

A lost generation:

Review of *Black Youth in Crisis, Facing the Future*

by Mamphela Ramphela (ed.)

Isaac Mogotsi & Reuben Mogomo

The essence of the crisis facing black youth in South Africa is well captured in this readable book. Prominent commentators of the South African social scene have collaborated to produce this timely piece of work.

Chapter One: Social Disintegration in the Black Community

The first contribution by Dr Mamphela Ramphela, deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, analyses the crisis and alienation afflicting black youth. She lucidly exposes the factors which account for the disintegration of the black community in South Africa.

These factors include demographic, economic and human development influences. Ramphela also catalogues indicators of social disintegration of the black community, such as the high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, under-performance in all spheres of life, the high crime rate, despair and the flight of skills and positive role models from these depressed communities.

Ramphela also analyses developments that have impacted on black communities such as the rise of the black consciousness movement, the involvement of youth in politics, the 1980s uprising and heightened political competition amongst black groupings. All these influences undermined and weakened the coherence of black communities.

Faced with social disintegration and the violence stemming from it, black people have adopted various survivalist strategies. This included resort to tradition and customs to maintain a semblance of self respect, resort to crime and the dizzying vacillation between resistance and acquiescence. The author acknowledges the short-term potential of some of these strategies for the purpose of survival. She highlights, however, the destructiveness of these strategies on their users in the long run.

Ramphela argues that "the opening up of the political space is a key factor in

the social disintegration of the black community". This is allegedly because of the mismatch between political liberalisation and the non-fulfilment of rising expectations as well as constraints in socio-economic development.

Ramphela concludes that an important starting place en route to a new South Africa is "to recognise the residual capacity within the black community to respond to positive intervention. This capacity resides in individuals, support groups and organised pressure groups".

Chapter Two: Living on the Wrong Side of the Law

The author, Steve Mokwena, opens with chilling statistics about the extent of youth participation in violence, as well as the extent of their marginalisation. These figures bring home forcefully the seriousness of the issue.

Apartheid, both at the level of legislative acts and through informal repression, is seen as primarily responsible for black youth marginalisation and violence. The author highlights the societal threat posed by youth marginalisation through figures indicating the appalling black matric performance, the level of unemployment amongst black youth and the proportion of black youth in the overall black population.

The marginalisation of black youth is seen in the context of the politicisation of issues affecting the black community. Youth and student involvement in politics became a powerful factor in the struggle of the oppressed against racist rule. The youth, according to the author, "not only directed, but also shaped the political mood of the township".

This had a profound impact. Traditional and customary instruments of control declined in importance. The township family, church, street and school became arenas of struggle. The author shows how this process led youth to challenge all forms of authority. The strategies of 'ungovernability' and 'people's war' further politicised the youth. In turn these strategies exposed the youth to the repressive measures of the apartheid regime. This crisis was also manifested in youth gang activities and street violence.

Unlike the author, we would argue that the involvement of the youth in the political struggles of the 1980s cannot be viewed uncritically as causing the marginalisation of black youth. By offering youth an avenue for self expression and making them feel useful, placing youth at the centre of things as it were, this involvement in the struggle for political change, in fact, 'de-marginalised' the youth. The article should have concentrated more on marginalisation as the "comprehensive disempowerment of black communities, in particular, the youth". How did such disempowerment come about and how is it entrenched? Not only the symptoms, but also the causes of marginalisation should be analysed in some detail.



What is of most value to the development of the country is the provision of basic primary education. *Photo: Market Theatre Photo Workshop*

Chapter Three: Education and Employment

Ken Hartshorne's introduction gives a fresh perspective to the debate on 'school systems' and their relation to work. He argues that the "debate on education and work cannot be contained within a simplistic discussion of 'academic' versus 'technical', vocational or career education". For him, "a relevant, effective academic 'education' provides the background of language, mathematics and science that many modern work situations demand. What matters is how they are learned and taught, and whether they are capable of being used outside the school. What is perhaps of most value to any country and to the economy is the sound provision of basic primary education (literacy, numeracy and basic life skills) which provides a platform on which further education and training can take place; yet this is often defined as academic".

The author, however, over-emphasises languages, maths and sciences. This can be interpreted as a very narrow view of the requirements of the 'world of work'.

Some careers like journalism or child minding do not require extensive knowledge of maths and science.

The article does caution, nevertheless, that too much is expected of schooling, especially in third world environments with high levels of underdevelopment and unemployment. This is important, as conventional wisdom wants us to believe that massive literacy campaigns can single-handedly 'kickstart' the economy. Such totally unrealistic perceptions are likely to heighten expectations which are never going to be met.

Chapter 4: Marginalised Youth and Unemployment

Riordan Rory's account of a multi-faceted problem - unemployment - reminds us of the endemic crisis in our society which threatens to further marginalise a large section of our population.

Rory suggests that economic policy should be informed by the close monitoring of the success of present policies in job creation, the explicit quantitative targeting of job creation policies, a comprehensive public education programme aimed at redirecting public energy and resources to feasible and/or effective job creation policies and a restructuring of particular policies and employment processes at the level of macro-economic data analysis and government budgets.

*The authors of this article both work for the
Project for the Study of Violence at Wits University*

*Black Youth in Crisis, Facing the Future is published
by Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1992.*