



International  
Labour  
Organization



# Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024

Decent work, brighter futures

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

20th anniversary edition

This report represents the 20th anniversary publication of the ILO's *Global Employment Trends for Youth* (hereafter "*GET for Youth*"). For two decades, the *GET for Youth* report has striven to provide timely and relevant information on how well young people are doing in their ambitions to attain decent work. In so doing the report has investigated the where, why and how of young people's labour market vulnerabilities, and highlighted the policy measures and interventions that aim to support youth job creation and effectively set young people on the pathway to a bright future of work. As an anniversary edition, this edition of the *GET for Youth* looks back on what has been achieved since the dawn of the twenty-first century while also looking ahead to what may lay in store for youth employment in an era characterized by crises and uncertainties.

## Post-COVID-19 recovery and labour market outlook for youth

### Young labour market entrants have benefited during the recovery period following the COVID-19 crisis.

More than four years from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the labour market outlook has improved considerably for young people aged 15 to 24.<sup>1</sup> Resilient economic growth rates and a strong rebound in labour demand benefited young labour market entrants in the post-crisis setting. At 13 per cent, the global youth unemployment rate in 2023 represented a 15-year low, and at 64.9 million, the total number of unemployed young people worldwide was the lowest seen since the start of the millennium. At the same time, 2023 saw a rebound in the youth employment-to-population ratio (at 35 per cent), as many of the young persons who had temporarily withdrawn from the labour force or had become unemployed during the pandemic returned to work (or started working for the first time).

### But recovery was not universal, by geography or by gender.

Youth unemployment rates in 2023 had returned to their pre-crisis rates or fell below their pre-crisis rates in most – but not all – subregions. For young people in the Arab States, East Asia, and South-East Asia and the Pacific, the youth unemployment rate in 2023 was higher than that of 2019. For the Arab States, this represents a continuation of the pre-COVID-19 trend of rising youth unemployment rates, but for the two Asian subregions, the rise represents a change of direction from the pre-crisis years, when economic growth rates – and associated job creation for youth – had been more robust.

Young men have benefited from the recovery in the labour market more than young women. In the decade preceding the pandemic (2009–19), the youth unemployment rate of young men at the global level was higher than that of young women by an average of 0.7 percentage points. From the peak of the crisis and continuing through 2023, the unemployment rates for young men and women converged (resting at 12.9 per cent for young women and 13 per cent for young men in 2023). Young women have thus experienced a double disadvantage. First, the youth unemployment rate jumped more sharply for women during the COVID-19 crisis and then, during the recovery period, the drop in the youth unemployment rate was smaller among women.

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1 Unless otherwise specified, "youth" in this report refers to young people aged 15 to 24.

## Good news on youth unemployment trends, less so on trends of youth in NEET status.

The trend of declining youth unemployment rates in most – but not all regions – is good news. But unemployment is not the only signal of headwinds against young people's success in the world of work. Only 6 per cent of the world's youth population were unemployed in 2023, but a much larger share – 20.4 per cent – were not in employment, education or training (NEET). This gives a significantly broader picture of labour market exclusion among young people, while also signaling some missed opportunities in human capital development.

Progress on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 8.6 to reduce the youth NEET rate has been mixed and skewed in favour of advanced economies. The report finds that one in three (33 per cent) of the world's young people is living in a country that is "off track" in its target to reduce the youth NEET rate. What is especially concerning is that the countries that follow a regressive trend are low-income countries and those situated in subregions where rates were already among the world's highest (namely, the Arab States, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa).

Also concerning is the continuing female face of youth in NEET status at the global level. Not only are two out of every three youth in NEET status women, but the NEET rate among young women is also more than double that of young men (at 28.1 per cent and 13.1 per cent, respectively, in 2023).

## With uncertain times ahead, the well-being of youth is a growing concern.

Moving forward, the global youth unemployment rate is expected to decrease further over the next two years to sit at 12.8 per cent in 2024 and 2025. Although expected to fall slightly from 2023, the rates in the Arab States, East Asia, and South-East Asia and the Pacific are anticipated to remain above their pre-crisis levels. In the coming two years, the historically low youth unemployment rates in North America and in Northern, Southern and Western Europe are expected to creep up again.

Despite the positive signals in global economic and labour market indicators, young people today show signs of growing levels of anxiety about their future. Surveys highlighted in this report indicate that many young people today feel stressed about job loss and job stability, the state of the economy, a lack of social mobility across generations, and their prospects for eventual financial independence. Whether borne out by reality or not, young people's perceptions about the future play a significant role in their personal well-being and motivation levels and in shaping their decisions about future educational, labour market and civic engagement.

