

ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY PRESIDENT, THE HON MR T. MBEKI, NATIONAL YOUTH SUMMIT

14 JULY 1997

Chairperson,

There is a beautiful symbolism about the venue of our meeting today. It is a symbolism which I know has escaped none of us ...

As we begin the work of the National Youth Summit, I am reminded that the first summit of this nature in a democratic South Africa took place on the 9th of December 1994 at the World Trade Centre, that place which has occupied an indelible space in the collective memory of our nation.

Our meeting here today, in these hallowed parliamentary chambers of a society reborn, is really symbolic of a journey that all of us, as South Africans, are traversing, from the past of suspicion, conflict and mutual destruction, to the present of reconciliation, nation-building and the construction of shared destiny.

It gives one a sense of great encouragement, that even at the exalted level of symbolism, the young people of South Africa are emerging; following the same pathway as the rest of the nation, from the accumulated effect of our historical burden, to a shared vision that only the evil can seek to befool.

Chairperson,

As we assemble today, our single most important challenge is to evolve a policy framework which should begin to expand and extend the social, cultural and economic frontiers where the young people of South Africa can their human fulfilment.

We are assembled here to craft a vision of how our society should prepare its younger generations to be worthy citizens of our country and the world. What we are called upon to elaborate a strategic project on how to build a glorious future tailored to the needs of the greatest number of the people.

When you representatives, including a great number of you present here today, met at the World Trade Centre in 1994 and debated over which structure would be most suitable to help you evolve a comprehensive policy on youth, they were following no precedent.

It was the first most representative meeting of youth organisations after the end of the Apartheid regime. More than 40 political, religious, cultural, sports and students formations of the youth attended. Also in attendance as observers were all national government departments as well as non-governmental organisations involved in youth development.

The aim of the meeting was to solicit the views of the youth of South Africa on the way in which the democracy government should ensure effective youth participation in governance, youth empowerment and youth development.

That summit in 1994 helped to blaze a trail which this summit has set out to follow in search of a policy consensus which should guide both state and government in the fulfilment of the task of empowering the youth.

We shall not here, and from this rostrum, even attempt to approximate the exact scope and texture of the policy framework which you will try to evolve in this meeting. We cannot attempt to arrogate to ourselves the wisdom which we do not possess. The task in front of you is immense.

It is precisely for that reason that your summit in 1994 came to the decision that the evolution of this policy shall be a process whose main characteristic shall be consultation on a widest scale possible. The summit also resolved that young people themselves should drive the process.

However, Chairperson, there are few key elements which will invariably cast large shadows on any deliberation on the empowerment of the youth. These are elements, we believe, without whose careful consideration the formulation of the youth policy will suffer.

The fundamental point to remember is that our policy formulation and implementation should, in both a practical and a philosophical sense, have the idea of the people at the centre of its agenda. The Programme of Reconstruction and Development is correct when it states that the task of transformation should be people-driven and people-centred.

The second important point is to accept a basic human philosophy which says that there is no rigid separation in the world of the ancestor, the world of the living, and the world of the unborn. These three worlds are interconnected all the time. They move into each other continually.

I make bold to say this is not simply a theoretical approach to existence. It is the very essence of social motion and human existence.

The point we are trying to make here is that our youth policy cannot avoid dealing with the legacy of our past even as we try to build our future. Our present life is scarred a thousand times by our dreaded past. Your policy formulation and implementation will have to recognise the legacy we have inherited from many decades of Apartheid rule.

So one of the main thrust of our policy cannot overlook the reality that the main content of change in the current phase remains the elimination of all forms of disparity which were created on the bases of race, ethnicity, gender as well as the divide between rural and urban life.

The third important point to be made is that South Africa is progressively and increasingly becoming a youthful country. Rapid changes in science, information technology and social evolution necessitate a new paradigm of human existence. Our policies will have to be flexible enough to accommodate these ebbs and flows in social motion. At the same time they will have to avoid to be infinitely open-ended as to be devoid of any target social group.

Youth policy should unmistakably proceed from the social condition of young people.

However it helps to remember that we have already stated that a good youth policy helps to prepare young people to be worthy citizens of the country and the world. So it can be said that our policy helps to build, not just the young, but the nation as well.

So we should not miss the never-ending dialectical relationship of the young feeding into the old, a continuous movement forward.

The wisdom of this relationship is best captured in the ancient philosophy of the Native Americans who say:

"We do not inherit our world from our parents, we borrow it from our young people."

Our understanding of the constituency of young people should be informed by on-going research work aimed at deepening our understanding of the ever-changing social environment and of finding more appropriate solutions to new challenges. Technological developments move at an inexorable pace and the extent of their impact on the fibre of society is unprecedented in the history of human kind.

It is of course also true that the attainment and sustainability of our policy objectives depend, to a large measure, on our ability to make our economy work and integrate with the economies of the world.

The programme aimed at the modernisation of our economic life must place the education and training of young people at the forefront of that modernisation strategy. The bulk of the new entrants into the production of the economy are drawn from this constituency.

In that context we see Curriculum 2005 and the evolution of the Skills Development Strategy by the government as important initiatives to give purpose to this reality.

All available evidence indicate that the section of our society most affected by the spread of AIDS/HIV is the youth. Latest statistics puts the figure at 25% infection rate in some of the areas in the country. This alarming rate further underlies the importance of a clear policy strategy geared at combating the spread of the epidemic.

A similar emphasis should be placed on the need to combat all forms of crime, the spread of substance abuse, the scourge of rape and child molestation as well as the general prevalence of moral degeneracy in our society.

Chairperson,

Let us also take advantage of this summit to raise the urgent need for the formation of a national youth umbrella body in the country. The need for such a body cannot be overemphasised. The existence of a strong and united civil society is indispensable in the formulation, implementation and in monitoring of policy.

The very concept of popular participation in the formulation and implementation of policy finds real meaning if organisations of civil society play an important role.

We would like to believe that our society is involved in a second revolution. It is the revolution for social and economic emancipation.

And all revolutions throw forth and are thrown forth by a groundswell of different national forces.

But what will become of our second revolution without the existence of a groundswell in a national youth movement!

The Preamble of the National Youth Commission Act states that "the youth of South Africa constitutes an energetic, creative and the largest sector of our population". But what will become of the energy and creativity of the nation as a whole if the largest sector of the population is not united and integrated into a national formation.

National youth organisations need to pose a question to themselves: What characteristics of the youth set them apart from the other generations. It might be that one needs both ones hands and feet in order to count them. But certainly some of them are the energy and creativity which we have already stated.

If this point be true, the question arises; in what way do we as the youth unleash this energy and creativity for the good of society as a whole.

For instance, many of us here have attended or are still attending institutions of higher learning. How many of us have volunteered to conduct adult literacy classes in rural communities around your institutions. What has become of the energy and the creativity?

As we, surely understandably, toi-toi in demand of expanded bursary schemes, we should at time pause and remember that society carries a responsibility to fund both adult and pre-school education. We should, at times pause and ask ourselves a question about what our contribution should be in the education of our own parents.

Lastly, Chairperson, our policy formulation should extend our understanding that we belong to the region of Southern Africa and the continent of Africa. We are citizens of the world.

Today we are three years away from the turn of the century and the beginning of another millennium.

Few generations are ever presented with the opportunity to usher in a new century, let alone a millennium.

The question is; what do we plan to do with this historical opportunity.

There is a way in which the democratic elections of April 27, 1994 represent a human achievement which goes far beyond our understanding. Students of history will refer to this date as the day which marked the end of the process of decolonisation of the Africa peoples.