

Speech by Executive Chairperson of the NYDA at the World Youth Development Forum, 1 November 2023 in Beijing, China

Our Host, the All-China Youth Federation (ACYF)

Vice President of the All China Youth Federation, Mr Whoo Paiting

Director of UNESCO Multisectoral Regional Office for East Asia, Mr Shahbaz Khan

Minister of Youth in Libya, Mr Fatalla Elzuni

World Youth Development Forum (WYDF) Organizing Committee

Supporting Partners which include United Nations Agencies, and the International Labour Organization (ILO) – among many other distinguished partners

Youth organisations and partners from around the world

Distinguished guests, friends and comrades

Members of the media

Allow me to greet you in isiZulu, Sanibonani. This person-centred greeting, directly means, “I see you.” I see and recognise all of you – those in the venue and on the virtual platforms.

Thank you for the invitation and privilege to address this Forum. We look forward to sharing knowledge and learning from best practices concerning youth participation and sustainable development. South Africa and China celebrate 25 years of diplomatic relations, but it is worth noting that this relationship stems from China's support to the South African people in fighting Apartheid.

In his visit to South Africa in August this year, Secretary-General of the ANC, Comrade Fikile Mbalula said that "President Xi's visit is one of comradeship between the two Presidents in strengthening this important relationship which spends decades of years between the African National Congress and the Communist Party of China".

NYDA and International Relations

The organisation I am representing today, the National Youth Development Agency in South Africa, broadly shares similar objectives as the World Youth Development Forum. Although we were established by an Act of the South African Parliament in 2008, ours is also to mainstream and champion youth development in South Africa (SA).

We conduct this work through measures aimed at economic transformation, job creation and entrepreneurial support, research and development, skills development and training. In the past, almost all of this work was done within the borders of South Africa.

However, thanks to technological advancements in mainly transport and ICT, our world has become smaller, and several challenges facing young people are not unique to our country alone. That is why we have, in the last years, initiated efforts to promote youth development in regional, continental and international arenas and bodies.

We have established and continue to nurture relations with regional organisations (both interstate and youth – such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and National Youth Services and Unions), the African Union (AU) and its organs, agencies – in addition to structures of the United Nations and more recently BRICS.

In August 2023, South Africa hosted the 15th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg. Leaders of BRICS member states agreed to the clarion call for the “finalisation of the BRICS Youth Council Framework” and recognised the ‘BRICS Youth Council as a forum for meaningful engagement on youth matters and recognise its value as a coordinating structure for youth engagement in BRICS’.

The objectives of the council will be to drive youth participation among BRICS member states through trade, investment, education, and exchange opportunities.

These building blocks of greater continental and international solidarity are important steps, but they need to be advanced.

Cultural Innovation

Culture plays an important role in our lives and societies. Those of us who are from nations that have a history of Colonialism or Apartheid know this too well. Cultural practices, artefacts, values, symbols and languages were outlawed and vilified when not stolen.

Moreover, creatives, cultural practitioners and artists have played significant roles during moments of conflict and periods of oppression. Those who resisted and engaged in liberation struggles know that these battles were not solely waged through arms, but culture informed and sustained their efforts.

We know that through culture and its expressions, such as art, we can view every day and even global challenges through a different lens and re-imagine solutions to political, social and economic challenges.

While it has correctly been noted that several major global conflicts today have a cultural dimension, it is equally true that arts, culture and heritage can contribute to reconciliation, and efforts to build more peaceful societies and world.

Importantly, for several countries from the global South, innovation, cultural and creative industries can create much-needed employment opportunities. A study conducted by South African universities found that the cultural and creative industry contributed 1.7% to the country's GDP between 2016 and 2018 while creating 1.3 million jobs. Unlike, a country with a population size of China, that number is significant in the context of SA. In BRICS countries and several others around the world, this sector contributes more than double that.

We raise our call on governments, businesses and international institutions to not only continue but increase support for the arts – especially in rural and underdeveloped areas. Furthermore, the focus must be on the youth (girls in particular) along with persons living with disabilities. Importantly, we call on you to do more to bring young people across the world up to speed with technological advancements in the world - the Fourth Industrial Revolution. That is because access to, participation in, and enjoyment of the arts, cultural expression, and the preservation of one's culture, language and heritage are basic human rights in South Africa; they are not luxuries, nor are they privileges.

Societies and the world stand to benefit from deeper social cohesion, re-imagined community identities and restored dignity. These are all ingredients that are necessary for mutual solidarity and sustainable development.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

But there is still a long way to go if we are to achieve the goals that were produced at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2012.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres wrote that: “Progress on more than 50 per cent of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient; on 30 per cent, it has stalled or gone into reverse.”

The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 states that: “Culture and respect for cultural diversity, however, remain undervalued and underutilized in the push for Goals-related progress. Greater consideration of culture’s role in supporting the achievement of the Goals – including within relevant indicators – would generate an important boost for implementation of the Goals between now and 2030.”

The Report has, rightly, listed the contribution of culture to the achievement of sustainable development as one of the Priority Actions.

Conclusion

I am looking forward to the speeches and dialogue this afternoon. But before I sit down, a best practice we have in SA that I’ll share is the motto on the South African Coat of Arms/ State Emblem.

It is “!ke e: /xarra //ke” which translates into “Unity in diversity”.

Translated directly, it means, “Diverse people unite.”

This Forum has connected young people and organisations across different cultural, linguistic, social, religious, and political divides. “Diverse people unite!”

Unite without necessarily being uniform and celebrate your diversity without fragmenting!

Let us shift our unity beyond the minimal stance of tolerance and acceptance towards a position that appreciates that our differences have the enormous capacity to enrich our interactions and reinforce our vision.

It is our belief, contrary to some sentiments, that culture can play a central role in solidarity and partnerships among young people. Innovation will drive this noble cause.

Congratulations to the organisers once more for implementing this remarkable forum and we hope the youth of the member states represented will benefit from these discussions.

Thank you.