

Youth show the way

THE idea that different races can't live and work together in peace and harmony was dealt a firm blow when 130 youth leaders from 45 organisations collectively defied the confines of their upbringing to stage a Natal Youth Convention.

Held over three days in July, youths from across the spectrum of political, religious, sporting and cultural organisations were enthused by the idea of non-racial interaction. On the agenda were the burning issues of the day – democracy, tolerance, youth empowerment, development and reconciliation.

Everyone agreed that racism and apartheid had no place in South Africa and that the process of change should be accelerated. However, a sharp argument began when a PAC representative said there would be no reconciliation until the land was returned to the African people.

A 17-year-old white student asked "What can I do to ensure that you get your land back because I have no land myself? I am a student. Let us make peace in this country." An IFP Youth Brigade representative said: "We need to accept the wrongs of the past without getting stuck there, and then move forward."

Delegates were unanimous that they should begin the process of working with other youth organisations in the region.

Simon Ntombela



YOUTH CONVENTION: Idasa's Steve Collins and Simon Ntombela at the opening

THE picture of black youth that emerges from the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (Case) study is very different from the popular stereotype of red-eyed anarchists hellbent on political confrontation and violence. Some are frustrated (three percent), confused (four percent), angry (two percent) and violent (one percent) certainly; but many are ambitious (21%), happy, caring, confident and honest.

However, more than a million black children have primary level education only.

sector

- Exploring the possibilities of sub-contracting work out to black-owned or women-owned small enterprises;
- Establishing a register of black- and women-owned businesses;
- Emphasising the need for manufacturing skills in the country;
- Developing the personal involvement of the whole community in business, rather than hand-out situations

Finally, the symposium agreed that affirmative action should not be seen as involving the relaxing of standards or tokenism. Rather, it should be seen as practical business sense to take optimal advantage of the resources in society. Business should also nurture a positive attitude towards change, understanding that it is necessary to overcome the imbalances and inequalities of the past.

Sandy Wren is regional co-ordinator in Idasa's Port Elizabeth office.

Frustrated, confused... also happy, caring

Extracts from a speech to the Youth Convention by Silas Zuma, director (planning) at the Education Foundation in Johannesburg.

Each year almost a quarter of a million (225 000) drop out of high school. Some 350 000 each year either fail matric or don't receive an exemption to study further.

Then there's the plague of unemployment: around three million young black people are unemployed. Some 15% of these have been without work for six years or more. The situation is worst in the 16 to 19 age group, where more than 80% are unemployed. By contrast white youth unemployment stands at a modest four percent.

The inequity continues in the workplace. Of the black youth who are working, 82% earn below R1 500 a month, while 75% of employed white youth earn more than R1 500.

Over half a million South African youngsters (about 515 000, of whom 465 000 are African) have fallen entirely through the cracks in society. They have no hope for the future and no regard for social, political or legal processes. Roughly 2,9 million (of whom 2,5 million are African) are already marginalised from these processes and urgently need systematic help.

A further 4,7 million (of whom 3,2 million are African) are at risk of marginalisation and must be reached as a matter of urgency. Only 2,7 million (1,6m African) are functioning well.

The level of dissatisfaction among the youth is very high. Some 62% of black respondents to the Case survey said they felt that they could not fulfil their potential. Interestingly, 44% of their white counterparts felt the same way. The main reasons given for this inability were lack of money, unemployment and poor education.

Dangerous ignorance is the condition of many of the youth. The Case survey revealed that 300 000 had never heard of AIDS. Of those who had, the majority believed they were not at personal risk.

Given this picture, any political, social or economic process that is not accompanied by measures to develop and empower our youth will fail. By contrast, attention to the development of our human potential, and that of our youth in particular, will elevate South Africa to the ranks of winning nations.

The recommendations I propose are not meant to be prescriptive but simply to serve as ideas for consideration by this convention.

The first is the establishment of youth development working groups. Youth leaders have a responsibility not only to mobilise youth into protest marches and demonstrations but also to mobilise youth into working groups to develop meaningful programmes aimed at development and empowerment of the youth.

The second is the establishment of a youth development fund. Thirdly, there has to be professional and technical support for youth development. Finally, there is a need for facilities. All available facilities should be used until late in the evening, on weekends and during holidays to the best advantage of all our youth.