

Adult Basic Education and the Preparation of South African Youth: Towards an Agenda for the Future

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ABSTRACT This descriptive paper proceeds with the assumption that the expectations, aspirations and challenges of the South African youth of the future could be so intricate that no single system of education can adequately satisfy their demands for learning within one segment of the entire lifespan. This is one major reason why adult basic education could become so critical and worthy of an academic discourse of this nature even as South Africa grapples with a myriad of strategies for meeting the needs of its youth. Adult basic education should be one of the critical human resource development strategies South Africa needs because it continues to harbor a large number of adult illiterates many of whom are youth and 55 percent of them female. The Kha ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign launched in February, 2008 has been planned to ensure that between 14th April, 2008 and the end of 2015, South Africa should be totally rid of its burden of illiteracy. But the challenges the South African youth of the future must contend with go beyond illiteracy. This discourse therefore makes some major propositions for consideration and immediate action in anticipation of the coming of a growing and restive population that could be stirred up by social and economic winds in an increasingly connected wider world.

INTRODUCTION

The South Africa youth are a priceless possession as clearly indicated by the Madiba, Nelson Mandela (former President of South Africa). Yet they face innumerable challenges. The innumerable challenges South African youth face would imply the need for measured resilience (Masten 2011; Barber 2013; Betancourt et al. 2013; Theron et al. 2013; Van Rensburg et al. 2015). However, this national resource would be valuable only if it is well cultivated and directed towards achieving the vision and mission that have been spelt out by and for them. Achieving the ideals for the maximization of the potentials inherent in the youth could be circumspect because of innumerable challenges. For example, the South African youth of the future will have to face up with the basic reality of life. The basic reality of living in the world of tomorrow is that people will have little or no choice to make as far as globalization and global competitiveness are concerned. It is true that the youth can make the case that glocalization (that is, looking more inwards to identify what we the people cherish and would want to protect) as opposed to globalization should be the way to go. That, in real terms, would be the case to make for the protection of the socio-economic systems and processes as a base for social development. But arguments in favour of protectionism in a globalizing

world may only expose South Africa and her youth to even more danger as other countries, especially those in the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (abbreviated as BRICS) bloc will continue to invest massively in growth, especially investment in people.

The 2010-2011 Global Competitiveness Index (abbreviated as GCI) ranks South Africa as number 45 in the world and second only to Tunisia in the entire African continent (World Economic Forum 2011). Tunisia itself ranks as number 40 in the World in the Global Competitiveness Index in the period specified, yet that nation is presently grappling with an unrest pioneered by its youth population. And that Tunisian experience portends to leave behind lessons other African nations must learn. All considered, it is welcoming that South Africa is positioning itself properly in Africa and in the world, judging by its present rating. Yet, there is still much to be done, and the application of active and inclusive interventions such as the one being considered in this paper has been generally recommended as the right approach to harnessing effectively all factors of production especially in the high-growth potential sectors of the economy.

Investment in people is one aspect of investment that is often overlooked. Yet, South Africa will increasingly find that it needs to cultivate and even scout more intensively for smart,

creative and highly motivated youth from around the nation and if it fails, from around the continent and the entire globe. It will then ensure that these people are placed in the planet's best basic and higher education systems, and then proceed from there to unleash them in a dynamic economy that thrives well in equally well run socio-political, economic and health systems. That objectively should be the biggest challenge that faces South Africa and its youth in the future. In reaching that goal, all systems of education and learning, be they informal, non-formal and formal, would have to be planned and efficiently managed such that they can contribute their quota in realizing the South African dream in a rapidly changing global environment, and in this context, adult basic education, which is education for people aged 15 and over who are not engaged in informal schooling or higher education and who have an educational level of less than Grade 9 (Aitchison 1999). Adult basic education clearly has a role to play in getting the South African youth ready to face up to the challenges of the future, and how best it could do so is the main purpose of this brief discussion.

Basic Assumption and Conceptual Framework

The basic assumption and conceptual framework that guides this discussion is that South Africa would have to move away from primary production systems and consumption to massive investment in its people as well as create new industries as its youth would be looking forward to more employment opportunities in a dynamic economy that can face intense global competition. Apart from this shift that is staring the nation in the face, South Africa may sooner than later find that most jobs with excellent prospects in the future will be complicated. True, agriculture, the service industry and the social service will remain, but the countries that would be able to build a solid future for its youth would remain those that are able to look beyond the present emphasis on basic skills and knowledge to real investment in scientifically and technologically based knowledge systems within the gambit of cultural awareness even as people seek to protect their very cultural roots in a dynamically changing world.

