

# Demographic trends Affecting the Transition of Youth in sub-Saharan African from Education/Training to Employment

by Machilu Zimba

The current global youth cohort is the largest ever in history. Out of 6 billion inhabitants in the world, 1.2 billion are between the ages of 15 and 24. Nearly 90 percent of these youth live in developing countries, mostly residents of Asia and Africa. The United States Population Bureau estimates that over 200 million youth live in sub-Saharan Africa alone. This large cohort continues to grow and undoubtedly increases pressure on African governments to provide sufficient services for its citizens and to create new jobs, as yearly many young people seek to transition from education and training to employment. The general consensus of the World Bank (WB), the Africa Development Bank (AfDB) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) is that the human capital potential of youth in sub-Saharan Africa exceeds that of youth in other parts of the world and can be tapped into as a resource for development, drawing many out of poverty and into sustainable livelihoods. However, the current social and economic conditions that shape the lives of youth in Africa make it difficult for many as they transition into adulthood, especially into the world of work. The transition of youth into adulthood for sub-Saharan Africans is riddled with obstacles that few are able to successfully overcome. This brief overview examines the demographic trends affecting the transition of youth in Africa from education to employment. Specific issues regarding population growth, the impact of HIV/AIDS, and rural to urban migration are taken into account.

## **Population Growth and the HIV/AIDS epidemic**

Although sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a drop in birth rates, these rates remain relatively high with projections of the current population of just below 1 billion people doubling by 2050, while the region of Latin America and the Caribbean will most likely only experience a 25 percent population increase. Conversely, European nations are concerned with extremely low birth rates. Currently, around 43 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's population is below the age of 15 while 28 percent are youth. Fertility rates in Africa are high; the median age at which women give birth can be as young as 15 in Niger or 16 in Zambia while the number of children an African woman may have in her lifetime is 5.3 with the global average at 2.6.

The recent 2009 ILO publication, "Global Employment Trends", reports a world-wide labour participation rate of 50.9 percent for youth, with the ratio of youth-to-adult unemployment sitting at 1 to 3. The difficulty youth experience in entering the labour market is therefore a global one. In

sub-Saharan Africa youth make up 36 percent of the workforce, and it is estimated that 3 out of 5 unemployed people in this region are youth. With a large youth cohort, competition for decent jobs is high, increasing pressure on governments to create new ones.

Sub-Saharan African countries are faced with the opportunity to take advantage of this large youth cohort. Garcia and Fares (2008) have noted how regions such as East Asia and Latin America, who have experienced important demographic transitions, have each dealt differently with the potential brought by a large youth cohort. Some East Asian countries applied appropriate policies and institutions in order to reap from a large work force with fewer dependents, and Asian economic growth has been attributed by some to this demographic dividend. Latin America, sharing similar demographic dynamics at the time, did not yield better development outcomes. With appropriate policies and institutions African states can yield economic benefits from the human capital offered to them by large numbers of youth. However, one of the biggest threats to this is the prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

The countries that are the hardest hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic are in sub-Saharan Africa. The United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) 2009 statistics reveal that 67 percent of all people living with HIV/AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa. The most affected by the epidemic are children and young people. Women, in particular young women between the ages of 15 and 19 are vulnerable to HIV infection. Kenyan young women, for instance, are three times more likely to become infected than their male counterparts. As things are it is projected that the epidemic will decrease the African population substantially. While educational investments in young people are threatened, an increasing number of AIDS orphans may result in the increase of child labour, as orphans are forced into work for personal survival, or, as it is in a number of cases, to support their siblings.

### **Rural to Urban Migration**

Approximately 70 percent of African youth live in rural areas with low job prospects. In Burundi, The Gambia, and Zambia the majority of rural youth work either in the informal sector or are self employed. It is no surprise that increasingly these youth are moving away from their homes in hopes of attaining formal employment in urban areas. Youth rural to urban migration creates strain on the few existing jobs in urban areas. In addition to this, it increases pressure on public resources such as education, housing and infrastructure, and health care. Of great significance, it affects the skills composition in both urban and rural areas, with those most educated moving to urban areas. Once in urban areas, rural youth find themselves vulnerable to exploitation and again in self employment or working in the informal sector. The high level of informal employment may be a sign of labour market entry difficulties or of low employment quality. A noted difference between youth in rural and those in urban areas was noted by Garcia and Fares (2008), they found that rural youth tend to leave school earlier than urban youth and find employment quicker than urban youth, although urban youth have higher education levels than rural youth. It was found that labour market entry for females is longer in urban rather than in rural areas.

### **Demographic Impacts**

Economic development and job creation in sub-Saharan Africa is taking place at a slow pace. The combination of this and continued population growth poses a challenge to governments. Although youth in sub-Saharan Africa are not a homogenous group, with differences in education and employment prospects varying according to region, gender, age, ethnicity and health status, generalisations reveal important challenges that cannot be ignored. Solutions to these challenges require a continental, as well as a national, approach, with governments pouring resources to the most vulnerable first. This said, this brief overview only touches on a few of these challenges. However, the fact remains that with appropriate policies and institutions in place, governments may be able to benefit from the large youth cohort.

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