



Youth and Democracy in South Africa: Disillusioned but Engaged

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Introduction

Traditionally, political participation is divided into two categories: formal and informal. Young people have steadily distanced themselves from formal participation, leading to a noticeable decline in youth voter turnout in South Africa. Instead, they are increasingly turning toward informal forms of engagement such as protests. Along with this shift there is a growing scepticism among young people towards political leaders and institutions.

One of the main reasons for this disillusionment in the 2024 national elections as well as in the previous national elections in 2019 is their lack of inclusion in decision-making structures. Democracy thrives when its citizens are actively involved in shaping it. However, the youth in South Africa feel excluded from positions of power and decision-making, with their interests often ignored. In 2019, a study conducted by the Centre for Social Development in Africa at the University of Johannesburg found that young people prioritise socio-economic well-being above democratic rights. Their sentiments reverberated on X (formerly Twitter), through the hashtag #IWantToVoteBut[i]. This online trend aimed to shed light on why thousands of young people did not intend to vote that year. Moreover, a study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)[ii] in 2024 on youth attitudes toward democracy reported that the political mood

of those interviewed, only 4% said they were satisfied with their political leaders.

Writing for the Daily Maverick, Sabelo Mpidi[iii], referenced a viral video in 2024 that captured an exchange between President Ramaphosa and a young black woman wearing an African National Congress (ANC) T-shirt. In the video[iv], the woman, an unemployed graduate, explained her job-seeking struggles. The President responded, “Yeah, you must keep checking. You must, also, register on the mobi-” only to be interrupted as she retorted, “I am.” This brief interaction symbolised the increasing disconnect between politicians and the struggles of young people, reflecting their deep disappointment in the country’s leadership.

In South Africa, the average age of politicians in the National Assembly is 54 years old, according to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG)[v]. This significant age difference raises concerns about whether the country’s leadership fully understands or represents the perspectives and priorities of its youth population. Adding to the frustration, many young South Africans are losing faith in democracy as a system of governance.

[i] Unathi Nkanjeni. (2019, May, 7). #IWantToVoteBut: South Africans Talk Election Day. Retrieved from: <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2019-05-07-iwanttovotebut-south-africans-talk-election-day/>

[ii] Human Sciences Research Council. (2024). Beyond Apathy: The Diverse Attitudes of Young South Africans Who Are Planning to Abstain or Are Uncertain about Voting, in Election 2024. Retrieved from: <https://hsrc.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023-12-06-1b-IEC-Online-Youth-Survey-final.pdf>

[iii] Sabelo Mpidi. (2024, May, 26). Why Are Most of South Africa’s Young People Politically Apathetic and Unlikely to Vote? Retrieved from:

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2024-05-26-why-are-most-sa-youth-politically-apathetic-unlikely-to-vote/>

[iv] Waffi [@TunezMediaBlog] via Instagram. (16 April 2024).

<https://www.instagram.com/tunezmediablog/reel/C50TZuINHo9>

[v] Parliamentary Monitoring Group. (2018, June, 14). Youth Day: How many of our MPs qualify? Retrieved from:

<https://pmg.org.za/blog/Youth%20Day>

While democracy is often linked to economic development and prosperity[vi]—particularly in Western democracies—the reality young South Africans experience in their own country doesn't reflect this ideal. Instead, they see corruption, inequality, and a system that seems to serve the wealthy and those already in power.

Unemployment rates, particularly among youth, are staggeringly high, with youth unemployment sitting at 60.8% for those aged 15-24 years in Quarter 2 of 2024[vii]. Many public services, from healthcare to education, have deteriorated, and widespread poverty and inequality remain largely unchanged. Accordingly, a 2024 Afrobarometer survey[ix] notes that 62% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with South Africa's democracy, and that this sentiment was particularly pronounced among the youth.

This growing disillusionment is concerning, especially in a young democracy like South Africa's, where the youth make up a third of the country's population[iv]. If young people continue to disengage from political decision-making processes, the country's democratic future could be at risk. Without their active participation, both formal and informal, the country's democracy itself becomes fragile.

While traditional forms of engagement have declined, young people are not completely disengaging from politics. They are choosing to express their interests in different ways, i.e. through protest politics.

