AFRICAN YOUTH DECLARATION
ON DEBT REFORM AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Council for World Mission | Africa Region Youth Initiative

Pretoria, South Africa | 18–21 October 2026

Theme: Youth Reimagining Economies of Life

Preamble

We, young people from across Africa, gathered in Pretoria, South Africa, from 18 to 21 October 2026 under the auspices of the Council for World Mission (CWM) Africa Region Youth Initiative and the theme “Youth Reimagining Economies of Life”, declare our commitment to economic arrangements that protect human dignity, uphold justice and secure the future of our continent. As young people, students, workers, theologians, activists and members of faith communities, we speak from the realities of our societies and from a shared conviction that the present economic order must be transformed.

We gather at a time when African societies possess immense human and natural wealth, yet many young people struggle to have access to resources, e.g., access to decent work, quality education, affordable healthcare, access to land, and opportunities to build livelihoods. We refuse to accept the passive title of "leaders of tomorrow" while decisions concerning our debt, natural wealth, climate, and institutions are negotiated and locked away. At the same time, the servicing of public debt can compete with investments necessary for the flourishing of communities. Our generation is expected to repay obligations it had no opportunity to scrutinise and inherit public institutions weakened by decisions taken long before it could participate in them.

We stand in the long line of young people who refused to accept the arrangements they inherited as natural. Therefore, we declare that our responsibility does not begin tomorrow; it begins now!

Context Analysis

Debt challenges of Africa are inseparable from the historical and contemporary structures of economic power. Colonial dispossession and extraction established unequal patterns of production and trade that continue to shape the continent’s place in the global economy. Africa exports raw commodities while much of the value derived from them through processing, finance, and technology is captured elsewhere. The global economic system imposes uniform rules on countries with unequal economic capacities, placing low-income African nations at a disadvantage and forcing them to rely on borrowing to meet their development needs. However, this unwanted situation cannot excuse corruption, opaque borrowing, wasteful expenditure or the concentration of wealth by African political and economic elites. Debt justice requires accountability in Africa and beyond.

The human consequences of debt are evident when governments face pressure to reduce public spending on essential services, e.g. education, health, food security, water and sanitation, and climate resilience. The burdens of these decisions do not fall evenly. Youth, women, and girls often absorb additional unpaid care responsibilities when public services diminish. Rural

communities, people with disabilities, informal workers and unemployed young people experience forms of exclusion that overlap and reinforce one another.

We therefore ask not only how much a country owes, but ***who*** borrowed, on ***whose*** terms, for ***whose*** benefit and at ***whose*** expense!

Theological Analysis

Our theological discernment begins with the conviction that "the earth is the Lord's" (Psalm 24:1) and that land and its resources are entrusted to humanity for the flourishing of all (Leviticus 25:23). The Jubilee tradition in Leviticus 25 challenges permanent dispossession, while Deuteronomy 15 associates debt release with the protection of those exposed to poverty and enduring dependence. These biblical traditions do not provide a mechanical formula for modern sovereign debt. They offer a moral standard by which systems of ownership, lending and repayment must be judged: economic relationships should restore dignity and protect life rather than make deprivation permanent.

In Luke 4:18–19, Jesus announces good news to the poor and release to the oppressed. His promise of life in its fullness (John 10:10) directs the Church toward the material conditions in which people live. Economic structures that normalise preventable suffering, exclude communities from decision-making or protect accumulation at the expense of life demand prophetic scrutiny. In the spirit of the Belhar Confession's witness to unity, reconciliation and justice, we recognise that reconciliation without economic transformation leaves the sources of division untouched. For us, debt reform is therefore an economic, political, ecological and theological responsibility.

Denouncements/Rejections

We propose the following:

- **We denounce** the systems of debt, austerity, and extraction that keeps Africa dependent.
- **We denounce** the conditionality and structural adjustments that put a heavy economic burden on the most vulnerable and marginalised.
- **We denounce** a global financial system that demands equal obligations from unequal economies, forcing vulnerable nations to compete and comply under rules that fail to account for their limited economic capacities and development needs.
- **We denounce** the climate injustice where those who did least to cause the crisis suffer the most and are forced to borrow money for survival.
- **We reject** the claim that these realities are natural, inevitable, or merely technical. They are a product of choices.
- **We reject** the language of waiting. Calling young people, the leaders of tomorrow excludes them on decisions about debt, resources, land, technology, and climate that are made today, and that is deferring their agency. There's a difference between preparing young people for leadership and perpetually postponing/delaying it.
- **We reject** the idea that youth unemployment is a youth problem. This problem exposes the architecture of our economies and their shortfalls in being unable to create enough dignified work, regardless of the injustices of the past.

