Obstacles to employment among African youth

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Abstract
One of the major problems in Africa is unemployment among youth that leads into a lifetime of chronic underemployment and incomes barely covering minimal food and shelter needs. The present article reviews the major causes of unemployment among youth aged 18-31 as the basis for a longer range research project on the problem. The present article finds that the basic problem is the inadequate formal education but especially the lack of technical skill training. Many African youth have no experience of participating in youth groups to learn cooperative skills. Without adequate skills and good work habits, the quality and quantity of products are not competing in the world market, which further lowers employment opportunities. The present survey is based on research which covers all of sub-Saharan Africa.
Keywords: Unemployment, Africa, youth, income, skill, education

Introduction

Many would argue that one of the most serious social problems in Africa is unemployment among youth aged 18 to 35. Not only are they unable to guarantee an income to help the family they are born into, but they are unable to plan to start their own family. As we will note in the analysis of the harmful effects of long unemployment on African men and women, the youth are wandering from place to place looking for any form of income and are afraid to take up the responsibility of family or community involvement. Many African youth out of desperation end up in the dirtiest, most dangerous and poorly paid work. This leaves a permanent mark on them (Garcia and Fares, 2008: 53-59).

Information technologies are now the foundation for African economic growth and young people are much more capable and open to ICT sectors of the economy. It is important to get youth moving into these areas so that they not only develop these skills but become creative in adapting ICT to all areas of

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productivity. The present article attempts to examine more systematically the major factors in the frequent and prolonged unemployment of youth in Africa. The argument is that poor education, especially the lack of technical education, is the major factor in unemployment. But there are many other factors as well.

The important role of education

All the data point to the fact that the higher the level of education, the better the life opportunities and the better the job opportunities. The higher the literacy and numeracy, the better the job opportunities (Resnick and Thurlow, 2015). However, the education of lower-status youth is inadequate due to the fact that they usually must accept public school education with crowded classrooms and less experienced teachers. African school children tend to have limited cognitive skills (ability to reason through a problem) on entering school and do not develop "problem solving skills in the schools" (Filmer and Fox, 2014: 80). Many children lack socio-emotional skills which are gained by group and youth organizational experience in the home, the community and in the school (Filmer and Fox, 2014: 84-89).

Most African youth are rarely totally unemployed for the simple reason that they must find some income to survive. It is true that many youth are unsuccessful in their small businesses or are not successful in finding casual labour on some days. In this case they may get a meal with relatives or friends for the night. But youth must fend for themselves to find some form of survival.

Helping young people start their own small enterprises

Many or most youth in Africa sustain themselves with small businesses, usually selling on the street, but there is a high rate of discontinuance due to lack of business management and marketing skills (Gough and Langevang, 2017: 37). This lack is due to the generally low educational background and the weakness of many of the training programs that youth may enter.

An evaluation of a skilling programme in Uganda revealed that the "technical and vocational courses were impractical, did not equip young people with employable skills and were generally unpopular among Ugandans" (Gough and Langevang, 2017: 27). In Ghana, the long period of economic growth has failed to translate to increased formal business enterprises offering employment among

youth. Consequently, most youth sustain themselves by self-employment, especially trading, but with limited results because of lack of capital and training in business management and marketing (Gough and Langevang, 2017: 45). In many African countries youth starting their own small enterprises lack access to small loans and often cannot get start-up capital (Bertrand and Crepon, 2014: 134-135). One of the obstacles to getting loans is that they evidently do not have the financial training to guarantee repayment (Bertrand and Crepon, 2014: 123-125). And even if they have some financial skills, they lack skills in management, planning and marketing (Bertrand and Crepon, 2014: 137).

In Zambia the majority of young entrepreneurs have finished high school and were tipped off about business opportunities by friends and family. They started with their own personal savings (a general business phenomenon). They barely support themselves and do not anticipate getting loans or hiring other employees than themselves. Although the government of Zambia has a TEVET programme and has operated a number of small youth training centres, this effort is too limited to make a significant contribution to youth entrepreneurship (Gough and Langevang, 2017: 54-57).

