

# YouthMatters

What young people need to reach their dreams



**YouthMatters** explores the challenges that young people face in their communities and outlines a range of potential solutions. It captures young people's energy and creative thinking, and it calls on a range of duty-bearers from government, business and civil society to step up support for youth development.

It was developed in collaboration with 18 young South Africans who first discussed and debated the critical issues with other young people in their communities before feeding their broader insights into this booklet. Data in **YouthMatters** are drawn from the *South African Child Gauge 2015* which is available on [www.ci.org.za](http://www.ci.org.za).

# Support youth development

As young people we face many challenges – from crime and poverty to school dropout, teen pregnancy, substance abuse and unemployment. These problems are all interconnected and in this context some of us end up making the wrong decisions. But we know there has to be a way to get back on track to a better future. We need to learn to develop a positive mindset, but we also need support and guidance from the people around us.



## A positive mindset

We would like to tell our peers: a positive mindset can help you make the right decisions and move forward. There are things you can do to activate your life, but they will take effort. So you have to work it, sweat it, feel it, and bring some effort to the table.

We know that it's not always easy to have such a positive mindset, especially when you don't know where you are going or where to find support. It may be hard to keep smiling, work hard, and say no to drinks and drugs. At times you may feel like giving up, but you have to go on. You have to make up your mind: what is it that you want to be, who is it that you want to be? Then make a plan.

It can be really difficult for young people to navigate the systems of our society, as we often don't have the information and support we need to make the right choices. We may not know where to study, how to get a bursary, how to start small businesses, or what opportunities are available to us. Some of us don't have positive role models. Some family members and parents may be drinking, going out, or leaving us alone, or they simply don't know how to help us.

Some elders in our communities talk about young people as the 'lost generation' and say we are not good enough, and sometimes we start to believe them. It is easy to feel hopeless and begin engaging in destructive behaviours. But you have to have self-love and define your values. You can choose strong morals and ethics. Your context does not define who you are. Ultimately, you decide who you want to be!

Some members of our community *are* successful but we don't always know how much effort it took them to get to where they are now. You often have to start at the bottom and work your way up. So you have to take responsibility for yourself and work for your success. Remember that you have the power to decide who you want to be, to go out and find the information you need, and to learn from those who have succeeded even if you have to go and look for them. There are community centres, churches, social workers, health care workers, libraries, schools, teachers, business people... Ask for information. Find the support and resources that will empower you.

There *are* opportunities out there. You have to keep trying. Keep asking. Find people who can help you. Don't give up. You will find a way.



## Open communication

Communication is supposed to start at home. We know our parents often want the best for us but they are from a different generation. They may not know how to communicate with us or how to provide us with the information we need to do our best. We know that our elders don't want to see us make mistakes. But parents, we need to talk...

Open, transparent communication is needed at every level, and we would like to ask that you communicate in a way that motivates us. For example, a teacher who wanted good things for his class used to write them inspiring quotes, and this encouraged everyone to work hard and pass physics. It is the way people communicate that can motivate us.

Government, businesses and NGOs, please come talk to us. Let's work together to find out what is needed for young people and where things should be built. Can we think creatively about solutions? We need information and resources that are easy to access. For example, would it be possible to have wifi at taxi ranks, in bookstores, youth

centres, community halls, schools, clinics, trains and bus shelters? That way we would all have cheap and fast access to the internet, even when we are travelling to and from work or school. You can block social media so we can focus on sites where we can search for employment, learnerships and study guides. You can use posters and pamphlets in strategic places – schools, clinics and churches – and hold information sessions at school. It would also help if you could put all the information about jobs, careers and further studies in a central place so it is easy for us to find what we are looking for.

We know that we are responsible too, we need to learn how to keep the communication going, in our families, with people around us, and with government. But it is difficult to do that if we don't know who to contact, where to go for help, what number to call or how to get hold of our local councillor. So we need you to show us the right channels to communicate with you.