Affirmations

We affirm that:

- **Human dignity must come before debt repayment.** Economic policies and debt arrangements must protect people's dignity, access to essential services such as education and health, equal opportunities for all, and respect their fundamental rights.
- **Young people must not bear an unjust burden for decisions they did not make.** Debt policies must account for inter-generational justice.
- **Young people are participants in decision-making, implementation and not merely recipients of its consequences.** Youth must have meaningful representation in national budget processes, debt negotiations, economic policy discussions and development planning.
- **Faith communities have a responsibility to advocate for economic justice.** Churches and other faith-based institutions must use their moral influence, community networks and practical resources to promote accountability, solidarity and the protection of vulnerable communities.
- **The convergence of the Belhar confession's message** of reconciliation,justice, and unity with our struggle for economic liberation and ecological stewardship
- **That Africa's vast** mineral wealth, agricultural potential, and youthful population must be harnessed to generate broad-based human flourishing and localised value addition rather than external enrichment.

We affirm that Africa's young people are not merely the inheritors of debt; they are agents of transformation who must be empowered to shape a just, equitable and sustainable future. We commit to carrying the insights of this initiative into wider ecumenical engagement, including conversations associated with the 40th anniversary of the Belhar Confession, and to holding one another accountable for action beyond this gathering.

Calls to Action

We have noted the injustice. The injustice on innocent young people denied access to essential services and basic needs such as healthcare, proper nutrition, education, opportunities, life and demand that measures are taken to change the narrative. This calls for input from the Church, the Youth and the Government.

+To the Youth

- **Rise and Organize:** Refuse passive waiting; mobilize across communities, campuses, and churches to build robust networks for ecumenical action and grassroots economic transformation.
- **Take responsibility:** Demonstrate trustworthiness and capacity to attract inclusion, gain trust, and earn the government's confidence to be entrusted responsibility
- **Build Alternatives:** Move from critique to construction by fostering youth-led cooperative enterprises, local-currency financing initiatives, and localized knowledge production.
- **Full participation:** Take part in decision making processes at national level and beyond. Question decisions and demand transparency.

To the Churches

- **Embody the Prophetic Witness:** Transform churches into sanctuaries of economic justice, active mentorship, and safety nets that support first-generation students and marginalized youth.
- **Preach the Economy of Life:** Embed contextual Bible studies, Jubilee economics, and decolonial theology into regular worship, leadership training, and educational curricula.
- **Hold Powers Accountable:** Stand in solidarity with grassroots movements, acting as an intergenerational bridge that amplifies marginalized voices against austerity and debt oppression.

To the Governments

- **Pursue Aggressive Debt Relief and Restructuring:** Immediately implement comprehensive debt relief, restructuring, and cancellation mechanisms to free up fiscal space for essential public services.
- **Pass Binding Private Debt Legislation:** Introduce national and regional legislation compelling private creditors to join debt relief processes on fair and equal terms.
- **Establish Debt Workout Mechanism:** Champion the creation of an independent, transparent, and binding multilateral framework for sovereign debt crisis resolution.
- **Conduct Transparent Debt Audits:** Publish accessible information on public borrowing, debt servicing, loan conditions, and the use of borrowed funds.
- **Protect Adequate and Sustainable Financing for Essential Services:** Shift priority to services that uphold human dignity such as healthcare, education, and youth development.
- **Establish Meaningful Mechanism for Youth Participation:** Include youth in national budgeting processes, debt oversight, and economic policy making.

Conclusion

The central question before Africa is not simply whether its economies can grow, but **whose** lives that growth sustains, **who** owns its productive wealth, **who** bears its risks and **who** is permitted to shape its future. A just economy is one in which public borrowing serves people, public resources are governed openly, creation is protected and young people inherit genuine opportunities rather than the cumulative cost of exclusion. That future requires international financial reform and an equally serious transformation of domestic governance.

We draw courage from the spirit of the struggle refrain "***Kubi, siyaya***": the conditions are difficult, yet we move forward. Our declaration is a commitment to continue that movement through solidarity, scrutiny of power and practical action. From Pretoria, we raise a collective call for economies of life in which justice is measured by the flourishing of people, communities and all creation.