

Youth Unemployment In Uganda: A Worsening Plight



Philemon Okillong

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Research Intern, Center
for Budget & Economic
Governance, ACOE

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the total global number of unemployed youths hit 73 million in 2022. Furthermore, it was noted that young men are almost 1.5 times more likely to be employed than young women. The gender gap is greatest in lower-middle-income nations, at 17.3 per cent, and is smallest in high-income countries, at 2.3 per cent.ⁱ Additionally, the pandemic caused socioeconomic effects that were more severe and swiftly felt by young people globally. Multiple shocks were caused by the epidemic, including disruptions in education, training, and on-the-job learning; employment and income losses as a result of layoffs and shortened workweeks; and more difficulty in locating high-calibre employment.

Africa has the world's youngest population, which typically denotes a large and active labour force, a benefit for any region's growth prospects. However, young people's inability to find work across Africa continues to squander their potential. According to the ILO, Africa compared to other continents has the lowest youth unemployment rate among those aged 15 to 24 in the world on paper (10.6 per cent in 2021); however, the majority of African youth work informally, and many are underemployed or remain in poverty despite working due to low wages and the absence of a social safety net, making it difficult to compare them with more developed economies.ⁱⁱ

The issue of youth unemployment

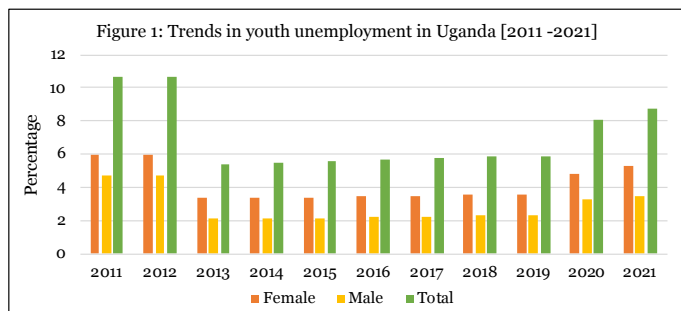
in Africa affects the entire world. Numerous young people from poor nations will keep moving to industrialized nations. Furthermore, there is no guarantee of a peaceful business environment in Africa because the continent's poverty and inequality are the main drivers of terrorism, insurgencies, and looting.ⁱⁱⁱ According to regional unemployment statistics, more than 80 per cent of young people in East Africa are unemployed.^{iv}

Over the past decade, Uganda has registered a considerable increase in the youth unemployment rate. In 2021, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) revealed that youth unemployment (for persons between 18-30 years) increased from 12.7 per cent in 2012/13 to 13.0 per cent in 2019/20, despite a reduction in the overall national unemployment rate from 11.1 per cent to 10 per cent during the same period. This implies that as Uganda's youth attempt to transition to the labour market, they face increasing uncertainty about finding employment despite gaining an education (especially secondary and tertiary education). According to the State of Higher Education and Training in Uganda 2018/19 report, more than 90 per cent of the students who enrol in Higher institutions can complete their programmes successfully, with the number of students graduating increasing by 1.03 per cent to 78,300 between 2017/18 and 2018/19.

Figure 1 shows the recent youth unemployment trends for Uganda using the ILO estimate (percentage

of total labour force ages 15-24). Figure 1 reveals that the country's annualized average youth unemployment rate was 7 per cent between 2011 and 2021, with a higher percentage for females (4.2 per cent) than males (2.9 per cent). This implies that female youth are more likely to be unemployed than their male counterparts.

