

A world in need of trailblazers

 By [Francois van Dyk](#), issued by [Ornico](#)

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"I am not young enough to know everything." Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900)

The Global Employment Trends for Youth 2013, issued in May 2013 by the International Labour Office (ILO) in Geneva, Switzerland, paints a bleak picture. Titled "A generation at risk" it cites some disturbing numbers, which include 73 million young people without employment this year.

Of particular concern to the ILO is that in developing regions, where 90% of the global youth population lives, stable, quality employment is especially scarce - even part-time employment is rare. However, it is not just developing countries that are in crisis, even in developed economies like the European Union youth unemployment rates are at a decades high.

Though tough economic times and slow recovery from recessions do not help, there are several other factors which contribute to the startling youth unemployment rate. An obvious one, which I have experienced on a regular basis is a complete lack of skills to fill vacant positions. There is usually a severe shortage of skilled candidates for available positions, e.g. engineers, while other industries suffer from an oversupply of candidates, many who end up unemployed as all positions have already been filled with better applicants.

The root of this problem is outdated primary and secondary educational systems which have seen very little change in decades with the same old text books, subjects and curricula being used for generations. Young people leave these systems poorly equipped to face a rapidly changing world, with little or no financial knowledge, entrepreneurial skills and barely able to string an understandable motivational letter together when applying for a job.

A further reality is that as many jobs become obsolete: think typing pools; and new ones are created: for instance social media; governments are poorly equipped to handle the unemployment crisis. They rather opt for easy but unsustainable solutions like a bloated, inefficient civil service which puts more strain on already burdened tax payers. Governments should focus on creating an entrepreneurial culture where business can easily be created without too much red tape.

Global events have seen a very active role being played by the youth, from changing old political orders, protesting 'capitalist exploitation' and urging a new environmental awareness. It may come as a surprise to some that despite facing even bigger challenges than their counterparts in the rest of the world, African youth also see a sustainable financial system and environmental concerns as a priority and are actively working on securing this future.

Kali Ilunga, a young entrepreneur I've had the pleasure of working with, is one of the shining examples of a new generation of trailblazers who are ignoring traditional convention and are making things happen.

Ilunga, a new media strategist, entrepreneur and speaker, was barely seventeen when he launched his first entrepreneurial venture, a magazine called "War Cry" aimed at single-sex schools. Though it only lasted a few editions it gave him some valuable lessons for future enterprises.

He soon realised the value of the mobile phone as a device that can drive massive change on a continent where a traditional telecommunication infrastructure is sorely lacking. Not getting the support for a learner driving initiative which he wanted to launch through television stations, he turned to popular social media platform MXIT to distribute the educational content and had a massive response with more than 100,000 downloads in the initial weeks of launching the guide.

Kali also launched Spoken Ink publishing in 2005, a company voted number 34 on the 'SA FAST GROWTH 100 Companies' by the All World Network. Moombah.mobi, another project, delivers educational content via mobile phones to

users across the continent and these mobile campaigns have seen millions of downloads.

He then became Managing Director of EXP Digi in 2011, a Live + Digital Agency, which facilitates relationships between brands and consumers in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana.

At barely 26, Ilunga's innovative solutions has not gone unnoticed and he received the Endeavour Excellerator Entrepreneur award in 2009 and also a Harvard University SA Fellowship in 2011. Kali also made the Mail & Guardian 200 Young South Africans list in 2011.

His latest venture, SeeSayDo, which is headquartered in New York, is a start-up focusing on mobile advertising.

Ilunga has shared his entrepreneurial adventures at several conferences across Africa and the USA where he gave talks on Digital Africa, Marketing to Young People and Entrepreneurship.

There are many other examples of young people like Kali though. Kenya in particular can take pride that seven of its young entrepreneurs made the recently released Forbes 30 Under 30: Africa's Best Young Entrepreneurs, listing 30 young entrepreneurs making an impact on the continent. It was indeed notable that many of their entrepreneurial activities were focused on doing business unusual.

Some notable mentions from this list includes Lorna Rutto (28) whose EcoPost recycles plastic waste and manufactures environmentally friendly fencing, engineer Evans Wadongo (26) who created a solar-powered LED light which is becoming very popular in rural Kenya and even Ecofuels Kenya, producing environmentally friendly fuel, which is being run by Cosmas Ochieng (26). Not to be outdone is Joel Mwale (20) who runs SkyDrop Enterprises, a rainwater filtration and bottling company which produces low-cost purified drinking water, milk and other dairy products.

African governments in particular should ask themselves how they are going to smooth the way for these fearless young people to do business. The World Bank's "Ease of doing business index", which rates countries' regulatory environment being conducive to doing business, shows the long road still ahead, for Africa in particular. Kenya's rating dropped from 117 in 2011 to 121 in 2012, Ghana's fell from 63 to 64, Nigeria stayed stable at no 131 and South Africa increased marginally from 41 to 39. If we want to see youth unemployment eradicated, governments should revamp primary and tertiary education, ease regulations and provided incentives for entrepreneurship. The private sector can't overlook its responsibilities either, and should do their utmost to invest in new start-ups and foster skill development - in the long run it all makes financial sense.

ABOUT FRANCOIS VAN DYK

Francois van Dyk, heads up Operations at Ornico, the Brand Intelligence research company. He is part of the management team that has seen Ornico expand across Africa, currently with data resources in 14 countries and employing more than 100 media enthusiasts. He studied and lectured public relations before entering the world of media research. Contact details: Twitter @sbalie
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