD, you know what you are talking about – but it helps you not to rust."

Our own icon, Nelson Mandela, has said repeatedly that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". Exposure to education is a seed whose fruit is sustainable success. So the seed we plant in our behaviour and interactions in society and our personal lives will also speak volumes about the potential of our success being sustainable.

These words directed at a relatively successful group of young people are relevant today.

One of the pillars of this democracy is the ability for our leaders of tomorrow to have the ability to run this country successfully. We should not be made to apologise for insisting that that means that people must go to school and study. During the apartheid years, when we were student leaders, there were raging debates about education before liberation – a debate that was forcing people to choose between academic success and being involved in the struggle for emancipation. Many young people understood that you have to do both, and many of them, despite victimisation by oppressive lecturers who were an extension of the apartheid monster, passed with flying colours and went on to pursue successful careers. Today, we have no excuse but to study to prepare us to run this country as young people. Unfortunately, there is no in-service training that can stand on its own and replace education. Our democracy is better off with people who have studied. Those are the kind of people who will never be easy to oppress.

- Never stop studying. It's a lifelong journey, one author once noted, whose diploma is your tombstone.
- Ask yourself the question: 'how will my studies contribute to more than just my personal ambition fulfilled.'
- How can my studies contribute to society?
- Am I simply certificated or am I educated?

Words like 'freedom', 'justice' and 'democracy' are not common concepts. On the contrary, they are rare. People are not born knowing what these are. It takes enormous and – above all – individual effort



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to arrive at the respect for other people that these words imply (James Baldwin). By educating and equipping yourself as a young person you are starring in this movie of economic emancipation: you are not a spectator who is waiting for God to do something.

The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character: that is the goal of true education (Martin Luther King, Jr).

### BE INVOLVED

Many young people are not involved in much. Many are, of course, involved with each other. We all know what the result of that is! Involvement here has many dimensions. To start with a simple principle, "don't ever leave it to the next guy to effect change, do it yourself" (Jean Gump).

"It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have" (James Baldwin). This sentiment alone should be enough to inspire young people to be involved in politics. I know that you are going to say we now have a Coca-Cola generation, etc, but let me say something to you. Lenin said: "If you don't involve yourself in politics, politics will involve itself unto you."

Martin Luther King Junior put it aptly when he said: "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines

of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

How do we do this? Put simply:

- Attend ward meetings. If they are not being called, make sure you write to your warden to call these. In the leafy suburbs you must attend the meeting of the body corporate. This is how you can contribute to the conversations that are so much-needed in our country between neighbours, across the colour lines.
- If you grew up in a village like me, you will attend Lekgotla, or what would be called kgotha kgothe. It's no longer just for the elderly. You have to be there to put issues of importance to the youth on the agenda of the local chief. Don't look down on it all and hope that your aspirations will not be tied up to the slow pace that characterises these tribal authorities.
- Through structures such as the youth parliament, make a difference and ensure that the issues that are raised with government are followed up. There is nothing as annoying as a charade where government is seen to be consulting, but then does not act on any of the many resolutions passed by such gatherings.
- Join a political organisation. If you feel this is the way you want to change things, then pick a political party whose objectives you are comfortable with and contribute your worth this way. We cannot constantly have people merely complaining about the likes of Julius Malema when they are not involved in any way and so fail to provide

alternatives to this kind of youth leaders we are subjected to.

- Join a community-based organisation or non-governmental interest group. Linked with your passion to help out, there will be an organisation that will be up your ally. Whether it is an environmental group or a sports body focusing on sports development, it is important that community involvement is there. Join a youth club or movement of some kind. This way you learn from others and therefore improve on your kind of involvement in the community.

By doing these things, you are starring in this movie of electoral democracy. You are not standing on the sideline watching. This involvement can be translated into the ultimate exercising of the right to vote. It is crucial that you understand that such a vote will:

- help you determine the leadership of the country for the next five years; and
- help determine which political party will run your life... in your province in your locality.