# Building circles of support – supporting youth development

Youth are expected to become independent. Yet young people do not grow up in isolation, and the entire system around us needs to function well and support youth development.



It is important to understand how our development and life choices are shaped by the environments in which we live. This includes:

- our **relationships** with friends and family,
- the **communities** in which we live, and
- the influence of wider **society**.

Each of these circles of support has a role to play: As young people, we need guidance, care and support from our families and loved ones. We also need support from our communities and access to quality schools, colleges, sports

facilities and youth-friendly clinics that enable us to make healthy choices and reach our full potential. And we need government, business and civil society to work together and invest in comprehensive programmes that support youth development.

This means that everyone who comes into contact with young people – teachers, doctors, nurses, youth workers, businesses and community leaders – all have a role to play in inspiring and motivating us and enabling us to access opportunities.



# Education is the key

We long for an education system that will enable us to follow any career path we choose. Yet there are many problems with our current system – **only half of grade 1 learners in South Africa make it through to matric.**

The curriculum is **very academic** and offers **few choices** for those of us who are more practical or creative minded.

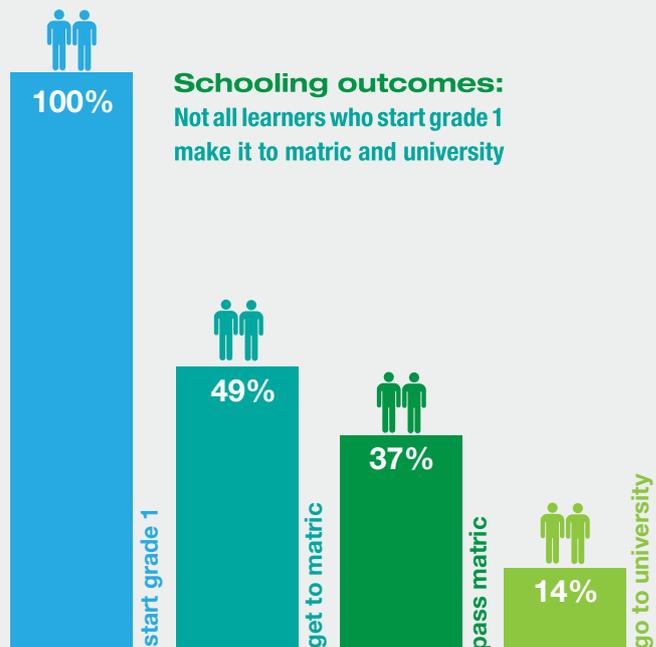
Many schools are overcrowded and offer little or no extra mural activities. This is especially bad in rural and township schools. The **inequalities** in the education system wear you thin – we are not all getting the same education.

*“I studied at a township school and I worked really hard because I knew what I wanted. I came in at 6.30am and left at 11pm. But at some of the other schools in this country, kids start at 8.15am and leave at 2.15pm, then they do extra mural activities and they still get all A’s. In their class there are 25 kids, in my class there were 105 kids.”*

Then there is a problem with the **teachers** who do not teach or who have no qualifications: Some don’t show up for months. Others come with books, they read from them, but **you don’t understand and they don’t explain.** Even with a positive mindset, it is hard for us to make it through that system.

There is little **career guidance and support**, so we feel ill-prepared to make the right choices. This starts in grade 9 when we have to choose subjects that we will take in matric, yet we have no idea what we would like to study after school.

In the end, only 8% of us make it to college or university. There are many reasons for this. It is difficult to access **information about higher education**: what to study and where to study, and how to make sound decisions about our futures. A lot of information is now online but we



**Schooling outcomes:**  
Not all learners who start grade 1 make it to matric and university

are not always taught how to find it or even how to use computers. In rural areas, many of us do not have access to the internet.

Education, and especially higher education, is **expensive.** We know that there are bursaries and grants but the system is complicated and often grants only come through after we have decided to stop studying because we can’t afford it.