To help ease youth anxieties, institutions will need to guide young people through the complexities of the school-to-work and youth-to-adulthood transitions. Helping young people to keep their hopes alive must become a shared mission involving all segments of society.

## Twenty years of the *GET for Youth*: What has changed in youth labour market prospects?

In the spirit of the anniversary of this publication, the second chapter of the report presents the longer-term trends of youth employment since the beginning of the twenty-first century, addressing how the landscape that connects young people's prospects to labour market outcomes has changed over time. Among the themes highlighted are the evolution (if any) towards attainment of decent jobs for youth, how the sectoral structure of jobs for youth has changed, shifts in educational attainment and the returns from education, the growing spectre of conflicts, and the increasing influence of demographic shifts on the youth employment outlook.

### Young people in most regions are unable to find secure work, and their chances of doing so decrease as the income level of the country decreases.

In low-income countries, only one in five young adults aged 25 to 29 manage to find a secure paid job (that is, a job with a paying employer and a contract greater than one year in duration). This picture has not changed much since the start of the millennium, beyond a slight decrease in the share of young people in self-employment and a concurrent increase in the share of youth working in temporary paid jobs – essentially shifting from one form of precarious (and informal) work to another.

The share of young adults working in a secure paid job is significantly higher in high-income countries (at 76 per cent in 2023), but even here the incidence of temporary work among youth has risen. Depending on the subregion, from one fifth to one quarter of young adult workers are currently engaged in temporary paid work, a share that has increased over time. The global trend towards the casualization of labour serves as a source of increasing anxiety among young people striving to move towards financial independence and the next stages of adulthood.

### Young people in Africa and the Arab States are still not faring well.

Youth unemployment rates remain critically high in the Arab States and North Africa. In both subregions, more than one in three economically active youth were unemployed in 2023. While this represents an improvement since 2000 for North Africa, the youth unemployment rate in the Arab States has shown a steady increase over the two decades. At the same time, youth employment-to-population ratios remain critically low in the two subregions. Fewer than one in ten young women and fewer than one in three young men in the two subregions are working. The employment ratios of both young men and women – especially the latter – fall well below what is seen in other regions. As the two subregions also have the world's highest youth NEET rates, it is clear that many of the non-working youth are also not engaged in schooling.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the main concern is not youth unemployment (which consistently shows rates that are among the world's lowest – 8.9 per cent in 2023) since still few young people can afford to forgo some form of income generation through work. In 2023, as in the early 2000s, nearly three in four working young adults in sub-Saharan Africa were in insecure forms of work; one in three paid workers earned less than the median wage; and more than one in two working youth eked out a living in the agricultural sector. Demographic pressures consume the continent: between 2023 and 2050, the cumulative growth in the youth labour force is estimated at 72.6 million (with an additional 3.3 million young labour market entrants in North Africa). How African countries will create decent jobs for so many young labour market entrants in the coming two decades is a matter of global concern. On a more positive note, the youth bulge in Africa could prove to be the regions' most valuable asset moving forward as other regions of the world grapple with population ageing and labour shortages.

## **Educational mismatches have increased as the supply of educated youth starts to outweigh the supply of jobs for the highly skilled in middle-income countries.**

Globally, young people today have more opportunities to stay in school. As of 2023, the share of the global youth population engaged in some form of schooling or training was 48 per cent, a significant increase over the 38 per cent share seen in 2000. The increase in educational participation held for all but the low-income grouping of countries. With such results comes an increasing gap in the skills levels of young adults across country income groups.

With the rise in access to education since the start of the millennium has come a slight overall waning in the returns on education, a situation that reflects in part slow progress in the structural transformation of economies in the process of development. The share of young workers in the industrial sector has grown slightly over time, but the sectoral allocation of youth employment away from the agricultural sector has been predominantly towards non-manufacturing industry (mainly construction) and towards traditional services such as trade, transport, accommodation and food services. The structural adjustment of developing economies to higher value-added sectors has been slow, which means that young people in developing countries are still primarily finding work in low- and intermediate-skilled occupations. With limited numbers of higher-skilled jobs available, the queue among educated young jobseekers grows.

