

Youth and Employment in Africa: The Potential, the Problem, the Promise

In Africa, 200 million people are aged between 15 and 24 years, comprising more than 20% of the population. Africa's population is growing fast and is experiencing a slow demographic transition, which will increase the pressure countries face with job creation. The large majority of the youth lives in rural areas and is mostly employed in agriculture, for which they account for 65% of total employment. Young people are, however, not an homogeneous group and their employment prospects vary according to several factors ranging from region to gender to schooling, thus requiring different policy interventions. Nevertheless, the median African youth is easily identifiable: she is an 18.5-year-old female living in a rural area, literate but not attending school.

Stylized facts suggest that:

- Youth make up 37% percent of the working-age population, but 60% of the total unemployed.
- Youth unemployment is much more prevalent in urban areas.
- Youth in rural areas work longer hours and spend a lot more of their time in household work.
- Rural youth attached to agriculture are disadvantaged as compared to those in non-farm activities.
- Urban youth enjoy greater educational opportunities and stay longer in school.
- Youth experience higher levels of unemployment and underemployment and a much greater concentration in the informal sector than adults.
- Young people are more likely to work longer hours under intermittent and insecure work arrangements, characterized by low productivity and meager earnings.
- Young women work more hours than young men, are more likely to be underemployed, and more likely to be out of the labor force.
- The youth start to work early (a quarter of children ages 5-14 are working), especially in rural areas.
- Young migrants are more likely to be unemployed and out of the labor force than their non-migrants counterparts.
- Among the youth, females and the rural face particularly stronger challenges especially because of early motherhood and lack of educational and job opportunities.

The worst working conditions and lack of opportunities in rural areas have encouraged the youth to migrate to urban centers. But, because most countries have not yet initiated their transition to industrialization, urban centers can not create a massive number of jobs. Thus, in the short term, only rural activities, farm and non-farm, can effectively create occupation for most new job seekers.

Given the challenges faced by the youth in labor markets, success in pursuing employment for young people will require long term, concerted actions, spanning a wide range of policies and programs. Indeed, success will not be achieved and sustained through fragmented and isolated interventions. An over-arching guideline for addressing the youth employment challenge is the need for an integrated strategy for rural development, growth and job creation – which covers the demand and the supply sides of the labor market and takes into account the youth mobility from rural to urban areas – combined with targeted interventions to help young people overcome disadvantages in entering and remaining in the labor market.

An inventory of interventions designed to integrate young people in the labor market suggests that comprehensive, multiple service approaches tend to do better than fragmented interventions. In Latin America, the *Jovenes* Programs, for example, have been widely analyzed as a successful story in assisting young workers in developing countries. They use a demand-driven model that targets economically disadvantaged youth, fosters private sector participation, and promotes competition among training providers. It has been successful in improving job placement and earnings, but has become particularly expensive for some countries where it has been replaced by smaller and more focused interventions.

Modern agriculture has considerable potential for job and wealth creation and may absorb large numbers of would-be youth migrants or youths who currently crowd the cities with underemployment. Making well balanced choices for employment-intensive investments in agriculture and rural nonfarm activities can create immediate short term employment opportunities which can be more easily tapped by young people. Combined with appropriate local economic development strategies, it can generate more and sustainable jobs. This requires strategies to make agriculture an attractive enough option for youth to engage in, including moving away from subsistence agriculture, and introducing commercialization and productivity improvements through technological changes and infrastructure support. By creating jobs and educational opportunities, rural areas can increase their attractiveness to young workers, thus eventually delaying the rural-urban migration, which is a very critical issue should governments want to mitigate and prevent youth urban unemployment and underemployment to grow, and the well being in the already congested African cities to worsen. Investing in rural education will also create better opportunities for people to migrate more successfully and contribute to the economic growth of cities.

Besides expanding rural job opportunities, it is also necessary to improve the investment and macroeconomic environments; encourage and support entrepreneurship and the informal sector; improve access to education and skills; address the demographic issues, including early motherhood; tackle the problem of youth in violent and post conflict settings; and improve the labor market conditions. These are the most needed policy responses to tackle youth employment issues in a sustainable manner in Africa.