While protests, marches, and demonstrations amplify the voices of the marginalised, disrupt the status quo, and raise public awareness of critical issues, they are often reactive, sparked by specific events or crises. This reactivity means they lack the structure to create long-lasting change. Protests can ignite a sense of urgency and even lead to immediate outcomes, like policy changes or increased attention to neglected issues.

[vi] Çiğdem Karış. (2020). The Relationship Between Economic Growth and Democracy: A Conceptual Approach. Retrieved from: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/1224872>.

[vii] Statistics South Africa. (2024). Unemployment Rate in South Africa from Q1 2019 to Q2 2024, By Age Group. Retrieved from:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1129482/unemployment-rate-by-age-group-in-south-africa/>

[ix] Parliament Statement on Youth Day. (2024). Retrieved from: https://www.parliament.gov.za/press-releases/parliament-statement-youth-day_2#:~:text=The%20South%20African%20youth%2C%20defined,of%2062%20million%20in%202024

But, when the momentum fades or the media spotlight moves on, the underlying systemic issues often remain unresolved.

Moreover, informal participation through protests tends to be unsustainable in the long term. They require significant energy and resources from organisers and participants, and without consistent and institutionalised support, they can lose steam. The focus on immediate action does not always leave room for the deeper, strategic planning needed to build the infrastructure for sustained political engagement. This is where formal political participation, despite its limitations, plays a crucial role: it provides a pathway to influence decision-making at the core of the political system.

For democracy to thrive, young people need to balance their informal engagement with more sustainable, long-term involvement in formal political processes. Without this, their influence will be limited to moments of crisis, rather than being a continuous force for positive change.

This policy brief is informed by several conversations conducted through the Youth Identity project with young people aged 15-30 years old in four peri-urban and rural communities across South Africa, namely Ceres, Warrenton, Douglas, Tulbagh and Umzimkulu. It contends that the disconnect between young South Africans and formal politics threatens the future of democracy in the country. To address this there must be new ways of creating pathways to re-engage youth. First, there is a need for comprehensive civic education to equip young people with the knowledge to navigate political systems and leverage their collective power. Additionally, increasing youth representation in political institutions is essential for reflecting their voices in decision-making. Lastly, young people need tools and strategies to sustain their informal movements beyond moments of crisis, particularly through leveraging digital spaces to advocate for their causes and influence policy.

Post-Apartheid Promises: Youth-Led Struggles and Unfulfilled Dreams

In 1994, South Africa entered a new democratic order, led by the African National Congress (ANC) that promised “a better life for all.” The ANC’s 1994 manifesto stated that, “South Africa’s democratic elections are about our common yearning for freedom, peace, and a better life for all. They... are about a future of hope and democracy.”^[x] This was not just a political slogan, but a rallying call rooted in the ideals of the Freedom Charter^[xi]—a document drafted in 1955 that called for equality, dignity, and human rights for all South Africans, regardless of race. The promises entrenched in the Freedom Charter signified a future where freedom would be more than just the absence of oppression—it would also mean access to opportunities, economic security, and social justice.

During the apartheid era, it was South African youth who stood on the front lines, demanding justice and equality at great personal cost. Young people have been highly visible in South Africa’s political history and present, from the formation of the organisations responsible for anti-apartheid efforts to leading the charge of popular uprising against post-apartheid institutions that perpetuate inequality. Young people have not only engaged critically with the barriers that hinder their development, but, also, the very systems and ideas that underpin these barriers. The June 16, 1976 Soweto Youth Uprising and the formation of South African Student Organisation (SASO), under the leadership of Steve Biko, followed by the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement, showcased the determination of young people to bring about change and empowered young black people to assert their humanity in the face of a racist regime that denied them basic dignity^[xii].

[x] African National Congress National Manifesto. (1994). Retrieved from: <https://www.anc1912.org.za/manifestos-1994-national-elections-manifesto/>

[xi] The Freedom Charter. (1955). Retrieved from: <https://www.anc1912.org.za/the-freedom-charter-2/>

[xii] Mubarak Aliyu. (2021). Steve Biko and the Philosophy of Black Consciousness. Retrieved from: https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/111983/1/africaatlse_2021_08_19_stev_e_biko_philosophy_of_black_consciousness.pdf

Other young figures, like Solomon Mahlangu, a 22-year-old Umkhonto we Sizwe operative who was executed by the apartheid government in 1979, symbolised the sacrifices of an entire generation. Mahlangu’s final words, “My blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom,”^[xiii] encapsulated the spirit of the youth-led struggle. Figures like Ashley Kriel^[xiv] and Anton Fransch^[xv], who were brutally killed during their resistance against apartheid, also played a pivotal role in mobilising communities and challenging the regime’s machinery.

