

Has the Government failed our youth?

By Dr Narissa Ramdhani, CEO Ifa Lethu Organisation

South Africans are a creative lot. One only has to stop at a traffic light, stop sign, or visit one of our numerous craft markets alongside highways, backroads and city centres to see hand crafted items for sale at low prices. A strong component of our tourist industry, often the sale of these crafts is the only means of family support for many rural people. Passed down from generation to generation, the skills we see are surviving are due largely to necessity and a will to feed families. Community leaders express their fears that these skills will dwindle and die as young people find the promise of city life and earnings too strong to even learn these age-old creative skills.

Many art pundits dismiss crafts as tourist 'tat' not worth commenting on or considering as art. But it is this creativeness that produces often beautifully crafted items that needs nurturing and refining to lift it into the sphere of 'export quality art' to be proud of and to fulfill the creative spirit that can be channeled into sustainable, market-ready income for individuals and their communities. Let us consider Youth Day and Heritage Day. They come around every year in June and September. We all take a day off work and spend as we see fit. The ANC Youth Leagues has its rally in June. Our leaders take every opportunity to stand on a podium somewhere during these days and tell the world what they are doing for our youth. A warm glow of after-promise lasts until realization that there is no job to go to the next day for many of these hopeful young people. There's no income, and many turn to the easy street of petty crime and drugs.

For creative youngsters it destroys their souls. They have spent years drawing, painting, carving, designing, singing, dancing, writing and dreaming of converting their talents into a meaningful and fulfilling living. How do our young people, especially those from rural areas, get started in the creative field? How do aspiring fashion designers learn their art? What support can they count on?

While we have national and regional events such as that in National Arts Festival— where do youngsters go the rest of the 50 weeks of the year? Not all can get a place into our already overcrowded tertiary education institutions; many do not even have a Matric level academic pass. Mathematics and science aptitude is not often possessed by creative young people, and Matric (NSC) is therefore a real trial for them. With perhaps a handful of Arts high schools in the country, drama, music, dance, and visual arts learners often struggle through their secondary schooling. Given the parlous state of our education system, the value of skills such as creative ones are even more enhanced.

As the largest creative entrepreneurial development organization in the country, and recognizing the contribution that creativity can make to both national impact priorities such as poverty alleviation, the Ifa Lethu Foundation has added to its mandate, the development of creative entrepreneurs. This was undertaken through the recognition that the creative industry contributes R2 billion to the national GDP. Three years ago we started with our first intake of artistically talented youth from Mamelodi, using our struggle era artists to teach and mentor them in all aspects of painting, drawing, sculpting, etc. This was followed by business skills taught by our partners from the University of Pretoria. We have just opened three incubators in Mamelodi, Soweto and Ngove in Limpopo, where our learners will use the facilities to produce market-ready cultural products. A graduate of our programme, Michael Selekane, who has enjoyed a successful entrepreneurial path, will be addressing FTSE 100 CEO's in London in Heritage month on the strength of South Africa's cultural sector. Our Fashion Design graduates, having passed through a rigorous series of workshops in Durban are going on to find lucrative careers in the fashion industry. We have partnered with Professor Lee Berger at Wits University to produce much needed skill in the fossil casting industry, several of whom have been employed by the Origins team and other related sectors.

While this fills us with excitement, as we see creatively talented youngsters realize their dreams and begin to support themselves and their families, we know it is not enough. The creative sectors can be of great benefit to South Africa's tourism industry, can assist with poverty alleviation, and feed the soul of a nation. Many pockets of assistance such as these projects by Ifa Lethu exist across the country, some into the depressed rural areas. But where is our government in all this? Where is the consistent and sustainable funding needed to make a real difference? Each year organisations compete against charities, sports organisations, events at funders like the National Lottery. Each year they go cap in hand to corporates to fund creative projects. Government and Corporates need to take concrete steps to support work of NGO's that seek to manage the expectations of our country's youth. For failure to pay attention to our youth will drag us into an endless quagmire of decline. One has only to look at the more recent examples of North Africa and the Middle East where it has demonstrated that drowning out the voices of youth of the country or removing them from national conversations can only be done at great risk to a country.

South African history owes its youth an enormous debt. We are the inheritors of a phenomenal legacy entrusted to us in 1976. Yet we continue to forget the power of these youth. If we are going to really provide our them with realistic opportunities that will empower them and feed their souls, we need a government that understands that a nation needs the creative spirit and passion we are slowly killing through lack of national commitment.

In delivering the ninth Nelson Mandela lecture recently, Ismail Serageldin, the Director of the New Library of Alexandria, Egypt, urged youth to continue being revolutionaries and creating a better world, this in response to their role in toppling the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt. He recognized youth as the

vanguard of the great global revolution of the 21st century and so doing, urged SA to provide youth with a higher purpose than mere material gain. This, he justifiably pointed out, could be done by educating them on democratic values and social justice. And this is advice we need to heed with much seriousness.

About Ifa Lethu Foundation: Empowering the Nation's Soul

Dr Narissa Ramdhani is the CEO of the Ifa Lethu Foundation.

Ifa Lethu, a nonprofit Foundation based in Tshwane, South Africa is devoted to the national development and economic growth of the creative sectors in the country.

Ifa Lethu today manages the largest heritage repatriation and creative entrepreneurial development efforts in South Africa with collections having been repatriated from countries such as the United States of America, Canada, France, Australia, Spain, Holland, the United Kingdom and Germany. Further collections have been identified across the globe and every endeavour is made by Ifa Lethu to facilitate their repatriation to their home country.

Recent activities marked a rapid growth and an extension of our mandate, which has resulted in the Foundation focusing on the provision of skills for creative practitioners so they may become successful entrepreneurs. This extension has allowed the Foundation to align its work with the national priorities of poverty alleviation and community upliftment and the Millennium goals. Creative Entrepreneurship training initiatives are ongoing in the visual arts, fashion design and small business skills. In addition Ifa Lethu's is committed to its education of the public and specific local and international communities through their extensive programme of exhibitions, workshops and conferences.

Ifa Lethu is headed by CEO Dr. Narissa Ramdhani and Chaired by Amb Dr. Lindiwe Mabuza.

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