**colleges R24 000**  
**tertiary R65 000**  
**possible cost of tuition**

## What is needed to open the doors of learning?

We ask **teachers** to **teach, encourage and inspire us.** Give us extra material and more individual attention. Teach us how to study, from the early grades, not only in matric.

We ask **school principals** to **recognise our achievements,** and help us find the information we need to connect to colleges and universities and to apply for bursaries and scholarships. Invite volunteers and NGOs to **tutor** us and invite business leaders and professionals to **provide career information,** and to come **inspire** and **motivate** us. Invite our parents so they can find out more about what goes on at school and explain what kind of support we need. Help us open up communication between ourselves, teachers, parents and the broader community.

**Businesses and professionals** get involved! Expose us to the workplace and give us hope that we can one day get where you are.

We ask the **Department of Education** to build **more functional schools** and **provide sport and extra mural**

**activities** to enrich our lives. Not everyone is good at maths and physics, so broaden the curriculum and give **us a chance to develop other talents** and careers in art, music and technical skills.

Review **teacher qualifications** and make sure teaching and learning is at the highest standard. **Raise the pass mark to 50%** and give proper guidelines in subjects where we are struggling. Get independent organisations to **evaluate our teachers.** Make random visits to our schools, and hold principals and teachers accountable. When we fail, ask us why, so that you can improve the quality of teaching and learning based on our experience.

We want to tell **our peers: own your education.** In the end, it is **your responsibility** to make the most of your education. Once you have the information and services you need, don’t take advantage of them. Use them wisely, act responsibly.



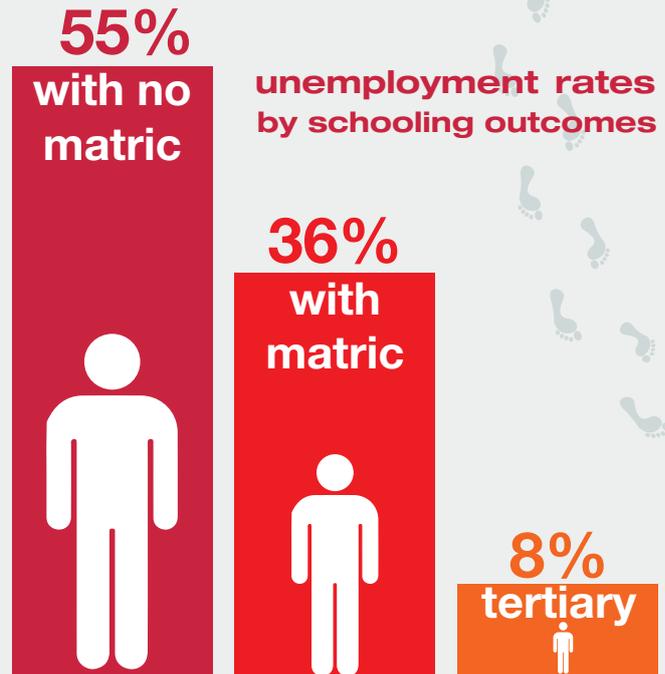
# Unlocking job opportunities

37% of young South Africans say they would like to work, they are looking for work, but remain **unemployed**. The more motivated among us keep on applying for jobs but we rarely get any replies. It is hard not to lose hope, and give up trying. If nothing changes today, we fear that our children will be trapped in the same cycle of poverty.

We know that education increases our chances of finding work. Yet the quality of schooling is poor and many of us are **not prepared** for higher education or for the workplace.

We **struggle to find information** about what kinds of job and training opportunities are available. This starts early: What subjects should we take at high school? What degrees do we need for which career? Where and how do we apply for jobs, college and university? How should we prepare for a job interview? How can we start our own business, and access practical support? Even when information is available, it may be difficult to access and the technical language used in forms may be hard to follow.

There are **not enough job opportunities**. Education alone, or a different attitude to life, is not enough to solve the problem.



## How can we help youth find employment?

We ask **government** to intensify job creation by providing internships and insisting that companies give youth a break and hire us. We also ask government to provide us with **information and training facilities** in our communities that will upskill us for the real world – including skills to set up our own businesses. Teach us how to fill in application forms and prepare for a job interview.