Unfortunately, the situation in Zambia is typical of conditions throughout Africa. Enrolment in formal TVET delivered in the classroom and leading to a formal degree after two or three years in the classroom is very low and scattered throughout Africa. Less than 4 percent of young people between 25 and 34 in Africa have ever attended formal TVET. Most TVET programmes require some secondary level skills, and the majority of African youth lack the basic education even to enrol in a technical or vocational institute (Filmer and Fox, 2014: 90). Young entrepreneurs in slum areas, the normal context of most young entrepreneurs, face the problem of lack of adequate work space and environment often with combined living space of 8-10 people per room and access only through narrow alleyways.

Many young people in Africa lack basic work habits

Employers in Africa, as elsewhere, want basic work habits which youth often lack (Resnick and Thurlow, 2015: 169). Young people, especially those with a background of poverty and families of uncertain employment, often do not know how to organize and finish a job. They often lack punctuality and stamina. Many youth have no experience of sports teamwork or coordinating with others in

groups such as singing or drama groups. Studies have shown that youth in slum areas have great difficulty working as a coordinated group. There is conflict among leaders of groups, conflict among leaders and followers and conflict among followers. The most significant organizations in slum contexts are the churches, but few of them have significant youth programmes bringing youth into task or entertainment groups.

Youth in poorer areas lack the capacity for problem-solving in a group (Filmer and Fox 2014: 85-89). The schools are too crowded and teachers too overwhelmed to engage the children in problem-solving exercises or exercises in starting and finishing tasks. Youth in urban, low-income areas live in a very transient, disorganized family and living situation. This does not provide them with good work skills (Resnick and Thurlow, 2015: 67). It is not surprising, because of the poor schooling situation, that many youth lack basic educational skills of writing, speaking, and cultural understanding. Many youth are almost illiterate, especially in rural areas, due to overcrowded classrooms, inexperienced teachers, virtually no newspapers or magazines in the home and few occasions to exercise writing skills.

Many youth, because of the rather chaotic life background do not do well in technical training schools and many do not finish with usable skills. Though many try to live with street selling, they do not do well because of the lack of financial, marketing or management skills.

The transition from school to work

The period of transition from school leaving to work tends to be very long in Africa because jobs and work are not easily available. Much of the formal education is not related to the work situation that youth must face. This can have very negative effects on the attitude toward life and work. The average duration of the period between leaving school and the first job is one to seven years, with at least five years being very typical (Garcia and Fares, 2008: 15-26).Some 70% of African youth are unemployed one or two years and 40% are unemployed for several or more years. Ethiopia and Tanzania have the longest periods of unemployment after leaving school.

A major reason for the long transition from school to work is that few youth have the technical training which fits them for a job. The majority earn an income in the informal sector, and often this is very uncertain work. The long

period of unemployment between school and finding some kind of income may permanently impair productive potential and lead to serious problems of social adjustment. Rural youth are less likely to be fully unemployed than urban youth, but often the occupations available to rural youth are not very motivating (Garcia and Fares, 2008: 123). The first income a young person finds is more likely to come from informal employment (Garcia and Fares, 2008: 56). Most youth enter employment under difficult circumstances. The work may bring very low income, demand entry into dangerous and unhealthy contexts, or offer uncertain continuance and outright exploitation.

Poor health (especially sexually transmitted diseases) is a major factor in the inactivity of many young people in Africa. In Tanzania between 11 and 46 per cent cite poor health as the reason for inactivity (Garcia and Fares, 2008: 54). Young women are often passive before the sexual advances of young men and end up with early pregnancies or pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. With this they tend to drop out of school and other training programs (Plummer and Wight, 2011: 377-389) which reduces their possibility of finding employment.

The decline in manufacturing labour jobs in Africa has affected the youth particularly, and youth are especially vulnerable to being forced into "bad jobs". Youth often do not work for set wages, but are involved in finding a living for themselves in any way that presents some income.(Garcia and Fares, 2008: 55-59).Youth in rural areas often remain unemployed longer. Most are simply "piddling around" in the family farm plot which, in Africa, is often too small to support a family.

