

NELSON MANDELA

UNIVERSITY

Welcome and Opening Remarks
Nelson Mandela Annual Youth Convention

“Rethinking Structural Inequality in South Africa: Towards Youth
Development and Social Justice”

2021 Edition

Professor Sibongile Muthwa
Vice-Chancellor, Nelson Mandela University

27 September 2021

10h00 – 13h00

- Our programme director,
- Mr Luthando Jack: Dean of Student Affairs
- Dr Bernard Sebake, *Director Student Governance & Development*
- Guest Speaker, Adv. Tembeka Ngcukaitobi
- Our esteemed panellists:
- MANCO members.
- SRC President, Bamanye Matiwane, members of the central SRC, SRC faculty and Oppidani representatives at Nelson Mandela University

- SAUS
- SRC's of the Higher Education sector
- Student Organisations and Societies
- Partners dealing with Youth Development e.g., Harambee, and NYDA.
- Students and youth organisations
- Youth Activists.
- Staff and students from Mandela University and sister institutions
- Convention attendees and participants

It is my pleasure and honour to welcome you all most warmly to this Nelson Mandela Annual Youth Convention, which is a high-level program for the Division of Student Life & Development here at Mandela University.

I feel confident that in this 2021 Edition of the Convention, aptly themed *Rethinking Structural Inequality in South Africa: Towards Youth Development and Social Justice*, you will ignite and harness your purposeful activism and innate innovation to regroup, consolidate and focus on continuous reconstruction, identification and leveraging opportunities, for the development and positioning of this most critical cohort of our population – our youth.

Please allow me a moment to thank our Nelson Mandela University team who have put together this purposeful programme, that I am sure will make a meaningful contribution to the desired outcomes over the next two days. To these colleagues and students, I say – we thank you for your efforts and your contributions. They are valued and appreciated.

As you embark on this convention you will be tackling some of the most intractable problems that our country, continent and the world have ever faced. For example, the call for social justice dates back many decades, while the reality of structural inequality as a stumbling block to genuine progress and equality remains as stark and intractable as ever. Perhaps the one positive that we can take from this, though, is that the pandemic has brought into sharp global focus, and revealed for the world to see, just how destructive these in-built inequalities and impediments are for historically marginalised both in South Africa and much of the developing world.

But even as we grapple with these challenges, we must realise the continental context for our youth is becoming more complex by the day. Many speak of the looming “youth bulge” in Africa. I’m sure many of you will have heard of it.

If, for example, one looks at the median ages by continent, then in 2021, *40% of Africa’s population is under the age of 15 years*, while only 4% is over the age of 65, as compared to 26 of the world’s population being under the age of 15, and 10% over 65.¹ The figure is hugely sobering. These under 15s are our future and we must begin thinking very seriously about the world they will be inheriting and the men and women who will be leading them.

Thione Niang, co-founder of Akon Lighting Africa, writes in the report that “youth in Africa are isolated and underrepresented in governance across the continent.”² *Sixty percent of Africa’s 1.25 billion people are under age 25—the youngest population in the world—but the median age of leaders*

¹ Proportion of selected age groups of world population in 2021, by region. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/265759/world-population-by-age-and-region/>

² Governance lags behind youth expectations and needs. Mo Ibrahim Friday, January 11, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/governance-lags-behind-youth-expectations-and-needs/>

in Africa is 62, older than the OECD median. However, Niang writes, “In many cases, the younger generation is more knowledgeable, equipped, and prepared to address the fast-moving issues of today than the establishment leadership.”³

By 2050 one third of global youth will be in sub-Saharan Africa and John Page, a senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program at Brookings, writes that Africa’s failure to industrialize combined with a growing population of more educated and urbanized youth “is a crisis in the making.”⁴

You who are attending this convention, who are elected leaders and representative of our youth, are those young people to whom these reports refer. Batons must be passed and new torches must be lit. Our future leaders must stand up and claim their spaces – but they must do so with gravitas that inspires trust and reciprocity.

A huge responsibility rests upon your shoulders – no, a huge responsibility rests upon *our* shoulders. Nelson Mandela University is fundamentally committed to social justice and equity.

The broader objective of our Vision 2030 is to build human capital for the African continent towards sustainability and global competitiveness. This strategic intent informs, aligns and directs all of our institutional initiatives, including those for student development – and this includes deliberate alignment to the value system of the Mandela University. We expect our students and our graduates to be positive, proactive and productive

³ Foresight Africa: Top priorities for the continent in 2019. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/BLS18234_BRO_book_007_WEB.pdf

⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2019/01/18/charts-of-the-week-africas-changing-demographics/>

disrupters of the daunting *status quo* which I have sketched above, for the growth and development of our region and Continent.

Secondly, Mandela University is part of the community and it is expected to contribute to the resolution of societal issues. This is the deliberate intention of our broader mandate and view of education as a national asset that inspires innovation and partnerships towards creating sustainable solutions for Africa.

We need then, to look to the future, to fixing those foundational pegs-in-the-ground; pegs such as moral fibre, ethical values and societal norms, committed social and corporate citizenship, and with all of that, respect for the rule of law.

You will therefore appreciate and understand, when we, as the Nelson Mandela community extend our very best wishes to you for a vibrant and productive convention.

I thank you.