Through the kind of involvement stated above, you can get closer to the policies of various political parties and be able to ask the following questions: "What is it that this party promises to do for young people of South Africa? What can I do to work with them for a better life for young people? What does this party say about the deepening of democracy, the growth of the economy, the creation of opportunities for

young people? How is it going to address the challenges of the youth on HIV/Aids and other ills that destroy social cohesion? What about unemployment?"

An old adage is appropriate to conclude this section. "Tell me and I'll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I'll understand."

### KNOW YOUR OBLIGATIONS, AS WELL AS YOUR RIGHTS

We are not in 1976 where all doors of participation were closed and so there was justification for ways other than a peaceful resolution of our differences. We need to encourage a rights culture, but at the same time a culture where people understand that with rights also comes responsibilities. Many young people sometimes turn a blind eye to what is required of them to live in a rights-based society. Some of our youth leaders are not inspiring in this regard. Remember that your right to express your views ends where my right to dignity begins. Remember that your freedom of association ends where my freedom to question your association begins.

We need to develop a human rights culture in our country. A few weeks ago we witnessed scenes at the Northwest University where young people set buildings alight – including their own residences – in protest. Talk about own goal, talk about suicide bombing. These were scenes reminiscent of the mid-1980s



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when we did not have a sense of ownership about these premises and facilities and everything was blamed on 'the system'. Is it really necessary to descend into this, 2008 years after Christ? What is our role as young people to help avoid these flare-ups? I sit on a council of that University for the fifth year now and I can tell you that the student body needs to do a lot of work in appreciating their obligations towards being part of governing the university. Their obligations are not just to their constituency in a narrow sense, but to the entire university community. Of course, none of this excuses the inept management and the hands-off approach of the council towards its own obligation, but violence and an inability to resolve conflicts peacefully does not belong in a democracy.

We have an obligation to protect the Constitution, so utterances to kill for leaders of the ANC need to be condemned by all right-thinking South Africans – threats of civil war and irresponsible utterances to eliminate and crush opponents. Our obligation is to entrench a culture where these are not acceptable. And so, when the Constitution is being violated and threatened, are you going to be a spectator who can only complain, or are you going to stand up and do something? It is a total shame if you ask me, that out of all the countless formations of young people in our country, a youth leader – equally passionate, equally committed to the cause of our own people – is yet to stand up and challenge Malema's recklessness. Where are the leaders of the progressive youth alliance? Where are the

leaders of young Christian students? Where are the leaders of youth opposition political parties? Are they starring in this movie or are they spectators?

Your obligations are simple:

- To protect the freedom that so many have fought for.
- To be the conscience of the nation – participation in public for parliamentary hearings and debates that shape youth policy.
- To entrench a culture of tolerance in our body politic where young people from various political backgrounds can be heard.
- To militate against a culture of baseless entitlement and plant a culture of Vuk'uzensele.

### **UBUNTU - YOU ARE BECAUSE I AM, I AM BECAUSE YOU ARE**

Recently, the ritual of passage to manhood was turned into a political joke when, in anticipation of his delivery of an unfavourable report to the provincial congress, we are told, Fikile Mbalula was bundled up to undergo initiation. True or false, what was to follow in the following weeks was a denigration of culture by all concerned. Recently the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) insulted the Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu and called him names and even asked for his sexual history when he dared criticise the President of the ANC for his apparent indiscretions. These are all shameful

occurrences that indicate that we, as a nation, are losing our moral compass. You may ask what on earth – or what the hell – this has to do with electoral democracy? A cursory look at the apartheid laws, many of which have been scrapped from the statute books, will reveal a huge amount of these being directed at the denigration of the culture of our people. In fact, without democracy's dawn, some of our cultural practices would have simply ceased to exist.