In predicting the future of employment, Fareed Zakaria quoted Louis Gerstner (2010), the former Chief Executive Officer of American Express and IBM, as having warned that most jobs:

.....will involve being able to juggle data, symbols, computer programs in some way or the other; no matter what the task. To do this, workers will need to be educated and often retrained.

And we know that good education and then retraining begins first with basic education, and in circumstances where there are still pockets of illiteracy and teeming numbers of out-of-school youth within the nation, of course, adult basic education obviously might be the real point of departure for many who are not provided for by the formal education system.

In applying adult basic education as a vademecum for preparing its youth population, the nation will still keep its formal education system as well as retain its manufacturing base. But the two strategies will still need to be seriously revamped such that they can face up to global competitiveness. Beyond that, South Africa will have to benchmark its education systems and employment creation systems against the best traditions and practices in the modern world. South Africa will not be allowed by its youth to operate an antiquated education and socio-economic and political systems that are designed for gridlock in a forward looking and dynamic world where quick and large-scale action on all fronts is the only hope every leading nation is pursuing with vigor. How can the nation match up with the best by applying its adult basic education for youth development? That is what this discussion is all about, but first starting with a brief exploration of the South African youth that need to be prepared for the future.

Brief Expose on the South African Youth

The National Youth Policy defines as youth any persons between the ages of 14 and 35 years (USAID 2009). Although the definition in itself is broad, it does cover a broad category of the youth and therefore renders itself useful for the purpose of our discussion. Following that definition, the 1996 Census figures did indicate that of the 40,6 million people living in the South Africa, just over 16,1 million or 40 per cent were youth, that is, the people who were in the age bracket of between 14 to 35 years of age (Sekwati and Hirschowitz 2001). That also should mean that South Africa's population was relatively youthful, and 77 percent of them were African, 10 percent white and 3 percent of them

Indian. Segregating the data into the various groups could be meaningful for the reason that their challenges would be different to some extent.

By 2010 the demographics had changed to some extent. For Statistics South Africa (2010) did indicate that by the time of the 2010 Mid-Year Population estimates, approximately one-third of the population was aged 0-14 (Statistics South Africa, 2010). The 2010 Mid-Year Population estimates have revealed that there were approximately 18,799,200 persons aged between 15 and 34 years. That excludes the figures in the age range of 10 -14 which had 5, 202, 300 persons and then the age range of 35-39 that had 3, 465, 200 persons. The data does suggest that a significant proportion of the nation's population remain youthful, and this has implications for adult basic education, especially when it embraces in its programming, the out-of-school youth.

In very significant ways, we need to understand the demographic characteristics of the youth population. First, it should be noted that there are more female than male youth in the age brackets covered by this definition.

As at 1996, Statistics South Africa reported that proportionately, more youth live in urban areas (57%) than the rest of the population (54%) (Sekwati and Hirschowitz 2001). That demography has not changed even as at today.

The demography on youth unemployment has not changed significantly from what it was during the 1996 Census. For in 1996, the Census data revealed that the overall unemployment rate for the South African youth was 40.9 percent, that the unemployment rate for the economically active youth was higher for females (46.6%) than for males (33.0%), that the problem of lack of jobs was more intense in non-urban areas where the unemployment rate was at 51.3 percent compared to 35.7 percent in urban areas and that the unemployment rates for male youth and female youth without any formal education was 33.8 percent and 52.3 percent respectively (Sekwati and Hirschowitz 2001). This kind of challenge definitely has implications for adult basic education. It is true that adult basic education may not be able to put on the ground physical projects such as the International Labor Organization project tagged SAY-JUMP (that is, South African Youth-Jobs for the Unemployed and Marginalized to Escape from Poverty) (ILO 2011). Youth unemployment remains

urgent and crucial in social policies in South Africa. For as at 2004, the New York Times quoted economists in South Africa as noting that the youth unemployment rate stood at 42 percent, and this was seen as one of the biggest threats to the unity pact that sought to bound blacks with whites together in the new South Africa (ILO 2011).

