



OPINION

Youth Day: A hungry generation cannot build a prosperous future

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THIS year's Youth Day will be commemorated under the theme "RESET@50 – The Future Calls", encouraging young people to help reshape South Africa's future. However, a country cannot ask its youth to build the future while they are fighting hunger. I am not referring to an abstract hunger for change or progress, but the hunger for food.

Throughout my childhood, my peers and I have been reminded of the courage of the youth of 1976. We remember young people who refused to accept a system designed to silence them. We remember their activism. Youth Day is not only a day of remembrance but also a prompt to ask us what kind of country today's young people have inherited, and whether they have been given the tools to reshape it.

If the future is calling, how can we, the young people, answer? How can a child concentrate in a classroom while hungry? How can a young person innovate, lead, or dream when their body has been deprived of the nutrition it needs to grow? Before we speak about potential, leadership and living up to the great courage of our predecessors, we must speak about the thing that fuels it all – food. The right to food is not built only on morality or dignity, although it is deeply connected to both. It is essential for human life. Food shouldn't be a luxury, a reward or a privilege, yet today it often is. It is the foundation on which every other opportunity is built. However, this foundation must be secure to be effective.

To have food security, we need sufficient, safe, and nutritious food. Without that, education becomes harder, health becomes fragile, and development becomes unequal before a young person has even had the chance to help build the future. This is not abstract.

In South Africa, 27% of children are stunted, which is one of the clearest signs of nutritional deprivation. These children

are unlikely to reach their full growth and development potential because they have been deprived of proper nutrition over time. It is one of the most painful reminders that hunger does not only affect the stomach. It affects the brain, the body, confidence, learning, and that child's future.

For too many households in South Africa, food is negotiated against transport money, electricity, school costs and other basic needs. We must understand why this is. It is driven by systemic inequality, extreme poverty, unemployment, environmental challenges and agricultural pressures. It is also worsened by unsafe food systems. Food security is not only about having food available. It is also about whether that food is safe, nutritious, and able to sustain life. We can all remember outbreaks such as listeriosis, which showed how quickly unsafe food can threaten public health, especially for the most vulnerable.

My own connection to food has been a consistent and evolving thread throughout my life. Growing up immersed in diverse African contexts, I was privileged to witness the incredible richness of food as culture: food as celebration, memory, tradition and community. Yet, alongside this beauty, I also saw the painful realities of food insecurity. That duality shaped me. It taught me that food is not just sustenance. It is a powerful tool for health, belonging and systemic change.

Food is one of the quickest ways to affect the human body. We often say, "we are what we eat", but that statement becomes uncomfortable when we consider what many people are forced to eat, or what they are unable to access at all. A society that feeds people poorly should not be surprised when its people, particularly children, are held back. Yet, I do not believe food insecurity is a problem that should lead young people into hopelessness. If anything, it should call us into action. South African youth

have proved countless times that they are not waiting for permission to shape the country.

There are already examples of what this can look like. Linked to 16 June directly, volunteers in Sharpeville have transformed abandoned land into permaculture farming spaces, using land that was once neglected to grow food and serve communities. This matters because it shows that food security is not only a national policy issue. It can also be local, practical and community driven. It can begin with land, seeds, skills and people who are willing to act.

Young people can contribute by educating themselves and others, supporting urban farming, controlling personal food waste by using Agritech innovations and advocating for better policies. We need young people in laboratories, farms, boardrooms, classrooms, kitchens, community gardens and public debates.

Regardless of your personal career goals, you can create a role for yourself in this struggle. We cannot only respond to hunger once it has already harmed a child. We must become proactive and follow in the footsteps of our predecessors. We must use our collective voice and energy to help build systems that prevent hunger, protect nutrition and create opportunities. Youth Day reminds us that young people once stood up because they understood that education without justice was not freedom.

Today, we must recognise that education without nutrition is also incomplete. A hungry generation cannot build a full future. The future cannot call on the hungry. To reset South Africa at 50 years since 1976, we must do more than celebrate the youth. We must feed them, nourish them, equip them and trust them. Because to grow the youth, we need to feed the youth.

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