To offset the declining benefits of higher education, countries will need to pay increasing attention to policies and programmes that can boost job creation for youth and to policies that support the transition of young people into productive employment. And it is important to bear in mind that despite some slowing of educational returns to higher education, educated youth still stand a much higher chance of transitioning out of the informal economy, earning higher wages and gaining some degree of job stability. In other words, the overall societal benefits of upping investments in the education and training of young people are as strong as ever.

## **With the number of conflicts across the globe doubling since 2010, the future livelihoods (and lives) of 57 million young people are at risk.**

The world today is a more conflict-ridden place than 20 years ago, a situation that young people feel heavily, whether personally affected or not. According to ILO estimates, the share of young people struggling to begin their primary productive years in conflict-afflicted areas has increased from 2.9 per cent to 4.6 per cent in the two decades since 2002. The lack of employment prospects in conflict areas can push young people to migration or drive them towards extremism.

## **Demographic trends take on greater weight as a driver of the future of work outcomes of young people.**

One shift of the past 20 years has been the polarization between countries and regions with respect to their demographic contexts. The struggle to create decent work for youth takes on a wholly different meaning in Africa, where the average age is 19 years, compared to North America, for instance, where the average age is between 30 and 49. The imminent “youthquake” in Africa means job creation and the transformation of jobs into decent jobs for young Africans becomes a critical issue for social justice and for the future of the global economy.

In the meantime, shrinking youth labour forces in ageing countries exert different pressures on economies and societies. Young workers in ageing societies might benefit in the short term from upward pressure on wages and easier recruitment processes but may face longer-term risks as these economies struggle to maintain output growth by consequence of the rapidly shifting demographic changes.

## Decent work, brighter futures – Moving forward

Uncertainties abound in the global economic and geopolitical outlook and in the future of work, including how these will impact today's and tomorrow's youth. But what is certain is that the degree to which young people successfully engage with the world of work (and in civic engagement at large) will play a key role in determining the direction of global progress. If young people are given the support they need to keep their hopes alive and to thrive through decent work, then productive and inclusive growth might prevail.

The ultimate goals of decent work and brighter futures for youth will be difficult to achieve, but progress is possible. Individual countries and the international multilateral community have taken up the call to action for youth employment and have done much in the realm of youth employment policies during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Yet much more work is needed, particularly on the following core policy areas for promoting youth employment and supporting youth labour market transitions:<sup>2</sup>

1. employment and economic policies to boost job creation and improve access to finance;
2. education and training to ease the school-to-work transition and to prevent skills mismatches;
3. labour market policies to target employment of disadvantaged youth;
4. entrepreneurship and self-employment promotion/policies to assist potential young entrepreneurs; and
5. labour rights that are based on international labour standards to ensure that young people receive equal treatment and are afforded rights at work.

The call for more and better investments in these five policy areas through integrated youth employment policies continues, and the multilateral community is called upon to increase their level of assistance to low-income and middle-income countries that struggle to find the fiscal space to prioritize such investments.

The report identifies the main principles for policy action as follows:

1. In all action areas, keep youth in the driver's seat of policymaking, and promote and strengthen the institutions of youth-inclusive social dialogue.
2. Amplify the policy focus on job creation through gender-responsive macroeconomic and sectoral policies, and make sure that demand-side interventions target directly – and with urgency – the creation of jobs for young women.
3. Scale up supply-side interventions with demonstrated impact that are oriented to meet labour demand, including through strengthened institutions, as well as interventions that strive to remove the entry barriers to education and skills development, especially for vulnerable groups, and in so doing, reducing the number of youth in NEET status.
4. Tackle global inequalities through improved international cooperation, public-private partnerships and financing for development.

## Structure of the report

This report addresses the context of global youth employment from both the short-term perspective of crisis recovery (in Chapter 1) and the longer-term perspective of the evolving landscape of youth employment during the 20 years of the *GET for Youth* report's existence (in Chapter 2). Chapter 3 looks at the policy framework for youth employment with an eye on how the scope and institutional setting of such policies has changed over time. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes with a discussion on the policy areas needing heightened attention in the coming years to support young people through their labour market transitions and towards decent work and brighter futures.

<sup>2</sup> The five policy areas were first articulated in the resolution "[The youth employment crisis: A call for action](#)", adopted by ILO constituents in 2012.

## **Advancing social justice, promoting decent work**

The International Labour Organization is the United Nations agency for the world of work. We bring together governments, employers and workers to drive a human-centred approach to the future of work through employment creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue.

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