Figure 1: Trends in youth unemployment in Uganda [2011 -2021]



Source: Authors' computation using data obtained from the World Development Indicators (2021)

Using data from the Uganda National Household Survey (UNHS, 2016/17), It was revealed that the critical drivers of youth unemployment in Uganda include the place of residence, level of education, and gender of the youth.^v The youth in urban residences have a higher chance of being unemployed than their rural counterparts. Likewise, the youth in the central region is more likely to be unemployed in comparison to those in the northern, eastern, or western regions. In addition, the study shows that youth unemployment increases with the level of education attained. Youth with some level of education (especially post-secondary) have a higher unemployment probability compared to those with no education. This may be attributed to the fact that more educated are more inclined towards wage-paying formal jobs, which are increasingly becoming harder to find.^{vi}

Key Determinants of Youth Unemployment

Like many Sub-Saharan African nations, youth unemployment is still a significant policy concern in Uganda.^{vii} Youth unemployment is said to have a variety of root causes, including poor job investment and supply, a lack of employable skills (youth have talents that are incompatible with available occupations), and high rates of labour force growth. More factors that are responsible for the difficulties that youth experience in initial workforce entry have been noted to include: a lack of knowledge, networks, and relationships among youth, particularly among young people from homes with little social capital. Lack of abilities necessary for the job even young individuals who have taken a path of study with a particular career in mind frequently discover that they have general or theoretical knowledge that does little to prepare them for

the actual tasks they would confront on the job, which could be partially attributable to the school curricula. Lack of qualifications and experience that would mitigate the risk to employers when making employment commitments. There is simply a demographic mismatch between the number of young individuals looking for employment and the degree of local economic activity in some labour markets, particularly in emerging countries. The majority of jobs can be in unregulated or underdeveloped industry areas as well as in the informal or underdeveloped industry sectors.^{viii}

In general, the high youth unemployment rate in Uganda and throughout Africa can be attributed to the continent's slow economic growth, small formal labour markets, high population growth rate, rigid education system, rural-urban migration, a lack of social networks, and young people's restricted access to financial support systems, among other factors. The Ugandan National Youth Policy 2001^{ix} recognizes that the major causes of a high youth unemployment rate are lack of employable skills, lack of access to resources like land and capital, lack of focus by the existing programs on the informal sector and agriculture, overemphasis on experience, a lack of apprenticeship schemes, negative attitudes by the youth towards work especially in agriculture, lack of a comprehensive employment policy and negative cultural attitudes such as gender discrimination.

Youth Participation in Government Programmes in Uganda

Youth employment is a national priority in Africa and several efforts are ongoing to address the challenge. These include the creation of enabling policy environments; youth employment mainstreamed in national development frameworks; resources allocated to address youth employment; establishment of institutions addressing youth employment; and the development and implementation of youth employment interventions. However, these efforts have not been well coordinated, which has resulted in the inefficient use of limited resources; overlaps and duplication; and a failure to exploit the untapped potential for synergies and cooperation.^x

Uganda has implemented several policies to create employment specifically for the youth. These policies consist of those aimed at providing an enabling environment for the private sector to create jobs and those targeted at building the skills and requisite knowledge to make youth more employable.^{xi} The National Youth Policy was adopted in 2001 and revised in 2016 to take cognizance of emerging issues such as youth empowerment and development in the country as well as harnessing their potential to contribute to national development.^{xii} Some of the government programmes that have focused on the youth include: Youth Livelihood Programme, Youth Venture Capital Fund, Emooga, Parish Development Model, NUSAF and the skilling programme among others below are some of the

challenges and gaps for some of the programmes.

The Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP) under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development was designed as one of the interventions of the Government in response to the high unemployment rate and poverty among the youth in the country. Though it has registered positive returns, some of the challenges still affecting the effectiveness of this programme include corruption, Lack of enough training, presence of ghost groups, sharing of money by group members, lack of a common understanding and low supervision of the groups by technocrats.^{xiii} Laziness and negative attitudes towards agriculture and work among the youth. Limited entrepreneurial training, the politicisation of livelihood programmes, inadequate capital and communal land, and communication deficiencies were reported to be constraining factors to youth livelihood.^{xiv}

Youth Venture Capital Fund (YVCF) under the Ministry of Gender Labour & Social Development is a government entrepreneurship project aimed at enabling the youth to access funds for designed and approved business ventures. Some of the challenges identified by beneficiaries include: the period for repayment of the loan being short, Unfavorable conditions in accessing funds that limit the number of beneficiaries, Lack of adequate information on how to get venture funds, targeting and accessibility given the many conditionalities attached for one to access the YVCF, so far the few beneficiaries of the fund have been the youth staying in towns and not the youth from rural areas. Negative attitudes towards the youth: There is a general tendency by the adult population and some policymakers to perceive the youths as not a serious and productive group. On the flip side of this, there is also a negative attitude towards government programmes by the population. Limited participating banks where many districts do not have a presence of the participating banks.