We need **businesses** to reach out and help us gain **work experience** through job shadowing or internships. We also ask businesses to come to our career guidance days and give us ideas of new careers and opportunities. Let us know what you expect in an interview and help us be prepared. Have some faith in us, hire us and give us a chance to gain experience.

At **schools** there is much that can be done. **Life orientation** and career guidance needs to prepare us for the real world and should start as early as grade 8. **Mentors** could help give us direction, and NGOs could provide **motivational workshops** and one-on-one guidance. We ask **teachers, principals** and the **community** to get involved. Write letters to businesses, organisations and people who can help us. Reach out to them for us while we are still at school. Build bridges between our schools and the colleges and universities.

**Universities** and **colleges** let us know when your **open days** are happening, and help us with transport so we can be open to the possibilities. Many of our parents are trapped

in poverty, so we need you to show us how to apply for **funding and bursaries**. Please reach out. Work together with our schools: make sure your open days are added to our school calendars.

We need **role models**. So those who have made it in our communities, please come back and tell us how you have done it. **Show us a pathway** that perhaps we can't see.

We also need to take responsibility for **ourselves**. If we drop out of school, we will not be in a good position to find work. And when we do find a job, we may need to start at the bottom and work our way up. Every bit of experience counts. Even **volunteer work** and internships can be a **stepping stone** to better work. You gain experience, make contacts and it opens doors.



# Social challenges

## Drugs and alcohol

Drugs and alcohol are really killing us. Many of us think it is cool to drink and take drugs. There is a lot of **peer pressure**. Today even young children are drinking alcohol.

Drugs and alcohol are freely available and are used in all spheres of our lives.

We see some of our parents drink and take drugs themselves, so we may think it is okay. It is a way of life. Some parents do not seem interested in what goes on in our lives. There is real neglect. Others are overprotective. But parents, instead of telling us what to do, rather explain the risks so that if we experiment we know what we are exposing ourselves to.

Some parents become so desperate they may think the only way to save their children is by supporting their

addictions. They give their children money for drugs or ignore it when their child steals, because they don't see any other way out.

People in communities often know who sells the drugs but may **turn a blind eye**. There is also a lot of corruption. Police get bribed and drug dealers get off the hook easily.

Some young people can afford to go to rehab but when they come out they **relapse** because there is no support in the communities, and the temptation and peer pressure are still there. Some drugs (like Woonga/Nyaope), you can simply not recover from.



## Violence and crime

We are all part of the problem: from the criminal justice system to the man in the street who turns a blind eye. *It is a cycle that starts with poverty and an environment where many of us drop out of school and cannot find work.* It is easy to get pulled off track – and then to break the cycle is difficult.

Many of us are often not willing to come forward or take a stand because **we are scared**. The police are afraid of the gangs too. Many community members support these gangsters, who look after them with gifts.

The entire criminal justice system is struggling. We hear of magistrates who take bribes. Crime and violence do not end anywhere – rapists are let back on the street, for example. So **people don't trust the system** and may end up taking the law into their own hands

Many of those people who do go to jail want to go back because they are making money there.

They have a TV in there. We know not all jails are like this but jail doesn't fulfil its purpose anymore. It's an initiation school and many young people can come out as hardcore criminals. Some acquire skills in the training programmes in jail, but when they get out, they do not know how to use them, so we feel those training programmes that doesn't serve their purpose either.

## Teen pregnancy



**In 2008, 23% of young women had given birth by age 20 ... but most of these were older teens. Only 5% of children were born to teen mothers under the age of 17.**

Having a child as a teenager has a negative effect on our chances of completing school, and our children's chances of a better life. So as young people, we need to think and act responsibly. We all know the consequences of having unprotected sex. So, to our **peers**, both young women and young men, we want to say: use contraception, every time!