In many ways, it was youth who shaped the vision of South Africa as a democratic, inclusive society and who were on the battlefield to ensure its realisation. Their sacrifices paved the way for the dismantlement of apartheid. These young people assumed power but the ideals they fought for, however, have been compromised by elite driven, interest based politics.

For the older generation of leaders who once marched as the youth in the streets across South Africa, the betrayal of those promises has come with age and power. The rise to political office seems to have distanced many former activists from the struggles they once fought for. This shift has left a chasm between the generations, with young people feeling disillusioned and disconnected from the political processes once viewed as avenues for change.

The Marketing of Democracy: Why it No Longer Appeals to Youth

In the age of social and digital media, where instant gratification and self-promotion dominate the narrative, the ideals of collective action and participatory democracy have struggled to resonate with younger generations. Influencers and content

[xiii] Government honours Solomon Mahlangu on the 42nd Anniversary of his Death. (2021). Retrieved from: http://www.dcs.gov.za/?page_id=6627#:~:text=%E2%80%9CTell%20my%20people%20that%20I,by%20the%20then%20apartheid%20government

[xiv] Zubeida Jaffer. (2020, December, 7). Ashley Kriel was an Anti-Apartheid Martyr. Retrieved from: <https://jacobin.com/2020/07/ashley-kriel-anti-apartheid>

[xv] Nicola Daniels. (2021, November, 18). MK Commander Anton Fransch Remembered. Retrieved from: <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/mk-commander-anton-fransch-remembered-f1d6cfb8-95db-45b9-ab96-a1356dad0d87>

creators, many of whom display lifestyles of affluence and opportunity, offer an appealing alternative to the slow, often frustrating processes of democratic engagement. For many young people, the pursuit of personal success and self-actualisation seems like the only viable path in a society where collective action appears to offer diminishing returns.

Young people today are constantly bombarded with images of success that are tied not to political engagement or civic duty but to individual entrepreneurship, consumerism, and personal branding. In this context, the traditional mechanisms of democracy—voting, campaigning, and civic participation—seem distant and ineffective[xvi]. Democracy in South Africa is, in many ways, suffering from a branding crisis and outdated processes for effecting participation. Unlike the aspirational lifestyles promoted on digital platforms and the instant ways in which youth can directly engage, democracy is viewed as inefficient, corrupt, and primarily serving the interests of those already in power.

The failure to effectively "market" democracy to young people has resulted in a significant shift in how they engage with politics. While many still care deeply about social justice issues—such as gender equality, climate change, and access to quality education—they are increasingly finding alternative ways to express their political voices, from protests to social media activism. However, these forms of engagement, while important, often lack the staying power to bring about long-term systemic change. Without sustained participation in formal political processes, the very foundations of South Africa's democracy are at risk.

Key Factors Driving Disillusionment

In the discussions conducted through the Youth Identity Project with young people aged 15-30 years old in four peri-urban and rural communities, including Ceres, Tulbagh, Warrenton, and Umzimkulu in 2024, a clear pattern has emerged: the majority of participants expressed

[xvi] Veronica Prytko. (2021). Social Media's Link with Individualism and the Dangers That Follow. Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1088&context=honorstheses>

disillusionment with politics and disempowered by the issues facing their communities. Unlike in metropolitan areas where resources, opportunities, and information are more readily available, rural and peri-urban youth often feel isolated and cut off from the means to effect change. This likely explains why activism and civic engagement are more visible in urban centres, where young people have greater access to platforms, resources, and opportunities for involvement.

The disillusionment expressed by these young people stems from a range of socio-economic and political challenges, i.e. youth unemployment and limited opportunities; violence and insecurity; persistent racism and inequality; poor representation in decision-making; state violence; climate change; and feeling stuck in state of waiting. These key factors provide insight into the complex forces driving young South Africans to question the value and relevance of democracy in their lives.

