

Re-structuring of the Educational System: A Panacea for Youth Unemployment in Africa

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Abstract

Many developing and developed countries of the world are faced with the challenge of high level of skilled or literate youth unemployment. In developed economies, it has been ascribed to factors like capital-intensive production, labour market regulation and general welfare benefits. However, in most African countries, it has been attributed to the fact that the educational system does not create enough skills in the graduates to meet the requirements in the world of work, lack of employment opportunities, amongst others. It is the candid opinion of the authors of this paper that the educational system be re-organised and used as an engine of change for job creation. This can be done by modifying the curricula of studies in higher education institutions in such a way that the gap between formal academic skills and the needs of the workplace is bridged; introducing Entrepreneurship education in the educational system at an early stage so that students at the secondary school level may appreciate the benefits and grow up to be employers of labour and ultimate wealth creators and finally, putting in place, right policies and incentives that will benefit both the institutions and the educated youths who have an entrepreneurial mind set to grow the economy.

Keywords: Educational system, Skills, Entrepreneurship, Youth, Africa

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that unemployment is a problem that is faced by both developing and developed countries of the world. However a more disturbing issue for most governments is the alarming rate of youths between the ages of 16 and 40 who are unemployed.

Young people can contribute to the development of their countries and the continent in general if they are gainfully and productively engaged. They are a potential resource for economic growth and social development. However with lack of job opportunities they end up roaming the streets of major cities in Africa and some constituting the source of devastating social tension and conflict.

The desire to be employed in the formal sector has encouraged a lot of youths to obtain formal education over the years. This can be seen in the increase in the number of youths in secondary and tertiary institutions in most African countries. Though a laudable achievement and a welcomed development most labour markets in many African countries are unable to accommodate the skilled or educated young graduate. As a result, young educated people are forced into selling snacks, apples, oranges, telephone cards, telephone handsets, calculators and other assorted goods along the streets of major cities. Some engage in illegal activities such as touting, stealing, armed robbery, internet scam, dealing in prohibited substances such as drugs, and prostitution. Only a few are engaged in the formal sector.

The reasons for this high level of skilled or educated youth unemployment have been attributed to a lot of factors. Some of which are that youths in Africa have obtained formal education from educational systems that have witnessed a decline in quality and infrastructure; systems that are geared towards providing basic literacy and numeracy and not meeting the changing demands for knowledge, skills and aptitudes required in the labour market, lack of employment opportunities; high population growth and small private sector. However, in developed countries the situation is different. Increasing capital-intensive production, labour market regulations, unions, general welfare benefits are some of the factors that explain youth unemployment.

This paper examines the reasons for skilled or educated youth unemployment in Africa and suggests the restructuring of the educational system as a way of combating this scourge. The paper is divided into five Sections. Section Two discusses Youth Unemployment Situation in Africa, Section Three examines the Causes and Effects of Youth Unemployment, Section Four provides Solutions and Section Five concludes.

2. Youth Unemployment situation in Africa

There is no generalised definition of the term 'youth'. Individuals under the age group of 15-24 have been classified as youths by the UN. In Nigeria, people between the ages of 18 and 35 are regarded as youths while in Uganda, a youth is between the ages of 12 and 30 years (Awogbenle and Iwuanmadi, 2010). In Mozambique, a

youth is in the age group of 14-35. For the purpose of this paper, individuals between the ages of 16 and 40 will be classified as youths.

Compared to other continents, Africa has the highest proportion of youths among the region's total population. In 2010, 70 percent of the region's population was under the age of 30, and slightly more than 20 per cent were young people between the ages of 15 and 24 (UNECA, 2011).

