



## **Executive summary**

The objective of this brief is to stimulate reflection on what the focus on “youth” can bring to the work of the Africa Commission, recently launched by the Danish government. The aim of the Commission is to improve international development cooperation with Africa and find new and innovative strategies for creating job opportunities for Africa’s youth. But what difference does it make that the Africa Commission is addressing employment objectives in a framework that focuses on youth? What is called into play by the concept of youth that is absent from discussions about employment tout court? This brief analyzes these issues and suggests how to integrate growth, employment and youth in the future work of the Commission.

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# **The Danish Africa Commission’s Focus on Youth**

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## Introduction

The Africa Commission was launched by the Danish Government in May 2008. The aim of the Commission is to present new and creative strategies to revitalize and strengthen international development cooperation with Africa.

The Commission's overall focus is on *Youth and Employment*. Youth is emphasized in light of the fast population growth and this segment's high demographic share in Africa (46 per cent of whose population is between 5 and 25 years). The commission acknowledges that young people represent a particular opportunity and challenge for development and security. On the bright side of the equation, young people are expected to be the dynamo of development and economic growth; on the dark side, disaffected youth without education, jobs or the prospect of a meaningful future may fuel future instability, migration, radicalization and violent conflict.

Generally, young people in Africa leave school early and enter the labor market unprepared. Their contribution to economic growth is therefore limited, reinforcing their vulnerability to poverty. Like policy-makers, therefore, the Commission considers education and

employment to be the key to Africa's developmental malaise. Yet is it not clear what value is added by situating the Commission's discussions on education, employment and growth in a youth framework.

## Thinking Youth and Employment

Throughout the brief, the term "youth" refers to the United Nations' definition of young people as those between 15 and 24 years of age. However, meanings of youth vary across space and time and may, for example, be different for men and women. In general, "youth" refers to the transitional years between childhood and adulthood, which are usually marked by certain rites of passage or other defining events such as obtaining employment and/or establishing a family. In many countries, unmarried men and women are considered "boys" and "girls", regardless of age. Marriage is often an indicator of economic well-being and independence, whereas the status of unmarried young men and women is often associated with poverty and dependence.

While young people constitute a significant proportion of Africa's population, governments and aid agencies have generally been slow to

fashion responses to their specific situation. This appears to be rapidly changing. Agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are among a number of institutions that have recently released publications about youth, in particular young people in war and conflict, and about ways of supporting their livelihoods.

However, most of the work on “youth” in Africa reiterates *facts* that are already widely recognized: the young face high rates of unemployment, are vulnerable to contracting HIV, have limited access to training and education, and evince a general apathy for political engagement. African labour markets are characterized by an excess of jobseekers competing for comparatively few vacancies. As a consequence, the number of unemployed youth in all of Africa grew by almost 30 per cent from 1995 to 2005, their rate of unemployment being estimated at 19.5 percent in 2005. Young Africans are three times more likely to be unemployed than their adult counterparts aged 25 years old and over.

Many policy-makers regard African young people as economically inactive, since most of them lack formal sector employment and are labeled by

traditional statistical economic surveys as “unemployed”. The Commission is no exception: it views young Africans as “inactive”, as stated in its discussion paper, *Youth, Employment and Education*. But what are the consequences of departing from such a view of youth?

First, by championing formal employment and education, there is an inherent danger that existing effective, but less formal means of meeting youth employment and learning needs are ignored. Secondly, such a view runs the risk of missing the degree to which young people are *already* economically active by contributing to household income through work in the informal sector, in family based enterprises or in farming or petty trading activities.

One way to avoid such misinterpretations and to ensure that the focus on “youth” really does make a difference is by tracing and acknowledging the “signals” sent by young Africans themselves. What do we make of urban youth who *actively choose* to drive a taxi-motorbike or be mobile phone card retailers as means of securing a livelihood, rather than planting swamp rice and peanuts on their parents’ farms in the bush? How do we address and assist such young

people while acknowledging and incorporating the agency and skills that are already in place?