Some countries such as Tanzania have introduced programmes to get school leavers into the work force and give youth the opportunity to learn how to enter into employment routines. For example, in Tanzania, the government has introduced programmes of community-based construction and maintenance of roads, promoting private sector investment in key sectors of the economy and developing apprenticeship and entrepreneurship programs targeting young people (Garcia and Fares, 2008: 91).

Throughout Africa the transition from school to work is long and chances for employment uncertain, often with long periods between gainful employment. Much of this uncertainty is due to the lack of clarity among youth of just what they want to do. By the time they reach their early thirties, most youth have "settled down", found some kind of employment which is more rewarding, have

begun to enter into some kind of marital relationship with accompanying responsibilities and have more steady incomes. How rapidly they enter the work force depends also on the economic growth rate and expanding job opportunities in a country (Garcia and Fares, 2008: 25).In most African countries the efficiency in production is low, production costs are high and it is difficult for African producers to compete in regional and international markets. This certainly affects the capacity to take in the youth coming on to the job market.
A contributing factor to the long interval between school and employment is the expectation of graduates, especially university graduates, of very high ranking positions with equally high salaries, when they have relatively little practical experience (Bertrand and Crepon, 2014: 98). The aim, with the help of political patrons, is often permanent positions in government programmes which provide side benefits, early retirement and good health and other special rewards. Often supervision in government programmes is notoriously lax with ample opportunities for extortion of clients. Unfortunately, government employment, especially in parastatals, is being reduced in many parts of Africa. One of the reasons for reduction of government employment is the notorious inefficiency of government agencies. This inefficiency is due, in part, to the weak formation of many university graduates in research and innovative planning skills. Many university programmes are simply rote memory of lectures with virtually no research, reading, analytic writing and planning skills required. This, in turn, is often due to the practice (to reduce expenses) of hiring of part-time lecturers at lower cost who live by migrating around universities in a given metropolitan area.

In some African countries the strong labour market regulations and collusion of political patrons with union heads place arbitrary conditions that make it difficult for young school leavers to get employment unless there are the “right connections” and “side benefits” to those controlling access to jobs (Bertrand and Crepon, 2014: 99-100).

Inadequate technical training programmes

Companies of all sizes continually cite the problem of insufficient training in hiring young Africans. This is important if manufacturers are going to compete with products of high quality and attractive for the market. At present, with the

work force available, African manufacturers can manage to capture a domestic market, but rarely an export market (Johanson and Adams, 2004: 16).

The author carried out an initial, exploratory study of a small scale technical training school under church sponsorship in Nairobi. The focus of the study was training in a program in electrical installation and a programme of training on dress making (fashion and design).The number of trainees in each programme was relatively small—about 40 or 50. Many of the students had failed to finish the formal high school programmes which would have enabled them to apply for tertiary level educational institutions. This suggests that many of the students in these programmes lacked basic literacy and numeracy skills. Being a private church-sponsored program, the tuition was an obstacle for some. Only a few scholarships were available. However, the dedication of the teachers in assisting slower students was impressive. The programmes had at least adequate functioning equipment, a major problem in many public training programmes. Both programmes were designed for three years of progressive stages from the most elementary skills to advanced levels. An indicator of the success of the programme is the fact that virtually all of the students passed the government supervised exam at the end of the year which provided a certificate enabling them to find employment. Many of the students chose to discontinue after the first year or second year in order to begin getting some income or because they could not afford the tuition. From the information available, most of the graduates, even after only one year of training, obtained some employment or were able to find work which gave them an income. According to the instructors interviewed and other observers of the technical training programmes, many of the past students have now obtained good steady employment with incomes. Some have obtained employment in private or government institutions and have advanced to relatively high paying jobs.

What this exploratory study shows is that technical training programmes are of great importance in helping young people get into employment and advance up the skills and income ladder. Some young people cannot mobilize themselves to get into any skills programme, but if more training programmes were available certainly many more youth would be permanently employed. A great help would be youth organizations where young people would develop life ideals and the capacity to mobilize their lives toward employment goals.