Young people need to rediscover their roots. Out of this discovery a simple truth will emerge and will be reinforced: "No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent." *Ubuntu* recognises the useful and profound existence of others. If principles of *Motho ke Motho ka Batho* are implemented, you cannot have a better defence for democracy:

- In explaining *ubuntu*, Desmond Tutu says: "A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed." Ironical that he was a victim of a lack of the same from student leaders in our country.
- Young people need to learn the customs from the older generation while they are alive so that the wisdom from these tales can strengthen democracy.

- Values such as the tolerance of opposing views are all rooted in the practical application of *ubuntu*. In the current politically poisonous atmosphere we need a dose of *ubuntu* to calm the fears.
- The rampant corruption in the civil service – acknowledged so by government's own report released in February this year – is an indication of a collapse of moral fibre. Young people with fledgling businesses are already learning bad habits of bribery and corruption. They find this being "the way to do business". This brings us to the realisation that such moral decay is also ravaging the high echelons of corporate South Africa where millions are lost every year to white-collar crime.

Attention needs to be paid to the decay of our moral fibre. The resultant poor morals across society are dangerous for the deepening of democracy. If the rot is not stopped, the state will eventually implode from its coffers being looted. The global financial crisis and the bail-out of banks by global taxpayers' money is an indication that any myths that private is better and public is bad is only that – a myth.

Young people who have access to information that can lead to the termination of corrupt practices need not be spectators in what is a terrible movie of dishonesty – they must star in it: as builders of a new order.

Note the words of George Soros: "Unsure of what they stand for, people increasingly rely on money as the criterion of value. What is more expensive is considered better. People



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deserve respect and admiration because they are rich. What used to be a medium of exchange has usurped the place of fundamental values, reversing the relationship postulated by economic theory. What used to be professions have turned into businesses. The cult of success has replaced a belief in principles. Society has lost its anchor.”

These were quoted extensively by former President Thabo Mbeki in his Nelson Mandela lecture delivered in 2006. This is staple reading for anyone wishing to understand the relationship of *ubuntu* with democracy. Young people’s crucial role is to reverse this rot by establishing new values upon which society must flourish.

### CONCLUSION

Come with me to 16 June 2020 – some 16 years from now. South Africa’s constitution is hailed as the world’s best. South Africa has halved the number of people living with HIV/ Aids and living in poverty. Education is free up to university. Enrolment at schools has skyrocketed and schools score an average of 80 percent matric pass rate. Society is conscious. A new political party has been born and it is now in coalition with the ANC, making it a lot more accountable. No one is untouchable and everyone is accountable for their actions. Literacy levels have plummeted to an all-time low and a few prisons have had to close down due to low criminal turnout thanks to the resurrected Scorpions. After

finally being admitted to Unisa, Dr Julius Malema is Minister of Primary Education. The rand has strengthened to three rands against the dollar. Tito Mboweni is President. American-African relations are at an all-time high following Barack Obama’s eight-year presidency.

All because, back in 2008, at some conference centre, a group of 500 young people decided that they would rather be starring in a movie of socio-political history in the making than be observers. These ambassadors of democracy went out and mobilised young people in shebeens, as well as in churches, in schools as much as on the homeless streets. They mobilised these youths to protect democracy and participate in the fourth, fifth and sixth democratic elections of South Africa – a right so many died for in the liberation struggle. They encouraged these youth to be aware of their circumstances – thereby empowering themselves to make choices and take advantage of opportunities provided by democracy. They encouraged them to embrace education and equip them to take their rightful place in building the economy and stability – a guarantor of democracy. They encouraged them to get involved and ask what they can do for their country and not merely what the country can do for them. They taught them to know their obligations alongside the hard-won rights. And finally, the world is a better place as all live the values of *ubuntu* that recognise that “no man is an island entire of itself”.

Wishing you well in your deliberations to share ideas about how to mobilise young people I know that it is not a task that is as easy as a, e, i, o, u.



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