

## **Youth speak up at HEAIDS National Youth Conference:**

HEAIDS hosted the first of its kind National Youth Conference from the 09-11 June in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal. The conference aimed to bring together delegates to interact, share best practice and evidence based educational, academic, curriculum, health (structural, social HIV and general health and wellness) initiatives and interventions that are critical and relevant for the post schooling sector at large.

Under the leadership of Conference Chair, Dr Yogan Pillay, Deputy Director General of the National Department of Health and Co-Chair, Ms Andile Mthombeni, a Master's Research Student at Wits University we witnessed a new chapter in African History. It was the beginning of an open dialogue between young people and policy makers exploring all the evidence based solutions we have in our arsenal.

Over 3700 young people from all walks of life in South Africa, including young people from 50 TVET Colleges, 26 Universities; Schools and Community Organizations, joined hands to have an open dialogue with various government, academic and civil society leaders on issues challenging our young people: addressing social factors that increase adolescent and youth vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Evidence has clearly shown that most of our new HIV infections are coming between the age group of 15-24, demonstrating the vulnerability of adolescents and youth in South Africa. Also in attendance were 500 academics from the 26 Universities and 50 TVET Colleges and 300 policy makers from government departments.

Under the theme "Ukuhlonyiswa Kwabasha" Empowering our youth in South Africa - Sharing innovative practices towards Youth Empowerment; Economic Empowerment; health, education, health promotion, knowledge generation and capacity building amongst our young people within South Africa" - young delegates rose to the challenge, outlining a myriad of challenges they face daily. A number of themes were raised during the open dialogues, workshops, satellite sessions and artistic exhibition.

The young delegates at the HEAIDS conference consolidated their main objectives in a declaration that was presented to Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, Minister of Health; Mr Mduduzi Manana, then Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training and Mr Buti Manamela, Deputy Minister in the Presidency responsible for Youth. Ms Andile Mthombeni, HEAIDS conference co-chairperson emphasized that these pledges should be monitored closely to ensure implementation saying "we as the youth need to hold our policy makers accountable".

Youth delegates of the HEAIDS National Youth Conference called upon political leaders to pledge their sustained and full-hearted commitment towards achieving the following objectives:

1. Implementing free education for the economically vulnerable, as we understand that HIV status and financial status are interlinked

2. Supporting us in implementing women empowerment programmes that include men, so that they can actively participate in discussions on gender and the fight against patriarchy
3. Addressing patriarchy and male privilege within our own government, so that our policy makers can understand the importance of fighting Gender Based Violence and empowering women and young girls
4. Creating emergency medical and counselling services for survivors of Gender Based Violence that are accessible to students and young people
5. Finding a sustainable solution to provide sanitary towels for our female students at universities, colleges and schools
6. Addressing the needs of LGBTI persons and holding universities and colleges accountable to respond to these needs
7. Making the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) accessible to all youth in South Africa, so that those that don't have access to the internet can also apply for the NYDA grant programmes
8. Helping us in activating the youth sector of the South African National AIDS Council
9. Funding regular youth summits and dialogues at universities, TVET colleges and schools to give youth the opportunity to raise their concerns directly with our political leadership
10. We would like to propose that the results of the government in achieving these goals will be monitored regularly and evaluated by an autonomous National Youth Forum.

HEAIDS Director, Dr Ahluwalia, understood the importance of these demands saying "We take these declarations incredibly seriously and will endeavour to work with our partners to ensure implementation. We have long believed that the traditional top-down approach is severely outdated and that if the pandemic is to be halted, a new approach will have to be taken," He added "It is clear that our current HIV/ AIDS interventions are not adequately reaching our young people, especially in the TVET sector," .