

# Africa's jobless youth cast a shadow over economic growth

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Youths account for 60% of all of Africa's jobless, according to the World Bank. In North Africa, the youth unemployment rate is 25% but is even greater in Botswana, the Republic of the Congo, Senegal, and South Africa, among others. With 200 million people aged between 15 and 24, Africa has the largest population of young people in the world.



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In most African countries, youth unemployment “occurs at a rate more than twice that for adults,” notes the African Development Bank.

African governments are confronting unemployment in many different ways. In Senegal, with 200,000 Senegalese joining the labour market each year, President Macky Sall launched a programme in February 2013 to create 30,000 jobs within a year and possibly 300,000 by 2017. The African Development Bank (AfDB) is financing some of Senegal's self-employment programmes for youth and women.

Young women feel the sting of unemployment even more sharply than young men. The AfDB found that in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa and all of those in North Africa, it is easier for men to get jobs than it is for women, even if they have equivalent skills and experience.

Africa's unemployment statistics exclude those in vulnerable employment and those who are under-employed in informal sectors. "Young people [in Africa] find work, but not in places that pay good wages, develop skills or provide a measure of job security," reports the Brookings Institution, a Washington-based think tank.

The Brookings Institution considers under-employment a problem serious enough to warrant greater attention, since it masks the reality in countries that post low unemployment rates.

More than 70% of the youth in the "Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Rwanda, Senegal and Uganda are either self-employed or contributing to family work," adds the Brookings Institution report.

## **Under-employment masked**

Gabriel Benjamin, a jobless university graduate in Lagos, Nigeria, says it is common to find young Nigerian university graduates doing menial jobs. "They clean floors in hotels, sell mobile telephone calling cards—some even work in factories as labourers."

But under-employment is not a solution to poverty, notes the International Labour Organization (ILO), which reported in 2016 that up to 70% of African workers were "working poor", the highest rate globally. The organisation added that "the number of poor working youth has increased by as much as 80% for the past 25 years".

Mthuli Ncube, the chief economist at the AfDB, had this to say: "This is an unacceptable reality on a continent with such an impressive pool of youth, talent and creativity."

Alexander Chikwanda, Zambia's former finance minister, put it succinctly in an interview: "Youth unemployment is a ticking time bomb", that now appears to be perilously close to exploding. The analogy draws attention to the consequences of high youth unemployment in a continent where about 10-12 million young people join the labour market each year.

"As events in North Africa [the Arab Spring] have shown, lack of employment opportunities can undermine social cohesion and political stability," the AfDB had warned in 2016.

The militant group Boko Haram, for example, has found it easy to recruit jobless young people, noted Ahmad Salkida, a Nigerian journalist who has had rare access to the group.

A number of African governments have, however, made some efforts to match words with action. Ghana, for example, created a national youth service and empowerment programmes to equip college graduates with requisite skills and help them find jobs. Mauritius developed a plan to encourage technical and vocational education for young people. Zambia introduced a national youth policy and a youth enterprise fund to stimulate job creation.

## **African leaders intervene**

The jury is still out as to how much of an impact such national initiatives have had on youth unemployment. Ncube warned against high expectations. There are "no quick fixes," he advised, and recommended "stronger job-creation mechanisms." The World Bank proposes a jobs strategy that pays more attention to rural development. Investment in agriculture slows down youth migration into urban areas and prepares young people for the contemporary labour market.

Young people migrating into Africa's urban areas aggravate city unemployment. They often confront obstacles, including discrimination due to their inexperience, according to *African Economic Outlook*, a publication of the UN Economic Commission for Africa. Even those who are lucky enough to find employment are the first to be laid off when economic growth derails.

Focus on manufacturing, urges the Brookings Institution, because it is "the industrial sector which is most closely

associated with employment-intensive growth.” It also urges more investment in agriculture, tourism and construction, and in projects that employ young people. “Public works programmes provide opportunities for young workers, particularly rural residents and people with low skills, to acquire initial work experience.”

The African Union also lends its voice to the call for more investments in agriculture. The AU requests its members to allocate 15% of their national budgets to agriculture.

## **Mobilising youth**

Ghanaian opposition politicians used the country’s high unemployment rate to mobilise the youth against former president John Dramani Mahama in the country’s December 2016 presidential election. Joblessness was one of the main issues that drove the country’s many young people to the polling stations to press for a change of government that ushered the current leader, Nana Akufo Addo, into office.

During the election campaign some Ghanaian opposition politicians frequently cited a 2016 World Bank report on the employment situation in the country. Authored by Maddalena Honorati and Sara Johansson de Silva, the report stated that only “52% of people aged 15-24 were employed, compared to 77% of the entire population,” meaning that 48% of these youths did not have jobs. Although the authors attributed the high youth unemployment rate to the fact that about one-third of the youth were active in school, the figure nonetheless underscored the challenge facing the country.

“I fear for the future of this country,” candidate Akufo-Addo warned before the elections, “We must do something about the current unemployment rate in Ghana because if care is not taken, something bad may happen.” That may have been a subtle reference to some countries in Africa (Nigeria and Somalia, for example) where young people are easily recruited to join armed groups or rebel forces.

A World Bank survey in 2011 showed that about 40% of those who join rebel movements say they were driven by a lack of jobs.

Source: [Africa Renewal](#).

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