But we do know various factors make it difficult for us to make well-informed decisions. Contraception is not always easy to access. Young women who try to get

contraception at a clinic are often judged. Some of the nurses in the clinics are rude, they gossip and they tell our mothers, regardless of the confidentiality they are supposed to upkeep. So even when we are trying to do the right thing, many **nurses shout at us** and drive us away.

Also, relationships are not easy. As young women or men, we may find it **difficult to say no** when our partner wants unprotected sex, as we don't want to lose them. So we need some guidance, but without judgement.

We also need to talk openly about **rape**. Rape affects everyone, but especially young women who are being raped by men in their communities, even by family members. We need to find ways to make men understand that they do not own us. We may dress up to feel good, and even to be noticed, but never ever because we want to be raped.

# Finding solutions



It starts at home. **Parents** please **set an example** for your children – if you do drink, then drink responsibly.

**Government**, you need to **get tough** and lay down the rules. You can't keep on preaching and giving motivational speeches. There need to be real repercussions and consequences for bad behaviour. Work closely with police and the justice system to get the drug dealers out of our communities. Come down hard on those who take bribes and who protect the gangsters.

**Monitor alcohol sales** and take away licences if they serve children. Most 18-year-olds are in high school or fresh in universities and should not be allowed into bars or hotels to drink; increasing the age limit to 21 to buy alcohol will help.

We are often bored. So we ask **government, NGOs, schools and communities** to build **art, sports and recreation centres** or to introduce **community services** so we have something constructive to do that gets our adrenaline going in a positive way. Get our buy-in for what you are creating. Ask us what we need and involve us in the process.

We also need more **rehabilitation centres** that are affordable and easily accessible – places in our communities where we can get clean and where we can be supported to stay on track after we leave the centres.



**Government officials**, we appreciate the work you do. But we expect you to act responsibly and do your duty. Do NOT take bribes.

**Correctional services** keep young boys away from hardened men in jail. Encourage those who have served time and have been rehabilitated to come back to share their life stories and **warn us first-hand** about how bad it can be. Target those of us who are already involved in gangs or look like we are going that way.

There are **skills programmes** for offenders in prison, but there needs to be more support for them to use the skills they have learned, when they come back out of jail. Please provide **therapy** for perpetrators of domestic violence and bullying because they, like the survivors, need help to stop the problem.

We need **positive role models**. Many of us only look up to gangsters because those who have made it in our communities leave and go to live in the suburbs. **Schools and community leaders** should encourage achievers to return and help inspire us away from a life of crime.

**Schools, communities and NGOs** take up our time with good things so we don't have time for crime. Give us **extramural activities** and artistic programmes to grow our talents, especially in music, dance and drama.

**Big business and government** please help to fund these programmes so they also reach youth in rural and poor communities.



**Government** please make sure **family planning** is more accessible and that there is less judgment. Train and monitor nurses regularly so that they know how to help us when we go to them. **Nurses** please remember your oath of **confidentiality** – we need to know we can trust you with our secrets. We would also like to see health services for youth, by youth.

**Schools** give us easy access to **condoms** and encourage pupils to use protection. Young people are going to have sex, so please accept this, and help us protect ourselves.

To the **community**, **do not judge us** when we go to clinics to get condoms and we try to act responsibly. We are not encouraging sexual behaviour at a young age, but we do all need to be realistic. It happens and it is a normal part of growing up. Help us access the information and contraception that we need.

**Parents** please talk to us about the realities out there. Help us **build self-esteem**, self-love, and trust.

**Men** say no to rape. Find a willing partner, but **leave children and girls alone**.

**NGOs and communities** start more **support groups** that we can access easily, so we can get guidance and know how to react in situations that lead to teen pregnancy.

**Communities and media** let young women know that if they do fall pregnant **it is not the end – there are ways to get your life back on track**.