As noted before, youth unemployment in South Africa is among the highest in the world[i], sitting at an alarming 45,5% among young individuals aged 15-34 years old. For young people, finding a job is not only a financial necessity but a key marker of adulthood and independence. The lack of education and experience, inadequate skills training, and a sluggish economy however, impedes job creation. Opportunities for vocational training are limited, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. The failure of the job market to absorb new entrants leaves young people trapped in a cycle of poverty and prolonged adolescence, where young people are forced to wait indefinitely for the traditional markers of adulthood to become accessible.

Furthermore, violence is pervasive and disproportionately affects young people. The government's failure to effectively address violence and crime leaves many young people feeling abandoned and unprotected by the very state that promised to safeguard their futures.

[xvii] Statistics South Africa. (2024, May, 17). Unemployment in South Africa: A Youth Perspective. Retrieved from: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=17266#:~:text=South%20Africa%2C%20like%20many%20countries,3%2C5%25%20in%202021>

Compounding the issue is the widespread mistrust of law enforcement, as police responses are often ineffective or seen as discriminatory[xviii]. This pervasive insecurity creates an environment in which young people struggle to envision a future free from fear, further deepening their disillusionment with the state. Racism, also, remains a daily reality for many young black people who continue to face systemic discrimination in schools, workplaces, and public spaces[xix].

The slow pace of change makes many young people feel as though the freedom promised to them is more symbolic than substantial. For the generation that grew up post-apartheid, the persistence of these inequalities raises doubts about the effectiveness of democratic institutions in truly transforming society.

One of the most glaring sources of youth disillusionment is the lack of representation in positions of power. Despite making up a significant portion of the population, young people are vastly underrepresented in South Africa's Parliament and other political institutions.

Young people often feel that their concerns are either ignored or inadequately addressed. This generational disconnect makes young people question whether their voices matter in a political system that feels increasingly out of touch with their needs and aspirations. Some of these aspirations include, access to affordable and quality education, job creation and dignified wages, and readily available mental health support. Government programmes, such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), exists to provide financial support to students in need, yet it has been plagued by corruption, administrative issues,

[xviii] Afrobarometer. (2024, August,16). South Africans view of Police Marred by Pervasive Corruption, Lack of Professionalism. Retrieved from: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad836-south-africans-view-of-police-marred-by-pervasive-corruption-lack-of-professionalism/>

[xix] P.R. Machaisa, LDM Lebeloana. (2017). Persistent Racial Challenges: A Case Study of South African Public Schools. Retrieved from: <https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.10520/EJC-f84ad53c2>

and reduced funding challenges[xx]. This has often meant that young students pursuing higher education face huge financial debts related to accommodation, food costs, and other expenses.

Without meaningful representation, the issues affecting youth remain on the margins of national policy discussions, reinforcing the sense of exclusion from the democratic process.

South Africa's youth have been vocal participants in social justice movements, from #FeesMustFall to protests against gender-based violence on university campuses. However, their efforts are frequently met with state repression, including violent crackdowns on peaceful protests. [xxi]. This state violence undermines the legitimacy of the democratic system in the eyes of young activists.

The lack of action on climate change frustrates young people, many of whom are deeply concerned about the future of the planet. They see a disconnect between the environmental crises unfolding around them and the indifference or inaction of their political leaders. Moreover, there are few opportunities for young people to receive education or training on environmental preservation, leaving them ill-equipped to take meaningful action in response to the crisis. Perhaps one of the subtlest but pervasive sources of disillusionment among young people is the feeling of being stuck in a state of waiting, caught between childhood and adulthood. Traditional markers of adulthood—such as finding stable employment, owning a home, starting a family, and building a financial safety net—are increasingly out of reach for many young South Africans due to structural and institutional barriers.

[xx] Thandi Lewin. (2024, May, 3). South Africa's Financial Student Aid Scheme Has Helped Millions but is in Trouble. Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/south-africas-national-student-financial-aid-scheme-has-helped-millions-but-is-in-trouble-heres-why-228910#:~:text=What%20are%20its%20three%20biggest,policies%20are%20sustainable%20over%20time>

[xxi] Amnesty International. (2016, November, 14). South Africa: Investigate Excessive Use of Force Against Fees Must Fall Protestors. Retrieved from: <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AFR5357252016ENGLISH.pdf>

The lack of access to stable jobs, affordable housing, and financial security has led many young people to question their place in society: "Am I really an adult if I don't have what my parents and grandparents had by this age?" This prolonged state of waiting creates a sense of suspended adulthood, where young people are forced to mature under difficult socio-economic circumstances without the corresponding rewards of independence or stability and this further erodes their faith in a system that seems ill-equipped to offer them the opportunities their parents once had.

