

Why every business should say 'yes' to tackling the youth employability challenge

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Recently, Tashmia Ismail, CEO of the Youth Employment Service or YES, shared a positive perspective at the 2019 Nation-Building Summit held by the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) in conjunction with Leaderex, against a backdrop of offering real-time solutions to youth unemployment. She stated that there is a way to climb out of this growth trap - provided everyone in the room says 'yes to YES' and shift the economy from pear-shaped to peachy...



Tashmia Ismail

Speaking on the subject, Ismail began by plunging into the truth of context: There's no denying the South African economy is decidedly pear-shaped, both literally and figuratively, at the moment, as we have a definite youth bulge, where those aged 15 to 24, which equates to a huge 35.7% chunk of the population, are effectively locked out of our very lopsided economy.

This was exposed in a recent *Time* magazine cover, which called South Africa the world's most unequal country as the current youth unemployment rate is in excess of 54%.

This means young people coming into the economy, supposed to be seen as the demographic dividend or 'tidal wave of growth' just isn't resulting in the anticipated economic growth rate spike. Instead, each year a million young people enter the economy without finding jobs. In places like Bushbuckridge, unemployment of young females is up to 73%, and 56% of the million youth entering the labour force each year actually haven't matriculated from school.

Ismail says we're at this point because the previously disadvantaged are still disadvantaged, as they're not in employment, education or training, yet they are your future customers and employees, the future custodians of the economy.

It's a sad picture, but that's where the Youth Employment Service or YES comes in.

YES: a trampoline for the youth to upskill themselves and gain experience

The Youth Employment Service effectively launches South Africa's youth into the world of work, helping them access that all-important year of skills and experience, as well as a credible CV and reference letter. This is crucial as employers and banks want some kind of currency they recognise, as proof that this is a person worth investing in.

"That's why," says Ismail, "we have to do more to create employment opportunities, and go the extra mile in doing so. We have a huge supply of youth, but they face spatial inequality as they're based far from the jobs that are in demand, most of which are for the highly skilled. The only way to get around this is to work through it."

Every business – big and small – needs to pull from this pool and give the youth a chance to show what they can do.

It's that simple, says Ismail – give a person a wage, and let them become contributors and participants in the economy.

In the past eight months, YES, together with business South Africa has effectively created 20,538 new jobs. That means over R1 billion has been put into the economy through the salaries of the young people now employed, and the YES initiative has only just gotten started.

10 reasons to say 'yes' to playing your part in inclusive economic participation

Ismail shared the following ten strong reasons to say 'yes' to YES:

1. Inequality and unemployment won't sort itself out miraculously. The worst thing we can do is to think: 'it's not my problem'.
2. Citizenship is not a spectator sport. South Africa's current unemployment levels are double that of Tunisia's before they faced the Arab Spring uprising – it's what happens when young people don't have pathways and don't have hope.
3. Only business South Africa can stop the economic slide to junk status.
4. If you invest in youth jobs, your B-BBEE levels will rise. This can be done meaningfully, with impact. More than 36 companies have seen their B-BBEE levels on the up, with over 500 companies registered for YES.
5. Create new future taxpayers – we need them. The currently lopsided economy results in a tax picture where only 3% of the population is contributing 80% of the overall personal income tax. That's certainly not sustainable, nor does it help us help people out of poverty.
6. Ismail shared the neuroscience truth, that giving is the secret to great happiness, as humans are wired to give.
7. Lots of companies are already involved in 'giving back' programmes, but tend to operate in silos to do so. The only way to really shift the needle is to work as a business coalition in collaboration, not as a lone wolf. With YES, this means there's scaled, amplified, exponential impact as a crowd through the YES platform, to give the youth that all-important chance to show the world what they can do. Think about what a burst of young energy can do for your business.
8. Because the cost of saying 'No' is your future – the future of SA means investing in these current youth. If GDP growth doesn't move, your company can't move forward. That's the scary bottom line.

Adds Ismail: "We grow the economy by giving people jobs; helping them learn a skill and become active participants in the economy. Every single business can join and contribute to the cause, whether in employing one person through or 3,300, as Nedbank did."

How your business can get involved in YES

YES offers many ways to give towards a common good, from investing in youth jobs to enterprise development in the YES hubs they're putting up in townships and rural spaces, bringing the necessary education and skills right into the heart of the community, effectively creating urban farming entrepreneurs equipped with digital coding skills.

Most of the youth involved in YES faced the Catch-22 that in today's age, you can't get a job without experience, and you

can't get experience without a job. That's why many of those helped by YES had been unemployed for years before learning about the opportunities it provides, in jobs they would otherwise not have had access to.

For example, many of the YES jobs happen through implementation partners in communities like Project Nomzamo, which then roll out the jobs by training youth in Mpumalanga have been trained as community health workers.

YES has also resulted in Tembisa-based science lab assistants for Deutsche Bank. With just a Matric, they're being trained for jobs they would otherwise never have had access to. A further 12 young women are learning how to produce sanitary pads and run a company that will be based in Tembisa.

"We just need a little bit of imagination, and for civil society to contribute – together, this is the type of thing we can do," explains Ismail.

Through their implementation partners, YES therefore takes the economic skewing of wealth, currently concentrated in the urban centres, and spreads it to community level. YES has already injected R1,002,734,040 into local communities so far, with 20,538 new work opportunities created. This means there are 20,538 new tax payers, with R1 billion allocated to salaries which in turn boost local economies.

Ismail concludes: "If you say 'yes' to YES, our economy can go from pear-shaped to peachy."

Watch Ismail's full presentation from SAICA's Nation Building Summit here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4C3It-0TV60>.

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