

**Keynote Address by the Minister of Small Business Development, Ms Stella
Tembisa Ndabeni
Youth Empowerment Session
28 June 2026**

Programme Director,
The Premier of the Free State,
The Executive Mayor of Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality,
Members of the Provincial Executive Council,
Councillors present,
Representatives of government departments and entities,
Youth development partners,
Young entrepreneurs,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

It is a privilege to join the young people of Mangaung and the broader Free State Province here at Grassland Community Hall as we gather for this important Youth Empowerment Session.

We meet during Youth Month, a period in which we honour the courage, sacrifice and determination of the young people of 1976. They stood up against injustice and changed the course of our country's history. Their struggle reminds us that young people have never been passive observers in South Africa's journey. Young people have always been at the centre of change.

Today, we honour their legacy by continuing the work of freedom.

The generation of 1976 fought for political freedom.

The generation of today must build economic freedom.

That economic freedom must be visible in our communities. It must be visible in townships, in villages, in informal settlements, in small towns and in cities. It must be visible here in Mangaung. It must be visible across the Free State.

Programme Director,



Young people must know where to go for support.
They must know how to register and formalise their businesses.
They must understand tax compliance.
They must know how to access funding.
They must know how to access markets.
They must know how to move from an idea to a sustainable enterprise.
That is what practical empowerment looks like.

Programme Director,

One of the greatest challenges confronting South Africa remains youth unemployment. Across our country, there are young people with skills, ideas, creativity and ambition, but too many remain excluded from meaningful economic opportunities.

Some young people cannot access finance.

Some cannot access business development support.

Some do not have markets.

Some do not have mentors.

Some do not have information.

Some are operating informally and need support to become compliant, sustainable and competitive.

As government, we must continue to close these gaps.

Young people do not lack talent.

Young people do not lack ambition.

What many young people lack is access.

Our task is to unlock that access.

This is why the Department of Small Business Development continues to place youth entrepreneurship at the centre of its work. We are committed to building an ecosystem where young people are supported to start, sustain and grow businesses that create jobs and strengthen local economies.

Programme Director,

To make government support easier to access, we established the Small Enterprise Development and Finance Agency, known as SEDFA. This was done by bringing together Seda, sefa and the Cooperative Banks Development Agency into one institution.

This means that entrepreneurs now have one entry point for business development support, finance, market access and enterprise growth.

Instead of young entrepreneurs moving from office to office and from institution to institution, SEDFA is designed to provide integrated support throughout the business journey.

This is important for young people in Mangaung and across the Free State. Whether you are operating a business in retail, agriculture, manufacturing, construction, digital services, tourism, the creative sector or any other area, you need support that is coordinated, accessible and responsive.

Through SEDFA and our broader ecosystem, we want to ensure that small businesses are not only started, but are able to survive, grow and create jobs.

Programme Director,

Our work as government is guided by one clear principle: opportunity must reach every community.

Through the Township and Rural Entrepreneurship Programme, we continue to support enterprises operating in communities where economic opportunities have historically been limited.

Through the Construction Fund, we are opening opportunities for emerging contractors to participate meaningfully in the construction sector.

Through Imbali for Her, we are expanding access to finance and business development support for women entrepreneurs.

Through youth-focused programmes and funds, we are investing in the next generation of entrepreneurs.

These programmes are not just about funding. They are about building businesses that can stand, compete and grow.

They are about ensuring that a young person from Grassland, Botshabelo, Thaba Nchu, Mangaung, Welkom, QwaQwa or any part of the Free State can believe that their business idea matters and that their future matters.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we gather here today, we must also recognise the role of local economic development.

A strong national economy is built from strong local economies.

When a young person starts a business in their community, they do more than create income for themselves. They create services closer to people. They create jobs. They support local suppliers. They inspire other young people. They help keep money circulating in the local economy.

That is why youth entrepreneurship is not a side issue. It is central to inclusive growth.

The Free State has important opportunities in agriculture, agro-processing, tourism, logistics, construction, renewable energy, manufacturing, township enterprises and the creative economy. Young people must be supported to enter these sectors not as spectators, but as owners, producers, suppliers and innovators.

We must move young people from the margins of the economy to the centre of economic activity.



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Programme Director,

Today's programme also gives young people an opportunity to ask questions, make comments and provide inputs. I want to encourage young people to use that opportunity fully.