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# A call to action

*We are grateful for all the people who make a difference in our lives: the teachers who go the extra mile; the parents, who even despite their lack of education, are involved in our education; the government who protects us and builds facilities for us; the businesses who reach out to us; and the volunteers who mentor and support us.*

But we are still far from realising our dreams. We reach out to you to help us fulfil this generation's true destiny. We are not a lost generation. We are people with huge potential and great hopes. So we would like to say:

**To our parents:** We love you. We know a lot of you are doing the best you can do, and we appreciate this. We understand that you don't know everything. It's okay to ask for help. But there are some of you who are failing us and who are not being good role models. The use of drugs and alcohol among some of you affects us negatively. Maybe life has been hard on you. But please take responsibility. Be present. Parent us, and talk to us. Help us find information. Instead of telling us what we're doing wrong, show us how to do things right. Our learning starts at home. Also, accept that we live in a different generation to yours, and that we are facing different challenges. Don't try to make us live out your dream. We have our own dreams. Please be there for us. Don't judge us. We know that we have our flaws and many of us make mistakes; so let us try to find a way to work this out together. We need your love and support and encouragement to be the best we can be. We will do our best to make you proud.

**To our teachers:** We need you to teach us, every day. Please reinforce positivity, believe in us and show us the way. We will surprise you, because we want this education that you can give us. But please don't call us stupid, because some of us will end up believing you. You are our role models, and you have a powerful influence on us. So teach us, have faith in us and be patient, explain the things we do not understand. When you love your job, you can teach us what it means to be passionate.

**To the nurses we meet at the clinics:** We appreciate your knowledge and your care, but please treat us without judgement. Some of us would rather endure the pain than go to a clinic because of the treatment we get there! When we come to you for information or care, we need you to be professional. Keep our visits confidential. That way we know it is safe to return to the clinic to get the help we need. We need your compassion, your support, your respect and your patience.

**To our communities:** We need you to be united with us so that we can fight the problems out there together. Do not think of us as a lost generation. We are young, we may explore and experiment but with your guidance we can find our way. We may have dreams that are different from yours, our aspirations, thoughts and actions may differ because we are of a different generation. Please accept us for who we are and as though we were your own. A child is raised by the community. Don't isolate the ones who need your help the most.

**To the government:** We do see your efforts, but we need you to find better ways to provide the services that you have promised us – like equal and quality education, effective, youth-friendly and affordable health care, and job opportunities. Make your programmes more easily accessible to us and share the information in such a way that it can reach us. It is no use having programmes to help us if we don't know how to access them. Local councillors, take your role seriously and be proactive in your communities. All government services should put the people first. All political parties should work as a team to make this country move forward – we do not benefit from your fights!

**To businesses:** Some of you have reached out and sponsored us with bursaries, for which we are grateful. But we ask you to take an extra step. We would appreciate it if you could visit us and spend some face-to-face time with us. We need positive role models to talk to us about the world of work and the expectations of employers. Provide us with as many job-shadow options and opportunities as possible. Be our mentors, our motivators. Invest in charities that continue to fight social problems in our country. Remember, a little goes a long way.

**To the shebeen owners:** Be responsible. You are part of a system that destroys our society. Stop selling to minors.

**To the drug dealers:** Enough is enough! Stop destroying us. How would you feel if someone sold the most dangerous drug to your child?

**To the police:** We know it is not easy for you out there, we know many of you give your best to protect us. But we expect you not to take bribes. We ask those of you who are unhappy to be the change you want to see in your department. If you need more resources, training and manpower, then ask for them. Take your work seriously and protect the citizens of this country.

**To our peers:** Learn self-love and self-respect, because with that anything is possible. The positive change we speak of can only happen when we take ourselves seriously and we take up the opportunities that are out there. Go and look for them, make them work for you. Don't give up or sit back. Things will not just come to you. Don't fear failure – it is part of the learning process. Just keep going. Try again and again and again. We all need to do our best, because people are always learning from us. Don't be negative about where you are right now, or where you come from, none of that determines where you are going. Be positive. Dream big. And don't let anything get you down.

**To all of you:** Join the movement of change. And remember to join us in creative excitement – we will surprise you!