

Why SA needs to adopt a culture of youth entrepreneurship

With economic disruption worldwide brought on by pandemic lockdowns, the future looks bleak for young job seekers unless a culture of entrepreneurship is encouraged and supported right from high school through to tertiary education. This is according to Activate! Change Drivers, which hosted an online panel discussion with its youth network.



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Activate! Change Drivers has a network of 4,500 youth across South Africa, which it has trained in leadership and social entrepreneurship skills. Under lockdown, these young 'Activators' performed many essential services in aid of their communities – from distributing food parcels to the needy, to helping people fill out TERS and UIF forms, and translating Covid-19 information to make it more readily understood.

Panel discussion moderator, Nathacia Olivier, says that youth unemployment in South Africa was a pandemic in itself; and she questions how young people can recover prospects in the shadow of a global crisis that has completely disrupted lives and economies.

Kenneth Sethunya, an Activator from North West province runs an NGO called Future Pioneers, dealing with personal and career development for learners in high school. He believes it is imperative that South Africa adopts an entrepreneurship culture – from education to the business sector.

“Government must change legislation that hinders entrepreneurship. There is no information empowerment. It is hard for entrepreneurs to survive and create successful businesses that can, in turn, become employers. We need to have programmes at grassroots level to ensure that entrepreneurs, especially youth, have the information in how to start a

Sethunya strongly believes that youth employment and youth entrepreneurship should be a focus of all institutions to reduce youth unemployment. “We need to teach these business skills and entrepreneurship at school.”

Lindelani Mnisi, an Activator from Pretoria and a social activist, says the youth can “be their own saviours” - if they have the necessary skills to work and create opportunities for themselves.

Thabo Michael Masuku, an Activator from Johannesburg agrees, “There is an information gap, particularly when it comes to platforms that do provide these skills. There are great induction programmes for businesses to grow and source funding out there.” Simangele Zwane, an Activator from Gauteng, believes that the youth also need to go out and look for funding themselves, but also need to be “taught how to fish”.

“We have so many ideas, but we need to be given a chance. We need grants so we can execute. But we also need to invest in each other’s businesses and help bridge the gap between students needing to intern for experience and small businesses which struggle,” adds Zwane.

Time to help the youth integrate better

The definition of unemployment is someone who wants to work, but cannot find work, says Tshepiso Masuku of Johannesburg. He believes that in order for the youth to participate optimally in the economy, Government needs to start giving people the democracy they promised in 1994. He also believes that it is now up to community leaders such as themselves to start programmes to help the youth integrate better into the economy.

“In order to create wealth in a country, there has to be a form of entrepreneurship. In order to assist the youth in business, Government needs to open up the economy to create more opportunities for entrepreneurs and address much of the red tape that discourages businesses. Many of us have ideas that could be nurtured and developed into businesses that could create wealth and enable us to become employers.”

Mnisi says that what Covid-19 has taught them, is that the future is unpredictable. This in itself opens up a great deal of possibilities. “I have used this time under lockdown to do self-work, and decide what are my goals and priorities going forward into the future. We can recover from this going forward if people can learn to adapt to digital learning.”

Sethunya adds that it was a difficult time to suddenly integrate digital into people’s lives when they were not prepared for this transition. “During lockdown we have been trying to help people with this transition – from applications for SASSA grants, for university applications, for social relief. We Activators joined hands to assist people who were struggling to adapt to the digital space. I needed to help my community get used to this new norm.”

Masuku, who lost family members to Covid and initially struggled to move to online platforms as a fulltime university student,

says he is learning to survive and adapt. He, with a few friends, has been running a Matric recovery programme with about 50 learners to ensure they are able to secure their future in tertiary education.

“ We want to ensure that more young people in my community get access to tertiary education, the growth we have achieved so far has been amazing. We also realised that this is not just about us, alone; but also, about everyone else we need to care about, and the impact on our communities. That is how we, as young people, can respond. ”

A mindset change also needs to happen among the youth, the moderator, Olivier, concluded, adding that this would not happen overnight; but that it was time to be more practical and action-oriented when deciding on looking for employment or creating a business.

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