



Dear Fellow South African,

Engaging with young people always leaves me energised. It is exciting to gain insight into their struggles and triumphs and their vision for what can be done to improve this country.

There is no denying that youth are a significant presence in our nation's psyche and fabric.

Far from the perception that they are complacent, politically apathetic or self-absorbed, local and international studies consistently affirm that young people around the globe are always more positive about their prospects.

According to the findings of an Ipsos Pulse of the People poll released last month, 61% of South Africans aged 15 to 17 feel optimistic about 2020.

I have no doubt this is a sentiment shared by youth in general and especially the cohort born at the turn of the millennium who are now beginning their adult life, the ones the youth call Ama2000.

They are the sons and daughters born after democracy. While they have no direct experience of the atrocities of apartheid, they continue to live with its legacy of racial

inequity, spatial injustice and poverty. These young people are confident, self-assured and brimming with ambition. They know their rights and aren't afraid to demand them.

Our country's youth represent energy, hope, fun, potential, future and freedom.

They are digital natives fluent in the use of modern technologies and look to enter careers that did not even exist at the time of their parents.

On the eve of the State of the Nation Address last week I had the privilege of interacting with a group of such dynamic young people at an intergenerational dialogue convened by the National Youth Development Agency.

We discussed the issues that are most important to young people and examined ways in which we could align our perspectives and actions.

Naturally, access to employment and opportunities dominated the agenda. Of the 1.2 million young people entering the labour market each year, almost two-thirds remain neither working nor studying.

The participants in the dialogue welcomed the fact that the issue of youth employment was receiving attention at the highest levels of government. But the refrain was familiar: they were ready and able to contribute to the economy in various ways, including as entrepreneurs, but bureaucratic red tape and lack of funding prevents them from doing so.

As Bright Hlongwane from Youth in Business South Africa told me, there needs to be more funding extended to young entrepreneurs. They would like to see a variety of financial institutions, developmental financial institutions, angel investors, private equity firms as well as commercial banks extending credit and taking a bet on young entrepreneurs.

For our country to prosper and thrive we must do all within our means to ensure young people can participate in our economy in a meaningful way, whether it is in formal employment or self-employment.

It was therefore fitting that I could use this platform to launch the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention, which is a strategic national vision and plan which sets out priority actions to address youth unemployment.

This includes a national pathway management network that matches candidates with work opportunities. This will enable young people to have access to opportunities as some of them do not have the networks that make easy access to opportunities possible.

Specialised short focused courses in skills that employers need now will be organised. This aims to address the problem of a mismatch between the existing educational, training and development programmes and the requirements of the economy.

We welcome the work already being done in this area, such as the programme currently underway through the departments of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development and Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs to train 1,000 young students in the Free State in agricultural and other skills.

Many young people want to start their own businesses. They lack the technical skills that can help them start their own businesses. The intervention will support the growth of youth entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship is certainly not a panacea, but I am convinced that it is one effective and proven way to confer identity and purpose, a sense of belonging, and hope for the future for the youth.

The Presidential Youth Service Programme provides opportunities for young people to give back to their communities. This initiative is designed to effect change and make an impact at scale, as opposed to fragmented programmes that have had limited impact.

I also announced in the State of the Nation Address that we will set aside 1% of the national budget for a youth employment initiative. A number of programmes and projects are being designed to address this national challenge.

The youth of our country clearly see this as a land of opportunity and promise, despite the obstacles they encounter. In the past week alone I have met several young South Africans who make me proud of just how far we have come and what we have achieved.

There are young sports people like golfing prodigy Sim 'Tiger' Tshabalala who is racking up international golfing awards at the tender age of 8. He is ranked 7th in the world in his age group and has won the US Kids golf tournament twice. My spirits were lifted when Grade 11 learner Sinoyolo Qumba from Orange Farm wrote to me about what should be in this year's SONA. She actually joined our speechwriting team in the drafting process. There are passionate activists like Ayakha Melithafa from Eerste Rivier in the Western Cape, who attended this year's World Economic Forum in Davos to call on world leaders to stand firmly for climate justice. I was bowled over when I met Michelle Nkamankeng who, at 11 years old, is Africa's youngest author and is ranked among the top ten youngest writers in the world. The author of seven books and wrote her first book at the age of 6 years old. As Professor Jonathan Jansen said: "She is confident, articulate, insightful and passionate."

It is these young people who are the real jewels of our country's future and who remind us that our freedom was won through the sacrifices of the young men and women who were determined that not only they, but those who came after, should live in the light of freedom.

We must continue to work together as government, business, labour and civil society to ensure that the burden of unemployment does not continue to weigh down our young people, crush their spirits and cause them to become despondent. I am confident that the actions we outlined in the SONA will represent a new frontier for youth development

As Frantz Fanon said, it is to each generation to discover its mission. This generation has discovered theirs. It is now up to us to support them to fulfil it. It is a historical fact that a nation's failure to successfully nurture and enhance the capabilities of its youth spells doom for the future of that country.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Cyril Ramaphosa". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.