Youth unemployment data does suggest that unemployment rate among youth with no basic education and with less than basic education stood at 41.2 percent and 46.2 percent respectively in 1999. Moreover, youth unemployment rates among those aged 15-24 years among African females and males were the highest at 61.6 percent and 48.2 percent respectively as at 1999 (Sekwati and Hirschowitz 2001; ILO 2011). If you judge by the impact of the global economic recession that has hit most nations, you can only imagine that the figures that were quoted for 1999 and 2004 may not have changed drastically for the better as the youth had been restive in this area of national concern.

Yet, adult basic education training can equip those who specialize in the area with the knowledge of how to mobilize youth to engage in viable self-employment and employment creation projects. It can also equip its personnel with the knowledge of how to manage youth poverty alleviation projects so that they do not go round in circles.

Adult basic education should be particularly interested in the numbers of South African youth who are either completely illiterate or semi-literate on the one hand, and those who dropped out of the formal school system for some reasons, on the other. It is known that data made available in 2008 by the Kha ri Gude Literacy Campaign initiative revealed that 4.7 million South African adults were illiterate. Although this figure might have been reduced perhaps significantly as a result of the campaign, the situation could remain unappreciative if we were to add the number of youth that might have been hidden within the cohort. Then you can add to that concern the number of youth who drop out of school and those who are either orphans or simply destitute and live on the street. It all means that we have a much more complicated picture of youth we may not be effectively reaching under the existing intervention strategies and projects. Yet, this apparently "forgotten" segment of the population should also have a stake in the South African nation of the future.

The future of the South African nation could be in grave danger unless we tackle effectively the scourge of the HIV and AIDS epidemic. We know that the National Department of Health reported in 2007 that South Africa, Swaziland, Lesotho and Botswana reported the highest antenatal HIV prevalence levels in the world in 2006 (Republic of South Africa, Department of Health 2011). It is to be noted that the severity of the epidemic is normally linked to poverty, women's relative lack of empowerment, high rates of male workers migration and other social cultural factors that were held responsible for the fact that 5.4 million people were living with HIV in South Africa in 2006, of which a total of 294,000 were children aged 0-14 (Republic of South Africa, Department of Health 2011; Betancourt et al. 2012). It was also observed in that same year that the HIV prevalence among the youth (aged 15-24) was 10.4 percent, with the female showing 16.9 percent and male 3.7 percent. The different intervention strategies adopted in South Africa have brought to the fore good knowledge about the epidemic but the solution is still far from being realized. For AVERT (2011) has reported that as at 2009 an estimated 5.6 million people were living with HIV and AIDS, and an estimated 310,000 South Africans died of AIDS, and that prevalence was 17.8 percent among those aged 15-49 with youth and women reported as the worst affected (AVERT 2011). Without wanting to paint a disturbing picture of the danger that face the South African youth as a result of this epidemic, it must be clear to us that HIV and AIDS remains, perhaps the biggest threat facing the nation. And, it is very much a welcome change that the South African Government has launched a major HIV counseling and testing campaign in 2010, and that initiative is aimed at reducing the HIV incidence rate by 50 percent by June 2011. Adult basic education for youth should certainly play a key role in helping the Government to achieve this laudable goal.

It is possible that the existing adult basic education initiatives might have somewhat considered adequately the basic demographics of the South African youth that have been selectively highlighted in this paper. However, there is still a lot more that it can do for the nation. It could well be that whatever propositions we could make here might have been well considered and incorporated into the existing curriculum on offer by adult basic education, but as

things now stand, there could be some other big issues that are beckoning on them for renewed attention, and that is why this present paper is highly valuable.

An Overview of Adult Basic Education in South Africa

This discussion here would only be meaningful if, first of all, it is attempted to understand what is in place at the moment in terms of applying adult basic education to the preparation of the South African youth for the future. Adult basic education in this context is to be understood as the provision of basic education to South African youth such that they are not only literate but have acquired competencies in the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and aptitudes that they require for effective functioning in all spheres of life and throughout their lifetimes. Therefore, adult basic education in the context of this discussion encompasses training aimed at skills development as well. In other words, it is a comprehensive kind of education that targets out-of-school youth and, in the traditional context of the profession, adult citizens who had missed out on the provisions offered by the formal education system.