The varying quality of technical training programmes

In general, the quality of basic education in Africa is relatively low, even its best schools. Countries such as Korea or Finland, which did not have a strong quality manufacturing tradition, developed the basis for a first class export economy by making sure that their schools provide excellent basic education. These countries invest heavily in their educational systems and demand very high quality in their students. Students in Korea and Finland are continually rated at the highest level internationally (Mehrotra and Delamonica, 2007: 162).

Training programmes tend to be better in French-speaking Africa, but too often they are oriented more to preparing students for formal jobs in traditional manufacturing which are not widely available. Young Africans are not finding jobs in import substitution manufacturing, but in self-employment or in employment situations which require a great deal of flexibility and ingenuity.

Private training schools, especially those run by churches, tend to have better results in placing their graduates in jobs. The emphasis of schooling in Africa on memorization for exams is not a good foundation for the best results from technical training. Technical training does not replace a good basic education: "A solid basic education is the best preparation for a wide range of jobs and often will shorten the length of training required" (Johanson and Adams, 2004: 27). Young people who have a good basic education are more likely to profit from skills training. Those with post-secondary education profit the most from skills training (Johanson and Adams, 2004: 370).

Good technical training increases productivity and income. With good teachers, even technical training provides the basic values and capacities of dedicated cooperative workers that employers want (Johanson and Adams, 2004: 27). Training should aim at inculcating basic work and productive habits. Employers can often top this off with specific capacities in the technical aspects of production. Training for industrial production has traditionally been done by the industries themselves or planned by the industries. Training is often most effective when it is linked with the more precise work that the trainee is going to be employed in (Johanson and Adams, 2004: 27).

The importance of youth participating in young people's organizations

The ability to enter into a work team and to have clear productive goals in work depends very much on previous successful experience in some form of task groups. The involvement of youth in young people's organizations in school, church or in other youth activities in a community can be very important. According to Villaruel (2003), involvement in youth organizations contributes to many important life skills such as group leadership, skills in expressing oneself in groups and in the community, and ability to carry out a task to completion. The involvement in group activities increases motivation for academic achievement and having clear achievement goals in life. Group activities involving collective tasks improve capacity to get jobs, progress in job advancement and exercise of leadership in various lifetime organizations. The experience in youth organizations improves capacity to cooperate in employment contexts, make employment the context for friend groups and coordinate with the overall objectives of an economic enterprise.

Studies in Kenya have shown that the churches are doing relatively little to develop leadership in youth organizations. Many church leaders make little effort to understand the youth and their problems. There is relatively little effort by church leaders to involve youth in youth ministry and social action programs (Chandran, Mbutu and Niemeyer, 2004: 58-60). Part of the problem is that the churches and similar organizations are not training personnel for youth work. Unfortunately, there is relatively little effort to promote, train and support promoters of community youth organizations, especially in rural areas of Africa. There is now a growing literature on youth organizations in Africa (Uzochukwa, no date) and more interest in the promotion of youth organizations in Africa.

Employment of young people in rural areas of Africa

The majority of the population of Africa is still concentrated in rural areas and the majority of the youth are also in rural areas. However, youth in rural areas face some of the greatest difficulties in finding employment and are often migrating to urban areas in search of some kind of income. The great majority of rural people live on relatively small plots of land, barely able to provide food for an extended family. Most farming plots remain in the hands of the aging owners.

Much of the actual cultivation is done by the women of the family while the men, especially the younger men are migrating around looking for some form of casual work. Given the poor educational and training facilities of rural areas, most youth going to urban areas end up with relatives and friends in urban slums hunting for any form of remuneration they can find.

There is much research on diversification of livelihoods in rural areas (Haggblade, Hazell and Reardon, 2007), but the research suggests that rural incomes are so low in Africa that non-farm income generating activities do not flourish. There is generally very little opportunity for technical training for different trades, the start-up resources such as loans are not easily available and the general poverty of rural areas in Africa does not provide much disposable income.

However, a significant number of university and technical graduates who are trained in rural services are setting up businesses as veterinarians, mechanics for more technical farm equipment, food processing and especially forms of marketing.

