

# THE LENS

## THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED ARTICLE:

*Transitional Justice will heal society and  
unlock the potential of our youth*

- **Dr. Webster Zambara**

## TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE WILL HEAL SOCIETY AND UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL OF OUR YOUTHS

The National Youth Day is marked on the 16th of June every year in South Africa.

It is a day that commemorates the 1976 Soweto Uprising against, among other issues, the introduction of Afrikaans, in 1974, as a compulsory medium of instruction in schools, alongside English, by decree of the then apartheid government. The student's protested this imposition and during their protest they were met by the brutal force of the apartheid security forces who fired live ammunition killing innocent children.

The Soweto uprising witnessed the resolve, leadership and courage of the young people who clashed head-on with the full might of the white supremacist apartheid regime and changed the course of history of the country, the continent, and the world. In many African countries that supported the struggle against apartheid the day is also commemorated as 'the Day of the African Child'.

This year marks the 46th anniversary of the student uprising, honoring the contributions of the youth in the struggle for the liberation of South Africa under the theme 'Promoting sustainable livelihood and resilience of young people for a better tomorrow'.

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While the day has its roots in a historical event, it challenges everyone, particularly the youths to reflect on the present in order to inform the trajectory for the future. Youths and children are demographically the majority of the population at over 65%, and the future is naturally theirs. However, in a country and continent in which anything that could go wrong has possibly gone wrong already, it is important that we go back to the basics and revisit the very historical epochs that have shaped the current levels of deprivation and impoverishment which affects the majority of young people in South Africa.

South Africa's historiography is shaped by the 'unholy trinity' of slavery (and slave trade), colonialism and apartheid that have left deep economic, social and psychological scars affecting society. It is not a historical accident that the country exhibits deep structural and cultural forms of violence that resulted in the majority within the country being economically disadvantaged, particularly youths, women and children who remain marginalised.

The majority of the youths of today are often romanticized as 'Born Frees', but they are quick to invoke Swiss born philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous phrase 'man is born free but is everywhere in chains' as the majority live on the wrong end of the infamous triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality bedeviling South Africa today.

According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) of the Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) for the first quarter of 2022, youth bear the worst burden of unemployment rate which, at 63,9% for the age group 15-24 was almost double that of the national average that stood at 34,5%.

**“THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM AND APARTHEID, ROOTED IN RACIAL AND SPATIAL SEGREGATION, CONTINUES TO REINFORCE INEQUALITY”.**

**- WORLD BANK REPORT, MARCH 2022**

Due to the apartheid induced structural forms of violence that impoverished their ancestors and parents, the youths of today are born into a vicious cycle of poverty that is not easy to reverse because they themselves are becoming poor parents since they can hardly find employment, thus, making poverty an inter-generational burden.

It was not surprising when the World Bank Report released in March 2022, stated that South Africa is the most unequal country in the world, again! It concluded that “race remains a key driver of high inequality in South Africa due to its impact on education and the labor market”, while also emphasizing that “the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, rooted in racial and spatial segregation, continues to reinforce inequality”.

**"THE YOUTHS ARE ALSO CONFRONTED BY CLIMATE CHANGE INDUCED NATURAL DISASTERS THAT THREATEN NOT ONLY THEIR VERY EXISTENCE BUT THEIR PROSPECTS FOR BETTER LIVELIHOODS."**

As a result of facing the brutalities of life, we are increasingly witnessing a generation of depressed youths born into a depressing society with very high levels of violence. Unfortunately, these ills are playing out in schools and among the unemployed youths where violence, emotional and substance abuse are on the rise, including suicide. The youths are inheriting a wounded society that has not healed from the atrocities of the past, and the trauma has been passed on to them such that mental health treatment and psychosocial support are now urgently needed in this age group.

Given the reality of apartheid induced gross human rights violations, a policy declared by the United Nations (UN) as a ‘crime against humanity’, the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1996 was a notable attempt to promote transitional justice and redress to remedy the ills of the past.

The recently adopted African Union Transitional Justice Policy (AUTJP) defines these processes as “the various (formal and traditional or non-formal) policy measures and institutional mechanisms that societies, through an inclusive consultative process, adopt in order to overcome past violations, divisions and inequalities and to create conditions for both security and democratic and socio-economic transformation.

Transitional justice is meant to assist societies with legacies of violent conflicts and systemic or gross violations of human and people’s rights, by documenting the violations of the past and identifying strategies to remedy these injustices, as a pathway to achieving societal transformation and a future based on equality and dignity.

While not much has been tangibly achieved to date as a result of the TRC, its recommendations, if they had been implemented to the book, would have accelerated the pace of socio-economic transformation such that our 'Born Frees' would be less socio-economically burdened by the past as remains the case today.

A proper transitional justice process has the potential of not only healing and equalizing society, but opening opportunities for youths who have already shown enough appetite by calling for free and decolonized education as they did under the banner of the #FeesMustFall Movement of 2015, in their quest for Tata Mandela's dictum 'Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world'. As a country, we should not wait for the next World Bank Report to tell us what we all know and see every day. There is no reconciliation in abject poverty, unemployment and inequality!

Besides the historical challenges and the present misrule and mal-administration within all levels of government, punctuated by jaw-dropping levels of corruption, the youths are also confronted by climate change induced natural disasters that threaten not only their very existence but their prospects for better livelihoods. It is therefore imperative to invest in empowering youth actors to design and drive innovative interventions to improve their livelihoods and also protect the environment.

As Tata Mandela prophesied, 'young people are capable, when aroused, of bringing down the towers of oppression and raising the banners of freedom'. Rise the youth of today rise! Fight for your space, the future is in your hands. Long live the spirit of the Class of 1976!

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