Adult basic education in the South African context is equivalent to National Qualifications Framework level 1, and to some extent Level 2. It fits into the General Education and Training (abbreviated as GET) component of the continuum. It is arranged in such a way that it takes place not just in the urban and rural, farm and special training centers but also in occupational, work-based training and upliftment programs such as the ones catered for by the EDT/SETAS. In this case, NGOs, civil based organizations and like-minded organizations have developed programs that target South Africans who should benefit maximally from what they do.

What this means is that adult basic education may not end at the level intended for it as it becomes a necessary entry point into the formal education system affording the individual that enroll in it to move on to the highest level of education possible. This is one way it helps to shape the future of the South African youth who can get to any level possible in terms of educational achievement in life. In other words, adult basic education should not be narrowly con-

ceived as a mission that ends in the specified offers. Rather, it is the foundation phase in the lifelong learning frameworks and systems that every developed nation is pursuing in order to become competitive and viable for economic investments.

Adult basic education and Training has been intended to be the first segment of the continuum for providing relevant education in South Africa. It provides for those who might not have been able to access formal education for some reasons to do so until they can achieve the highest level of education possible. It is this arrangement in the National Qualification Frameworks that provides the basis for the curriculum that is discussed hereunder.

The Curriculum and National Qualifications Frameworks (Abbreviated as NQF)

The curriculum for Adult basic education is governed by the National Qualification Framework. In other words, the Adult Basic Education and Training program shares the South African vision of Lifelong Learning. The present offerings in the program are aimed at providing training in language, literacy and communication, mathematical literacy, mathematics and mathematical sciences, natural science, art and culture, life orientation, technology, human and social science, economic and management science. It is expected that learners may also choose to take courses in small, medium and micro enterprises, wholesale and retail, travel and tourism, applied agriculture, early childhood development and ancillary health care. From this offer, it is clear that almost all relevant sectors that should prepare the youth for the future have been covered. However, it remains to be seen how well these programs have impacted on the youth, and the research evidence is not immediately made available. So if we are concerned about how well adult basic education should be re-conceived in the light of nascent development challenges, we would have really targeted a niche within our specialization, perfectly following on the tracks of South Africa's forerunners in this professional area of development. What we probably need to add at this point is the consideration of sustainable efforts that should help the youth even better in preparing themselves for the future.

Towards Sustainable Adult Basic Education and Training Youth Development Program

Before venturing to propose what sustainable adult basic education and training youth development program should be in South Africa, it might be necessary to note that there have been ongoing professional development programs in different South African universities. For example, the University of South Africa and the University of the Western Cape have had professional development programs in adult basic education. These institutions have also been involved in research as to how to improve the different offers, and so what we are proposing in this section are only meant to interrogate and complement existing initiatives. Here are some major areas to which we can look for birthing a relevant adult basic education and training program aimed at preparing the South African youth of the future.

Quality Research

All things being equal, it would be appropriate to expect more dedicated actions first in the area of research. Sustained quality and robust research outputs would be needed to inform policies and the setting up of functional formal structures with well-funded programs. For example, research would be needed on the accurate spatial distribution of the youth, their most recent demographics and more recent challenges in the first place.

Policy Alignment

True, there are a number of social development policies that target the youth which is good. However, the duplication of policies and actions would be unproductive and tasking at this stage. That is why the nation must ensure that all relevant policies (including those related directly to adult basic education) targeting the youth are properly aligned such that there is a united front that is devoid of unhealthy competition and financial and person hour wastages.

Public-Private Partnership

Adult basic education practitioners, researchers and planners should not expect that they alone can effectively handle the challenge

of preparing the youth for the future. A lot more could be done by them if they carefully embrace the value of public-partnership approach to doing business in their specialization. And here, South African has learnt useful lessons from the Ikhwelo Project (1999-2003) (USAID 2009). Perhaps, it might be useful to consider briefly the gains of this project.

The Ikhwelo Project was a pioneering initiative in which the National Department of Education collaborated with local communities, other Government Departments, South African Non-Governmental Organization Project Literacy and USAID (an international donor agency) to implement a large-scale adult basic education and training program. This program was implemented initially and mainly in the Limpopo and Eastern Cape Provinces, being the poorest provinces and with the highest adult illiteracy rates. By the end of the experiment in 2003, USAID (2009) reported the following accomplishments:

- ♦ More than 3, 000 learners enrolled in agriculture and SMME programs.
- ♦ More than 300 ABET practitioners completed training courses.
- ♦ All of the 52 Provincial Adult Learning Centers received equipment and training aids.
- ♦ Interested learners gained accreditation for NQF Level 1, with credits towards obtaining the General Education and Training (GET) Certificates.

