SOUTHERN AFRICA YOUTH FORUM (SAYoF)

STATEMENT BY THE YOUTH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA PRESENTED BY HON. THEMBELA MSIBI, ON BEHALF OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICA YOUTH PARLIAMENT (SAYP) AND THE SOUTHERN AFRICA YOUTH FORUM (SAYoF) AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE 59TH PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE SADC PARLIAMENTARY FORUM ON 21 NOVEMBER 2026 IN EZULWINI, KINGDOM OF ESWATINI

SALUTATIONS
Guest of Honour,
Honourable Speakers and Presiding Officers,
Honourable Members of Parliament,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
All protocols observed.

It is an immense honour to address this esteemed Assembly on behalf of the vibrant, resilient and determined young people of Southern Africa. I extend greetings from the Southern Africa Youth Parliament (SAYP), hosted by the Southern Africa Youth Forum (SAYoF). We thank the SADC Parliamentary Forum for consistently providing young people with a platform to contribute to regional parliamentary processes.

Since the 56th Plenary Assembly in Livingstone, Zambia, young people have been welcomed into this Forum as genuine partners, contributors and leaders in our own right. For this, we commend the SADC PF's visionary leadership.

Guest of Honour, Distinguished Delegates,

This growing recognition comes at a defining moment for our region. Southern Africa is rich in youth talent, creativity and ambition, yet unemployment, poverty and economic exclusion continue to stifle this potential. According to SADC, youth unemployment reaches 62.5% in some Member States, while informal employment exceeds 90% in others. The International Labour Organisation further estimated that 34% of young people aged 15–24 in its Southern Africa subregion were neither employed, nor in education, nor in training in 2023.

These figures reveal a troubling reality: despite greater access to education and skills, too many young people remain excluded from meaningful economic opportunities. This is more than an employment crisis. It is a crisis of opportunity, dignity and hope.

We therefore call upon our Parliaments to prioritise youth employment, entrepreneurship, skills development and economic inclusion, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing, technology and the green economy. Young people do not seek sympathy. We seek opportunities to transform our talents into livelihoods and shared prosperity.

Guest of Honour, Distinguished Delegates,

Economic opportunities cannot flourish without peace, stability and inclusive governance. From eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to northern Mozambique, conflict and insecurity continue to disrupt education, destroy livelihoods and threaten young people's aspirations. Despite these challenges, young people are demonstrating remarkable resilience and leadership. They are mobilising communities, fostering dialogue, preventing violence and championing democratic participation.

We are architects of peace, agents of change and leaders in shaping our region's future. The time for symbolic youth inclusion has passed. We therefore urge our Parliaments to urgently institutionalise meaningful youth participation in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and democratic decision-making. Decisions about our peace, security and future cannot continue to be made without us. Peace cannot be built for young people without being built with them.

Just as peace creates the conditions for opportunity, technological progress offers new pathways to prosperity. Artificial intelligence and digital innovation are reshaping economies and the future of work. However, the benefits of this transformation remain unevenly distributed. According to the International Telecommunication Union, only 53% of African youth aged 15–24 used the internet in 2024, compared with 79% globally. How can our generation compete in a digital economy when so many remain disconnected? We rely on parliaments to champion affordable digital connectivity, digital skills, innovation and responsible technology governance. The digital revolution must become a bridge to opportunity, not another frontier of inequality.

Guest of Honour, Distinguished Delegates,

As we embrace emerging opportunities, we cannot ignore the environmental challenges that threaten our future. Recurrent droughts, floods and food insecurity are already disrupting livelihoods across Southern Africa. The scale of this vulnerability is undeniable. In its 2024 regional assessment, SADC reported that approximately 67.7 million people faced food insecurity, underscoring the devastating consequences of climate-related shocks and other pressures on livelihoods. In response to these mounting challenges, young people are pioneering innovations in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and climate resilience. A generation that will live with the consequences of today's climate decisions must have a meaningful voice in shaping those decisions.

Guest of Honour, Distinguished Delegates,

These interconnected challenges reinforce the fundamental reality that sustainable solutions require young people to participate meaningfully in shaping them.

We commend the SADC Parliamentary Forum for its growing commitment to youth inclusion through its partnership with SAYoF, endorsement of the Youth Caucus and support for the development and utilisation of the Youth Development Scorecard.

We reiterate our call for the establishment and operationalisation of National Parliamentary Youth Caucuses across SADC Member States, building on the success of National Women's Parliamentary Caucuses and the RWPC. Youth Caucuses will provide the foundation for a dynamic SADC PF Regional Youth Caucus. The ultimate goal is to build a coordinated, sustainable framework that translates young people's voices into meaningful parliamentary representation, legislative influence and concrete policy action at national and regional levels.

As the SADC PF advances towards its transformation into a SADC Parliament, youth representation must be embedded in its foundations, not added as an afterthought.

Guest of Honour, Distinguished Delegates,

As I conclude, I reaffirm that the youth of Southern Africa are not only the leaders of tomorrow but also partners in shaping today. We envision a region where every young person has the opportunity to learn, innovate, thrive and lead; where peace and prosperity are shared by all; and where the energy, talent and aspirations of our youth drive Southern Africa's transformation.

As we look to the future, let us deepen and institutionalise meaningful youth participation, ensuring that young people are active partners in shaping the policies, priorities and institutions of our region. *"Nothing for us, without us!"*

We commend the SADC Parliamentary Forum for its unwavering commitment to youth inclusion and for championing a future in which young voices are heard, valued and empowered to lead.

I thank you.
Siyabonga. Ke a leboha.