Shifting Focus: From Democracy to Self-Enrichment?

In our dialogues with young people across the country, a noticeable shift emerged: many are moving away from the traditional Afro-centric values of Ubuntu, which emphasise collective care and upliftment, toward a more individualistic outlook. This shift reflects global trends shaped by capitalism and westernisation. However, this shift is not simply a rejection of collective values, nor should it be seen as a flaw in young people's outlook. Rather, it is a survival mechanism—a response to the socio-economic pressures that have left many young people in a perpetual state of survival mode.

What is concerning, however, is the increasingly tenuous link between the individual and the community. While young people prioritise their own needs, they sometimes struggle to connect these needs to the broader social fabric that ultimately shapes their lives. In our workshops, young people voiced frustrations that participation in community life or collective action often comes at the expense of their personal well-being. Yet, finding a healthy balance between the two is crucial because the individual and the collective are inextricably linked.

Faced with systemic unemployment and limited opportunities, many young people have turned toward entrepreneurship and self-improvement as a way to survive and thrive. The lack of formal job opportunities means that young people are forced to create their own paths through the informal economy or by starting small businesses. Entrepreneurship offers a sense of autonomy, and

many see it as the only viable path to achieving personal success in an environment where traditional markers of adulthood—like stable jobs, homeownership, and financial security—are increasingly unattainable.

This shift towards self-reliance and individual survival is seen as a form of resilience. However, this can leave little room for collective action or community engagement, especially when young people are unsure whether the community will offer anything in return.

Social Media and Digital Platforms: A New Kind of Agency

Social media and digital platforms have provided young people with new ways to assert their agency and build personal brands. In online spaces, young people find opportunities for self-expression, entrepreneurship, and even social activism. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow them to create content, gain followers, and, in some cases, generate income. These platforms have transformed how young people engage with the world—they offer a form of empowerment that can feel more immediate and tangible than traditional community involvement or democratic participation.

Social media has been invaluable in helping marginalised identities connect and build supportive online communities- a significant positive- but it has also contributed to a decline in nuanced discussions. Users frequently gravitate toward binary modes of thinking, leading to heightened polarisation on certain issues and a breakdown in constructive relationships. This breakdown in online relationships often filters into real-life interactions, with people increasingly unwilling to engage critically in conversation. The binary rhetoric, which can turn violent, is not confined to the digital space, and can further disconnect young people from their physical communities.

This new form of engagement also intensifies the focus on the individual rather than the collective. The digital space often promotes personal branding and success stories, where individual achievement is celebrated, while collective struggles are often side-lined.

During our workshops, many young participants expressed a growing disconnect from community issues, noting that their engagement with social or political causes was often motivated by how directly these issues impacted their lives. If a cause does not align with their personal interests, it is less likely to capture their attention. This shift in focus reveals a complex relationship between individual empowerment and collective responsibility.

Young people are not wrong for seeking out spaces where they feel they have control over their lives and futures. But, the risk lies in how this can erode the sense of shared responsibility that was once integral to South African communities. The challenge, then, is not to criticise young people for focusing on their personal needs, but to find ways to re-establish the link between individual empowerment and community well-being. After all, the individual and the collective are mutually reinforcing—without strong individuals, communities cannot thrive, and without supportive communities, individuals struggle to realise their full potential. Democracy, at its core, depends on this balance. When young people are forced to focus only on their individual needs, the broader democratic project suffers. Similarly, when communities fail to support individual aspirations, young people withdraw from collective engagement, leaving democracy impoverished.

Strategies to Re-Engage Youth in Democracy

In the face of growing disillusionment among South Africa's youth, re-engaging them in the democratic process requires a multifaceted approach. Based on insights from our workshops with young people, we have identified several strategies that can help restore faith in democracy and ensure that young people feel empowered to participate meaningfully. These strategies are directed not only at institutions but also at young people themselves, as they play a critical role in driving the change they wish to see.