This program has partly informed other initiatives, and adult basic education for youth development could also learn some valuable lessons from it.

Professional Corp of Personnel

If adult basic education will continue to be relevant in preparing the South African youth for the future, it must first of all identify a clear set of actions to be undertaken in a coordinated and effective manner. This, of course, would be based on the assumption that South Africa commits itself to identifying, cultivating and sustaining its cadre of adult basic education practitioners and academia. And we know that this corps of personnel is disappointingly thinning down and even disappearing in Sub-Saharan Africa. But South Africa can avert the risk of paying attention exclusively to its formal education sector to the utter neglect of the non-formal education systems and processes.

Alignment of Industrial Based Training to Adult Basic Education and Training for Youth Development

USAID (2009) quoted a working group of Harvard University and South African economists advising the South African Government as having observed that only about 13 million or 42 percent of South African of the working age population are actually working, and that those who are not working are predominantly young, black, women, and are poorly educated. The Group was also quoted by USAID (2009:59) as having observed that fewer than 25 percent of South Africans between 20 and 25 years of age are actually working and that while the unemployment rate of whites is less than 6 percent, it is above 30 percent for Africans. Obviously, this demography does have implication for how the different industrial based training programs and projects should be aligned to adult basic education for the South African youth of the future. For example, adult basic education practitioners must find out how they can complete the industrial based training programs such that they become more motivating for the youth.

Adult Basic Education and the Bridging of the Skills Gap

The discipline would need to position itself properly in terms of fitting into the Education Roadmap which is the result of a process commissioned by the African National Congress in 2008 (Development Bank of Southern Africa 2008). The Education Roadmap had sought to inform the nation's education policy and the connection between education results and the national skills shortage.

Skills shortage constraints growth and employment creation, and therefore, adult basic education would have to ensure that it monitors effectively its contribution to the quantity and quality of the initiatives aimed at stimulating enterprises and business not just for adult citizens but also for the youth that have not been effectively reached. In proposing the way we have done, one is aware that there could be overlapping policies and implementation modalities usually related to multiple sectors strategies. Even at that, the adult basic education initiatives should be conceived more as being positioned to complement national initiatives, espe-

cially with special reference to the professional development of trainers working in industrial and other work-related settings in the nation.

Active Interest in Youth Development Initiatives

Adult basic education's role in preparing the South African youth for the future should embrace deliberate efforts by its practitioners and academia to properly identify and collaborate with existing youth development initiatives. The collaboration being proposed here must be informed by an active interest in the effectiveness and impacts of policies and projects initiated by the National Youth Commission and other youth development structures and initiatives like the Umsobomvu Youth Fund, the Interdepartmental Committee on Youth, the South African Youth Council, Young Positive Living Ambassadors and the Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship Clearinghouse (originally funded by US-AID but now taken over by the Umsobomvu), as well as the different provincial youth development commissions.

CONCLUSION

Adult basic education together with its professional development programs over the years might have been a veritable companion in the socio-economic development efforts in South Africa. However, times, systems, processes, including education and learning, are changing with terrific speed, and this is partly because of the nascent developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) together with the pervading influences of globalization. These new interventions have continued to challenge developing nations, including South Africa. Catching up with the pursuit of global competitiveness makes it absolutely unrealistic to look up only to one area of education and training as having all the answers to the challenge of developing a competent and competitive youth population in South Africa. This is why this brief paper has attempted to explore how adult basic education could be more effectively reviewed and redirected in such a way that it could be one national resource that must be linked to other initiatives aimed at preparing the South African youth of the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is true that adult basic education and training alone does not offer all the possible solutions and strategies. That was why a strong appeal has been made in this paper for a well informed and articulated collaboration with other agencies. The main challenge in ensuring that this happens remains in the ability of adult basic education and training practitioners and academia to convince policy makers in South Africa that it would continue to remain relevant to the national development efforts after illiteracy must have been completely wiped out from the nation. That is the real challenge the nation must address very urgently.

The intended value of applying adult basic education and training to youth development can only happen if enough financial provisions have been made, and this is where the political will the government has demonstrated becomes very critical.

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