

# Skills for young people must be a priority

AYANDA NYOKA

**T**HE United Nations' (UN's) global report on the millennium development goals (MDGs), which expire this year, highlights significant and uneven development progress across the world.

Analysis by Vusi Gumede in last year's Transformation Audit by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) reveals that SA has missed many of the MDGs. Most concerning is the scant progress on the economic empowerment of youth, despite being a target group for poverty alleviation.

Youth poverty interventions should focus on improving education outcomes to equip young people with skills for the transition from school to productive employment.

Given the strong correlation between education and employment in SA, the MDGs needed to deliver considerable education outcomes. Instead, policy pragmatism narrowly focused on universal primary education, limiting compulsory education to only nine years.

As a result, we have seen a disproportionate increase in primary school enrolment.

However, this was not matched with pupil retention through to matric, nor with effective transition paths to work. Pupils have continued to drop out of school without finishing matric, excluding most of them from the labour market.

The performance of public Further Education Training colleges has been far too weak to equip young people with the skills needed by industry. The share of young people in the labour force has increased since the MDGs came into effect in 2000, yet, without work experience and qualifications, for most the transition from school to employment remains difficult.

Findings from a recent Afrobarometer survey show that unemployment is a leading concern for most South African youth.

At the same time, ratings on government performance in job creation are very low among people aged 18-35. Only 25% of youth rated the government positively on job creation.

Youth participation in the government's Expanded Public Works Programme, which provides temporary relief to the unemployed, declined from 2011-14. Given how hostile the labour market is towards young people, aggregate levels of discouragement have nearly doubled between 2008 and last year — from 4.2% to 8.1%.

At the same time, there has been a strong policy against a comprehensive social grant system that would include young people, on the basis that it would create disincentives to work.

Also, the progressive youth wage subsidy debate was prematurely closed owing to politicking, without any real broad engagement with youth stakeholders.

It is against this background that young people have argued for the economic empowerment of youth to feature prominently on SA's agenda ahead of the coming UN summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda.

At the forefront of this global conversation should be specific targets to improve the employability of young people. At a national level, this should translate into resolute steps to empower them with appropriate skills, provide second-chance pathways into education, and engage in critical dialogue with employers to negotiate opportunities for youth.

The National Youth Policy 2020 is an important step by which progress can be measured. However, the government needs to prioritise a detailed implementation strategy. Waiting for high economic growth will not address these challenges.

The proposed sustainable development goals, which are to replace the MDGs at the end of this year, set forth a progressive and comprehensive agenda, and the merits of the 17 goals cannot be disputed.

But the final goals have to be realistic and achievable by 2030, and not merely a wish list.

Most important, they must translate into substantial development outcomes for SA's youth.

■ *Nyoka is project leader of the JIR's Inclusive Economies project.*