Changes in education to increase creativity and employment

The educational system in African countries is inherited from a colonial period in which Africans were being prepared to work in the colonial government. The overriding attitude cultivated in late colonial schools was to do what the master said and in the way the master wanted it done with as few questions asked as possible. As Africans moved into the independence governments, they moved into the positions of the colonial masters—often entering into the same elite housing, clubs and style of life. Often the new governments dominated by the "big man at the top", in many cases a military officer, demanded even less creative thinking than in the colonial period. They carried on the same rigid ways of education by memorization. They recreated the same rigid top down form of running organizations.

The ideal of many young school graduates is simply to get into a bureaucracy, preferably a government bureaucracy, and perform tasks mechanically with as little disturbance of the management as possible, as they moved up slowly to higher positions and finally to a government pension. The main agitation will not be to improve the productivity of the organization, but simply to increase the salaries of each position in the hierarchy. Often those who

manage to get into these bureaucracies are expected to support the education of many others in the family network, so most manage to move up with as little disturbance of the people at the top as possible. To be cooperating too close to colleagues at work would be perceived by higher levels of management as threatening.

Recent trends in education in Africa are trying to promote a different style of studying which implies a different way of working and indirectly also increases productivity and employment. Schools tend to encourage not rote memory but creativity, especially responding to one's indigenous problem solving (O'Hern and Nozaki, 2014: 133-148). This involves much more trust in one's own indigenous knowledge, not copying out of books or what the teacher writes on the blackboard. The goal is greater productivity in whatever way that is defined and measured in a given school situation. This encourages students to stimulate the good ideas in their schoolmates. Teachers take pride not in students parroting back their own ideas by memory, but using them as a stimulus to help students discover their own best ideas as these clearly are better ways to solve problems. Teachers pose problems and then encourage discussion among students to find a solution. Students then learn to focus on greater problem solving, greater productivity and seeking to bring in more ideas to round out a more complete solution to the problems. This translates into young people moving into work situations to increase problem solving, greater productivity, more exchange of ideas and bringing more people into employment who have a wider range of ideas. This could and should mean greater employment and better use of the talents of those who are employed.

The emphasis on building teams and networks to solve problems also has an impact on increasing employment and incomes. A typical example is the creation of networks among rural women to produce honey and peanut butter in rural communities and then find a market for this in towns and cities. The organizers started with one or two groups of women in rural communities producing honey and then peanut butter and then gradually spread the process to other communities so that the volume of production is continually increasing. The promoters were careful to train the women to meet the standards of the National Bureau of Standards and to design attractive containers and labels for an urban middle-class market. As the production grew, the promoters trained single mothers looking for employment to be vendors in a growing urban market. Much of the success of these projects depends on learning to work as

teams with increased interpersonal trust and commitment. Many of those involved in these networks are young people who are not only gaining some income, but learning valuable entrepreneurial skills. This training in productive and marketing skills has enabled many younger people, especially women, to move on to very satisfying careers.

Summarizing: what can be done to improve the employment possibilities for youth in Africa

Firstly, there is wide agreement that the technical and vocational training must be improved. There must be more qualified teachers and much better training equipment. There is agreement that there is need for more well-trained persons in almost every occupation—from plumbers to welders. The economy in Africa is agriculturally based and there is particularly great need for skills serving an increasingly technical agriculture. Especially important is the investment in the private, specialized occupational training institutions.

Secondly, there needs to be more public and private effort to promote youth organizations so that youth have the opportunity to carry out projects together and learn to work on tasks together. These youth organizations can focus on typical youth activities of sports, singing, acting, dancing, drama a host of other activities that teach them how to develop their talents.

Thirdly, most youth find their initial employment and income generation in the informal sector selling on the roadside, performing odd jobs in the gardens and house fixing or simply carrying and loading. However, these unskilled or semi-skilled jobs can be improved and incomes improved by providing them training in the informal sector jobs they find.

Finally, much can be done to improve the basic education in the African primary and secondary schools. Education is very under-funded throughout Africa. Classrooms are crowded, teachers are overburdened and school are badly equipped. The basic education of young people is so essential that it merits much more investment.

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