

celebrating South African YOUTH

Background

In 1974, the apartheid government decided to reintroduce the rule that Dr HF Verwoerd had tried without success to implement in 1953, when he held the education portfolio. The government of the day imposed the "50/50" rule that Afrikaans should be the medium of instruction for teaching mathematics, social studies and arithmetic, while science, woodwork, and arts and crafts were to be taught in English. The initial line of resistance came from teachers and parents.

In 1975, the School Boards of seven schools ordered staff not to teach in Afrikaans, which led to five Board chairmen being fired by the Bantu Education Department.

By 1976, resentment of the Bantu Education system was growing. In the run-up to the uprisings of June 16, Soweto pupils wrote a slogan "Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve" at the entrance of one of the secondary schools.

By March of that year Afrikaans had been imposed as a medium of instruction at some schools around Soweto, and resistance to the 50/50 ruling began to escalate.

On May 17 some schools organized boycotts, demanding that Afrikaans be dropped as a medium of instruction.

In June, some schools refused to write their social studies exams in Afrikaans and threatened a

full-scale boycott of the June exams. On Sunday 13 June, a meeting was held where it was decided that a march should be staged through Soweto on 16 and 17 June, ending with a mass rally on Friday, June 18. At the Sunday meeting a committee called the Soweto Action Committee (SAC) was formed, consisting of two members of each secondary school in Soweto. The committee was appointed to plan the intended peaceful march.

SAC and all meeting attendees were sworn to secrecy on June 13, so that plans would not be tampered with by informers. Over the next three days they spread the word and issued hurried instructions about what to do on the day.

On the morning of Wednesday, 16 June 1976, school pupils across Soweto gathered at more than 12 assembly points for the march. The marshals distributed cardboard placards with hand-written slogans such as "Down with Afrikaans" and "Afrikaans is a Tribal language".

Significance of 16 June

This day marks the highpoint of resistance by the youth of South Africa which started earlier and continued until the advent of democracy in 1994. The Soweto uprisings, the boiling point of youthful resistance, triggered a countrywide series of protests that were violently suppressed

by the apartheid authorities. Scores of people died, hundreds were arrested and many left the country to join the banned liberation movements in exile. The significance of 16 June 1976 lies in the way it symbolized human sacrifice, commitment to freedom and activation of the citizenry.

It also gave effect to the development of an educational system that respects human dignity, cultural diversity, freedom of choice and strives to ensure equal access.

The actions of the young people of the '70s contributed immeasurably to shaping the future of our country. As future leaders they were able to define their destiny and chart the course they wished to follow. Through their vision, action and sacrifices they fuelled the fight against an oppressive regime, which in the end led to democracy.

Young people continue to play an important role in society and the democratic government is committed to the development of the youth, who are the future leaders and custodians of our hard-won freedom. The interest of the youth is now being championed by the newly established National Youth Development Agency which has replaced the National Youth Commission and Umsobomvu Youth Fund, as the government structure to address youth issues.

Youth Challenges

The youth of today are confronted with many challenges that include a high volume of unemployment, poverty and crime. Unemployment cuts across a wide spectrum of young people, ranging from matriculants to graduates of institutions of higher learning. South African youths are also faced with a challenge posed by sexually transmitted diseases

and infections, including HIV/Aids.

Youth- and child-headed households are on the increase due to the death of parents as a result of HIV/AIDS-related opportunistic diseases, like TB.

The key challenge facing the country lies in making young people conscious of their identity, to be aware of their history and to inspire them to remain patriotic. Judging by the interest shown by young people in the fourth democratic elections, this is a struggle that is being won.

Opportunities for the Youth

The democratic government has put in place structures like the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) which is mandated to deal with all youth matters, from policy to development. The Minister in the Presidency is responsible for the Agency. The NYDA is the structure established by government to respond directly to the economic challenges that young people face, and as a development-funding Agency it is intended to establish a platform for job creation, skills development, and skills transfer, for South Africa's youth.

Attention to and emphasis on education is illustrated by the fact that Basic Education and Further Education have separate Ministers, to ensure that their portfolios receive attention.

Role of Parliament in Youth Development

Parliament has both Portfolio and Select Committees on Women, Youth, Children and Persons with Disabilities. These Committees are responsible for oversight on youth matters and

must deal with legislation that affects young people.

Parliament in its overall mandate of making laws, has passed many laws like the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act, 2003, the Skills Development Act 1998, and the Employment Equity Act.

Parliament in its oversight role, oversees implementation of enacted legislation which includes laws intended for the country's youth.

How South Africa's youth can be involved in Parliament

To make Parliament more accessible, there is a programme called "Member's Interface" in which young people may meet with an individual Member of Parliament to discuss issues pertinent to them. They can also make their voices heard through oral or written submissions.

The youth also form part of the public that can attend Committee Meetings where most of Parliament's work takes place, and they can attend sittings in order to observe, enrich and empower themselves.

Parliament has various initiatives targeted at different sectors, for example, *Youth Parliament* (which is held during the Youth Month) in which matters pertinent to youth are discussed and where participation is restricted to young people, and proceedings dedicated to them.

The Constitution obliges Parliament to involve the public in its activities and processes, therefore youth as part of society are frequently invited to take part in Parliament's initiatives, such as Public hearings, the State of the Nation Address and other outreach- and public participation programmes.

This pamphlet is available in all the official languages of South Africa.

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