

Thirty and thriving – or barely surviving?

Aarti Bhana

When Bawowethu Jonas was growing up, he had dreams of becoming a cricket player, a psychologist, a presenter on *YoTV Land* or a lawyer.

He was self-motivated and wanted to make something of himself, to help people and live a good life. He believed South Africa was a place of hope and opportunities and, if he worked hard and hustled like everyone around him, he would be able to achieve his dreams.

Last month, he turned 30, but his dreams remain out of reach. He is unemployed and every day must contend with the economic and educational hardships of being a young, black person in South Africa.

“I wanted to be a lawyer and then, right now, at this age of 29 years to 30, I had to change my dreams to become something else.

“Now I want to be a political analyst because I’ve lost hope of becoming a lawyer – but I will be the lawyer at some time, I know I will be,” he said.

Jonas grew up in Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape with his father and step-mother, who was an ANC activist. He believed that South Africa was on the right path because she was involved in politics. After completing school, he registered for a law degree at Unisa but had to drop out because he couldn’t afford the fees.

“It’s not that I don’t have capabilities to achieve this, it’s because of the resources. Education is expensive. Education now is like buying water, buying bread and buying eggs. I couldn’t finish my LLB because of fees ... but I’ve gone back to school to study another course,” he said.

The majority of South Africans living in poor areas have limited access to education, but in the past three decades key reforms such as the establishment of no-fee schools, school nutrition programmes, improved access to scholar transport, implementation of the child support grant and introduction of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme have enabled more people to access the system.

According to a Statistics South Africa report, *A Profile of Education Enrolment, Attainment and Progression in South Africa* published last month and based on the 2022 census, those aged 25 years and



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older who were able to attain at least secondary education increased from 21.5% in 1996 to 48.1% in 2022. More notably, black Africans in the same age group who achieved secondary education increased from 9.4% in 1996 to 34.7% in 2022.

Furthermore, the data shows that women are also making significant strides in obtaining tertiary education. In 2022, 13.1% of females attained tertiary qualifications, compared with 12.3% of males; in 1996, 6.7% of females and 8.6% of males obtained a tertiary education.

It’s encouraging, but it’s also a slow process, especially when it comes to economic involvement.

Rene Mpofu has her master’s and is on her way to becoming a lawyer, but recognises inequalities in the system.

“I think the weird part is not being able to translate that [her achievements] into tangible wealth.

“At 29, my parents owned property and had cars. I can’t do that. I have a car but property is so unattainable now – especially when you don’t have a dual income.”

She said it needed to make economic sense to live in South Africa.

“I expected to at least be in the beginning stages of my career and having a home. I’m still at the beginning but the challenge is actually that, now, to compete in South Africa, you need to have post-grad and other stuff, especially as a woman of colour in corporate, which

has yet to transform,” she said.

Mpofu also pointed to the problems of safety and security.

She is torn between leaving South Africa and staying.

Other 30-year-olds are seeking opportunities for growth and change.

Angela Martins was born in a small town in the North West, but later moved and schooled in the south of Johannesburg. She attended a public school and was told that it will be tougher to get a tertiary education as a result of this background. Nevertheless, she pursued her dream of studying hospitality, but her career trajectory changed on the back of economic instability. Now Martins is a sales operations manager for a software company, but she is content with her life.

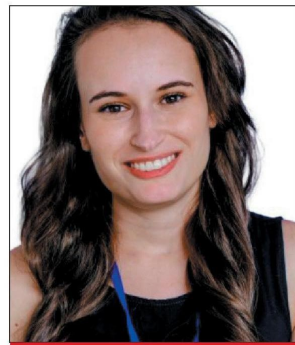
She said her dream was to be able to experience the opportunity for growth and stay in beautiful cities and watch South Africa lead in more areas.

“As a young person it seemed that the country was on an upward trajectory. I focused on heading to the hospitality industry to be part of welcoming tourists and prove why South Africa is a great place.”

She said she never thought to immigrate and rather travel around South Africa, but would like to see improved infrastructure to support



RODNEY BENGANGA
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growth across the board for the people in her generation and those after to drive South Africa forward.

“It is sad to see so many talented people relocate,” she said.

The Inclusive Society Institute conducted a survey in February which found that an increasing number of young and talented South Africans are leaving the country. The main reason is for better job opportunities and an improved standard of living. Poor governance and the failed state were also cited as reasons for wanting to leave.

According to the survey, South Africans aged 18 to 24 were more than two and a half times as likely to consider emigrating compared to those over 50.

Although some of the sentiments around South Africa’s governance and economics remain negative, there are some 30-year-olds who believe that South Africa still holds beauty and potential and leaving it is not an option.

Rodney Benganga always had plans of working in accounting and finance, and now holds the position of assistant manager in transfer pricing at EY.

Growing up, he said he always saw South Africa as a rainbow nation, and that the diversity always stuck out for him, and as an adult this has hardly changed.

“I hold on to two things that keep me in South Africa: my chosen family and my career. These are the people

that make me feel at home whenever I’m around them and then my career presents great opportunities that I still want to explore.

“Also I have so much pride in things that are just truly South African: my culture, the country’s food and the people. As shit as the problems are, there is still much to love about our country.”

Jayde* agreed with Benganga’s sentiments.

“I always perceived South Africa to be colourful and well-integrated. As a child, I never felt a sense of division between myself and my friends, and there was no sense of social, racial, or economic inequality. It felt as though everyone belonged.”

Jayde was born in Krugersdorp, but lived in Durban for a while before moving to Johannesburg, and now has a secure job as an operations manager, which he is said is an achievement in itself.

He didn’t go to university and had to rely on his own skills.

“I was raised by a single parent, who didn’t have access to funding. I’ve had to rely on natural talent, hard work, and informal training to succeed. But, the older I get, and the more opportunities become slimmer, the more I realise this is a priority.

“This is tricky because how does a young person, living in a single-person household, fund education and survive daily, with the current cost of living? Buying your first home also seems close to impossible.”

His biggest concerns are the increasing cost of living, limited employment opportunities, as well as the effect of poor service delivery on his ability to earn.

“I’m also concerned about my ability to save for retirement, and what SA will look like in 35 years when it is time for me to stop working.”

The future prospects for the youth seem uncertain against the backdrop of a tight jobs market, a slow economy, poor governance and crumbling infrastructure.

It’s easy to lose hope, but people like Jonas said the youth should think for themselves in this election.

“We do not own anything, so young people must go out and say, ‘This is our chance, this is our time.’

“My vote is my weapon to say I want jobs. My vote is to say that we want a free South Africa.”

*Jayde is not his real name.