Youth participation in NUSAF Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) was a programme designed to address the persistent youth unemployment problem prevalent in post-conflict Northern Uganda. NUSAF YOP offered cash transfers to groups of youths to increase employment and reduce conflict. In an evaluation carried out by International Alert^{xv} in particular, female beneficiaries showed an 84.0 per cent higher income level compared with the females who had not benefited from the programme in similar settings. However, no differences were recorded in social outcomes such as community participation, aggression and social cohesion. Some of the challenges identified were the training of beneficiaries focused more on agricultural skills. The beneficiaries indicated that they would have loved to learn other skills, especially tailoring, carpentry joinery, barbering/hairdressing, electrical installation and mechanics.

Youth participation in Skilling Uganda: In 2011 the

Government of Uganda drew up a Business, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (BTVET) Strategic Plan 2011–2020, which has been called the Skilling Uganda programme. Building on the previous reforms in the BTVET system, the Skilling Uganda programme is aimed at addressing the major challenges regarding relevance, quality, access and equity, management and financial sustainability of the BTVET system in Uganda. However, some of the challenges noted include: ill-prepared BTVET institutions, negative attitude towards vocational training, youth are not aware of the skilling Uganda programme, lack of BTVET that is limiting accessibility and some districts such as Kotido having no functioning BTVET institutions, unevenly distributed BTVET centres, lack of support for some courses in government programmes, for example, electrical installation and mechanics; Poor buildings for the technical schools; limited tuition fees; Inadequate teaching staff and practical tools; Lack of sensitisation and career guidance of the communities about the importance of BTVET; and Youth belief that BTVET is a last resort for failures and, therefore, a need to change community perception about BTVET.^{xvi}

Effects of youth unemployment in Uganda

Youth unemployment poses serious political, economic and social challenges to the country and its leadership. Its persistence is making it increasingly difficult for Uganda to reduce its poverty levels.^{xvii} Without adequate income, youth don't buy as much which reduces consumer demand, slowing business growth. As a result, the nation's gross domestic product is lower. Furthermore, Youths who remain unemployed or underemployed and do not exploit their full potential, are often associated with high incidences of drug abuse and gambling and hence a high crime rate.^{xviii} Unemployed youths migrate from rural to urban areas for work, which negatively impacts the social services sector in urban centres.

Conclusions

Addressing the youth unemployment plight in Uganda requires a multipronged, long-term, and coherent effort involving multiple stakeholders (both state and non-state). The Government, civil society, academia, private sector, development agencies, and communities will need to intentionally synergize their efforts to improve youth employment quality and establish interventions to combat underemployment and poor job quality. With a majority of Ugandan youth engaged in subsistence agricultural or informal, low-productivity and low-rewarding economic ventures, addressing the increasing lack of decent employment opportunities for young people is one of Uganda's major development challenges.

Recommendations

In its Sustainable Development Goal 8, the Post-2015

Development Agenda places a high priority on decent work and economic growth, while “supporting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for everyone” calls for focused solutions in Uganda. To create decent employment for Ugandan youth, the government should adopt and bolster complementary policies that boost the private sector, revitalize the Ugandan education system (which emphasizes skill and capability development), and develop employment policies with youth input and/or participation as follows:

- Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development should ensure that youth are given intensive entrepreneurship and business skills as a pre-requisite for accessing resources under youth programmes such as YLP such training should include financial management and leadership skills before funds are disbursed to beneficiaries.
- To ensure ownership of youth programs, the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development should include youth who are the beneficiaries in the conceptualization and design of youth programs.
- The Ministry of Education and Sports should ensure that skilling the youth is a key component of the education curriculum of educational institutions in Uganda.
- As part of its implementation of youth-focused programmes, the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development should develop and strengthen the mindset change component emphasizing entrepreneurship.

Endnotes

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