The socio-economic conditions of young Africans have improved relatively in recent years in the sense that there has been an increase in school enrolment over the past 10 years, however, young Africans continue to face a major difficulty in the realm of employment. Despite an increased level of literacy among the youths, youth unemployment rates in Malawi and Rwanda are under 5 percent, whereas unemployment rates are above 20 percent in Ghana, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and above 30 percent in Mauritius, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland, Algeria and South Africa (where unemployment rates climb to 60 percent for young women) (UNECA, 2011). Also, in Tunisia and Egypt, youth unemployment stands at 31 percent and 34 percent respectively. Out of the 200 million Africans that have been officially designated as youths, 60% are unemployed (Awogbenle and Iwuanmadi, 2010). According to Chigunta (2002), estimates show that unemployment among youths affects a broad spectrum of socio-economic groups, including the less and well educated youths.

Though adequate unemployment figures for African countries are not available, the exceptionally high unemployment rates in Africa can be interpreted as one of the main factors behind the revolutionary activities, increase in crime rates and recent civil unrests faced by some governments in Africa.

Since projections of population growth into the 21st century indicate that the proportion of young persons aged 15-24 years, in relation to the overall population, will continue to grow over the next twenty years (Chigunta, 2002), there is a need to examine the causes of educated youth unemployment as well as the probable remedies.

3. Causes and Effects of Youth Unemployment in Africa

Millions of educated youths in Africa face bleak employment opportunities because of a lot of reasons. Some that have been identified include:

3.1 Mismatch between educational systems and the skills needed in the labour market

At a time of high unemployment, a significant number of employers are having difficulty finding employees with the skills that they need. So the immediate problem for employers is not the number of potential candidates, but a talent mismatch (that is there are insufficiently skilled people for the few jobs available). This is so because African institutions produce graduates with skills that are not required by the labour market. As employers seek for specific skill sets and combinations of skills, the "right" person for a particular job is becoming much harder to find. Lack of relevant skills for the workplace is as a result of the structure of the educational system. Young people who pursue a course of study with a specific career in mind often find themselves with theoretical knowledge that does little to prepare them for the actual tasks they will encounter on the job. In many cases, youths are neither equipped with the skills nor mentally prepared for the labour market. They lack some specific skills like critical thinking, creativity or the ability to communicate. This can be partly attributed to the school (secondary and tertiary) curricula and poor connections between employers and the educational system.

3.2 A mindset that young people must be employed in well paying white-collar jobs

Irrespective of the tertiary institution (vocational, technical, polytechnics or universities) attended, most educated youths look forward to being employed. Majority do not think of self-employment. The reason for this is the absence of entrepreneurial drive. Even when the desired jobs are not available, they prefer to spend time looking for jobs that they desire instead of thinking of positive alternatives.

3.3 A small private sector that is unable to employ large number of people

In some labour markets, especially in the developing world, there is simply a mismatch between the number of educated young people seeking work and the level of desired economic activity. Most available jobs are in the informal or underdeveloped industry sectors which many youths consider as beneath them, given the low wages paid. Only a few youths opt for these jobs.

3.4 Poor economic growth

The demand for labour is derived from the demand for products. When an economy is not growing as a result of unhealthy policies (that is policies that are not business friendly) then demand for products falls and with it, the demand for labour. Hence the employment prospects of young people often reduce when there is little or no growth in an economy.

3.5 Crime rate

High crime rates have come to characterize many countries in Africa. High crime rate which is a symptom and evidence of the breakdown of social conditions increase the cost of doing business and limits the freedoms of citizens. Though a consequence of unemployment, it is also an additional factor causing youth unemployment through its effects on the economy. High crime rate affects the economy through a number of channels. First, it increases the cost of doing business for the private sector and of providing public services. This is because

Resources that would otherwise have been invested in increasing output and funding education and health are diverted to crime prevention and ensuring security. Second, it reduces the planning horizon for firms and households. Firms are discouraged from making long-term investment while the rate of saving by households falls, resulting in a decrease in the supply of loanable funds. Finally, because high crime rate increases the cost of doing business, it may reduce the attraction of foreign investment to Africa.