Make Democracy Tangible through Local Engagement

One of the most consistent themes from our discussions with young people was their feeling of distance from formal political processes. Democracy often feels abstract and far removed

from their day-to-day struggles, especially in peri-urban and rural areas. To re-engage young people, democracy must become more tangible and localised. This could involve promoting community-based participation, where young people can see the direct impact of their involvement. Local governments can host open forums and town hall meetings where youth are invited to facilitate meetings, drive the agenda, voice their concerns and propose solutions.

Programmes that allow young people to participate in decision-making processes at the local level—such as youth councils or advisory boards within municipalities—can also foster a sense of ownership and responsibility. By giving them a clear and direct role in shaping policies that affect their immediate surroundings, young people will be more likely to re-engage in democratic processes.

Re-imagine Civic Education

A key barrier to youth engagement in democracy is the lack of knowledge about how political systems function and how they can effectively engage with them. In our workshops, young people expressed frustration at their inability to navigate bureaucratic systems and their lack of understanding about how democracy operates beyond voting every five years. Civic education needs to be reimagined and made more accessible, engaging, and relevant to the issues young people care about.

Schools and youth centres could offer practical workshops on how to organise local campaigns, lobby local officials, or start community projects. This type of education should not be confined to traditional classroom settings but should also take advantage of digital platforms. Short, engaging videos on social media, free online courses, and interactive apps can offer quick and accessible ways to teach young people about their civic rights and how to exercise them effectively.

Close the Digital Divide

While social media and digital platforms have become a major space for youth activism and political engagement, not all young people have equal access to these resources, especially in rural areas. The digital divide exacerbates the political marginalisation of these youth. To re-engage them, investments in expanding internet access and digital literacy are crucial.

Bridging this gap would enable more young people to join online advocacy movements and engage in the kinds of civic actions that are increasingly happening in digital spaces. Government partnerships with tech companies, non-profit organisations, and local communities can help provide affordable or even free internet access in underserved areas, ensuring that rural youth are not left behind in the digital age.

Foster Inclusive Leadership

Many young people feel that they are excluded from positions of power and influence, particularly within the political sphere. One strategy to counter this is to promote inclusive leadership, which encourages young people to take on more prominent roles in political and civic institutions. Quotas for youth representation in Parliament, local government, and party leadership structures could ensure that young voices are heard at every level of decision-making.

Mentorship programs that connect young leaders with experienced politicians, activists, and business leaders could help bridge the gap between generations. This would not only provide young people with the skills and confidence they need to lead but also signal to them that they have a stake in the country's democratic future.

Encourage Young People to be Proactive, not Reactive

One of the challenges we identified in our discussions with young people was the tendency to react only during moments of crisis, often driven by anger or frustration. While crisis moments can serve as catalysts for activism, they are not enough to sustain long-term engagement. A key strategy to re-engage youth is to empower them to be proactive, not merely reactive.

Young people can start by building awareness around the root causes of social, economic, and political crises. Anticipating these issues, identifying emerging threats, and mobilising before a crisis explodes will allow them to shape the narrative from the outset rather than scrambling in response. This requires training in strategic thinking, research, and long-term planning. Workshops on these skills can help young people identify structural issues, mobilise around them, and devise ways to maintain momentum after the immediate moment of crisis has passed.

Further, young people need to devise systems for keeping their movements alive after the initial anger dies down. This could include creating youth-driven think tanks that generate policy recommendations or local organisations that can consistently advocate for specific issues. Social media, while an effective tool for mobilisation, should also be used to provide ongoing education, updates, and calls to action that ensure the movement is sustained. In this way, youth can shift from reactive crisis management to becoming proactive agents of change.

Conclusion

South Africa's youth face a complex reality, caught between the promises of a democratic future and the harshness of present socio-economic challenges. Many young people today feel deeply disillusioned and are disengaged from democratic processes. Persistent inequality, unemployment, violence, and the erosion of collective values have led to a growing sense of detachment from the systems meant to empower them. While young people increasingly turn inward—prioritising personal advancement through entrepreneurship, social media, and self-improvement—the tenuous connection between the individual and the community raises concerns about the sustainability of democratic participation.

Yet, the potential for re-engaging youth is still alive. By localising democracy, reimagining civic education, bridging the digital divide, and promoting inclusive leadership, we can create pathways for youth to take ownership of South Africa's democratic future.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

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