Do not sit quietly when you need information.

Ask where to apply.

Ask what documents are needed.

Ask how to become compliant.

Ask how to access funding.

Ask how to access markets.

Ask how to improve your business plan.

Ask how to move your business from survival to growth.

Government programmes can only assist you when you step forward and engage.

Information is power, but only when it is used.

To the young entrepreneurs here today: formalise your businesses. Keep proper records. Understand your customers. Know your costs. Separate business money from personal money. Build partnerships. Use technology. Be disciplined. Be consistent. Be honest.

No fund can replace discipline.

No programme can replace hard work.

No opportunity can succeed without commitment.

Programme Director,

Yesterday, we reflected on the importance of the Peo Pele Youth Fund, which speaks directly to the economic aspirations of young South Africans.



The name Peo Pele reminds us that every successful business begins as a seed. It may begin as a small idea, a skill, a dream or a solution to a problem in the community.

But with the right support, that seed can grow into a business that creates jobs, transforms families and strengthens communities.

The Peo Pele Youth Fund builds on the foundation of the Youth Challenge Fund and responds to the lessons we have learned: funding alone is not enough. Young entrepreneurs also need mentorship, business development support, technical assistance, market access and guidance.

That is why the Fund combines finance with non-financial support. It recognises that young entrepreneurs are at different stages. Some are still developing an idea. Some are already trading. Some need equipment. Some need working capital. Some need markets. Others need support to expand.

The Fund has been designed to meet young entrepreneurs where they are.

Over the next three years, government will invest approximately R900 million into the Fund, with R300 million envisaged for this year. Approximately 750 youth-owned enterprises are expected to benefit, and the programme is expected to create and sustain around 1,500 jobs.

This is a direct investment in the future of young people.

Programme Director,

The future economy will be shaped by young people who are prepared to innovate, adapt and build.

Young people must be ready to participate in sectors such as digital technologies, the green economy, agri-tech, advanced manufacturing, health and biotechnology, the creative industries, the blue economy and the circular economy.

These sectors are not only for big companies. Young people can participate in them through small businesses, cooperatives, start-ups and community-based enterprises.

A young person with digital skills can build a service business.

A young person in agriculture can use technology to improve production.

A young person in the creative industry can turn talent into income.

A young person in construction can build a compliant and competitive enterprise.

A young person in tourism can help tell the story of the Free State to visitors from across the country and the world.

The opportunities are there, but young people must prepare themselves to seize them.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we speak about economic empowerment, we must also speak about democratic participation.

As we prepare for the Local Government Elections later this year, I encourage every eligible young person to participate actively in our democracy.

Your vote shapes your municipality.

Your voice shapes service delivery.

Your enterprise shapes the economy.

Both democracy and entrepreneurship require participation. We cannot complain from the sidelines and refuse to take part. Young people must be active citizens and active builders of the economy.

Programme Director,

The testimony by a youth SMME beneficiary in today's programme is important because it reminds us that these programmes are not just policies on paper. They affect real people. They can change real lives. They can open real doors.

When one young entrepreneur succeeds, that success becomes a message to others that it is possible.

But success requires more than support from government. It requires discipline, resilience and a willingness to keep going even when the journey is difficult.

Every successful business started somewhere.

Some started in a back room.

Some started at a kitchen table.

Some started at a street corner.

Some started with one customer.

What mattered was not the size of the beginning, but the determination to keep building.

To the young people of Mangaung and the Free State: do not underestimate your ideas. Do not underestimate your skills. Do not underestimate your ability to build something that can change your life and the lives of others.

The next great manufacturer could come from this province.

The next major farmer or agro-processor could come from this community.

The next digital entrepreneur could be sitting here today.

The next employer of hundreds of young people could begin with a small idea discussed in this very hall.

As government, we will continue working to expand access to finance, reduce red tape, strengthen business support, improve market access and build partnerships that support youth entrepreneurship.

But government cannot dream your dream for you.

Government cannot wake up on your behalf.

Government cannot run your business for you.

That responsibility belongs to you.



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The generation of 1976 fought for political freedom.

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Let this Youth Empowerment Session be more than a programme. Let it be a turning point. Let it be the moment where more young people decide to move from waiting to working, from ideas to action, and from unemployment to enterprise.

The future of South Africa is in the hands of young people.

The future of the Free State is in the hands of young people.

Go out and build it.

I thank you.