Other causes of youth unemployment include information gaps between job seekers and potential employers; labour demand barriers, such as observed discrimination by employers towards young people on grounds of lack of experience or gender and a low status attached to vocational training.

The consequences of youth unemployment leave a permanent imprint on individual life outcomes, national and continental development. They represent both widespread personal misfortune for individuals and a lost opportunity for national and continental economic development. No wonder, Manpower group (2012) stated that Young people who have difficulty in their early integration into the world of work suffer lifelong “scarring” effects that diminish their resiliency and ability to thrive in a dynamic and demanding labour market. In addition, persons who experience extended unemployment as youths are at increased risk of illhealth, malnutrition and psychological deficits. According to ILO (2000) and Kotloff (2004) as cited in Manpower group (2012), chronic unemployment is associated with increased incidence of criminal behavior. Furthermore, high rates of youth unemployment represent a waste of valuable human capital for developing economies since the poor participation of youths in economic activities limits the use of available inputs needed for growth. Other effects include civil unrest, drug abuse, rising rate of crime, single parent families and risky behaviour which could increase their vulnerability to contracting HIV/AIDS.

African youths have the potential to be great impetus for Africa’s development, if the problem of youth unemployment is addressed. Though attempts have been made by different governments to solve these problems, a lot still needs to be done.

4. Solutions to Youth Unemployment

The mismatch between the skills produced by the education sector and the skills needed by the labour market as well as the lack of job opportunities can be solved by restructuring of the Educational system. Restructuring of the Educational system is the key to the successful reduction of youth unemployment in Africa. For the African continent to succeed in this battle, it is imperative that innovations be made in terms of introducing courses in tertiary institutions that will produce the skilled manpower the economy requires. Also, in different disciplines, that advancements have been made, it is important that these new skills be introduced in various tertiary institutions and outdated methods or skills be less emphasised or discarded. This will go a long way in making the educated youths possess the specific skills (especially “21st century skills”) required in the workplace. Secondly, entrepreneurship education should be introduced at the secondary and tertiary levels. According to data from The World Bank’s Enterprise Surveys, small scale enterprises (5-19 employees) are the primary engines of job growth in developing countries (Manpower Group, 2012). More youths can be motivated to become job creators (Entrepreneurs) instead of job seekers if Entrepreneurship Education is introduced at the early stages of their education. The Entrepreneurship Education curricula for both secondary and tertiary institutions should be made interesting so that students can appreciate the course and learn to see opportunities where others see threats or challenges. The opinion of successful entrepreneurs could be sought when developing the entrepreneurship curricula. They could also serve as mentors, instructors and visitors in entrepreneurship classes. Even when some youths do not start their own business, they will develop or acquire life-skills and deeper understanding of what it takes to make a business succeed. They will have more to offer in the workplace because entrepreneurship education provides them with greater financial and business literacy; a stronger focus on the needs of the enterprise; an understanding of the need for initiative and creative problem solving disciplined by teamwork and cooperation. Some youths who are not ready to launch their own business right after graduating may be inspired to explore entrepreneurship opportunities later in their career.

Other solutions include:

- a) Promoting a more positive image for Vocational Education as well as providing modern technologies in vocational schools, technical colleges and other higher institutions;
- b) Introducing Job search techniques in the curricula so that many youths will not have to depend solely on parents and relatives to find jobs.
- c) Putting the right policies and incentives in place. For example, governments can ensure proper funding of these institutions, give loans at reduced interest rates and offer tax holidays or concessions for up-coming entrepreneurs.

5. Conclusion

Africa is a great continent with a growing population of jobless youths who have resulted to crime and adopted other vices that are detrimental to them and the continent. In order to reduce the youth unemployment level now

and in the future, there is a need to make some changes in the educational system so that African institutions can produce educated youths that can be successful entrepreneurs and employable employees. Youths that can compete within the continent as well as across the globe.

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