In many African countries, work in the informal sector generates the majority of all employment and self-employment opportunities for young people and adults alike. The incidence of self-employment among the former is high. In some countries, including Burundi, Gambia and Zambia, almost all rural youth employment is in the informal and self-employment sectors. In urban areas some young people work in paid employment, but still almost 80 percent of urban youth in Kenya and Cameroon work in the informal sector or are self-employed. In other words, young people are less likely to be involved in wage work and much more likely to be performing informal work than adults.

To sum up, the Commission's focus on formal employment and education may have the effect of occluding other perspectives that are more flexible, innovative, creative, and inclusive of young people's own opinions and actual livelihoods. Having as its main task to rethink current aid modalities and generate new thinking for special initiatives for youth employment, the Commission needs to engage in a reflexive process in which youth is purposely framed as a

critical priority. In this way, the Commission will hopefully be able to contribute constructively and in a truly innovative manner to the debate over how best to link growth, employment creation and youth. In West Africa, for instance, young apprentices outnumber employees in small informal firms: the Commission could recommend bolstering and enhancing this work by providing access to new technologies, improving the technical skills of master crafts people and certifying skills.

### **Working with youth or around youth?**

The perspectives of the young themselves are rarely taken into consideration in designing program activities for employment generation and education. Activities in schools, for instance, focus on a narrow range of learning modalities, with literacy being prioritized. Yet young people need a variety of skills to survive in severely impoverished settings, especially in the African mega-cities. Youth development specialists have, for example, pioneered a wide range of non-formal learning and youth engagement approaches, from community service to livelihood support initiatives closely tied to local market demands.

Experience shows that practical curricula that include both technical and life skills, less formal methods of instruction and flexible schedules are most likely to attract the young and provide them with the skills they need in the labor market. Large-scale funding for these kinds of “alternative” efforts is rarely available and more often than not directed towards young people at risk of radicalization and militancy. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, the at-risk young have become an important priority because of the ways in which they became key actors in the civil wars in these two countries.

From the vantage point of the young, it is important to be able to apprehend what knowledge, skills and trades are being either passed on or dropped entirely in contemporary Africa. Youngsters are re-creating the African social world. Participation of the young in defining their own employment needs and modalities should be central to the agenda of the Commission. It is therefore of paramount importance that the Commission works with youth and not around it. If the ultimate goal is to create *innovative* thinking, a broader framework for understanding the link between youth and employment is needed.

The fact that youth unemployment is overwhelmingly an *urban* phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa should stimulate the Commission to come up with effective recommendations. Which economic sectors are the most suitable in absorbing unemployed youth? Do these differ from country to country? According to the World Bank (2008), the unemployment ratio for urban youth is at least triple that for rural youth in Burkina Faso, Burundi, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda and Zambia, and at least twice that of rural youth in Kenya and Madagascar.

The data highlight two possible programmatic answers to the problem of youth unemployment. One is to use the *potential* of the agricultural sector for absorbing young rural workers. However, to make agriculture an attractive employment option for young people, African countries need to devise innovative policies and develop the sector. But agriculture cannot do this alone, since experiences of living in the city may have changed young people’s visions and aspirations, making them unable or unwilling to reintegrate into the patterns of rural life. A second answer is therefore to design a comprehensive strategy to combat youth unemployment in the *cities*, acknowledging that few urban youth are willing to live in rural communities.

General policies are necessary to promote youth employment (spurring economic growth and improving the investment climate), but they are not sufficient. Youth would benefit from policies that mitigate market and policy failures responsible for labor market rigidity and segmentation. In Ethiopia, for instance, downward rigidity in real wages in the urban sector in times of economic reform has led to high rates of urban youth unemployment.

### Conclusion

It is very timely that the Commission is bringing the issue of youth employment in Africa to the forefront of its discussions, and of the utmost importance that it does so. Thus far, the overarching message of the Commission has been the need to promote further investments in the human capital of young people in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the potential of working with youth has yet to be realized, and the crucial question still hangs in the air: who is going to provide the jobs that Africa so badly needs? This brief suggests that the Commission needs to take young people seriously if it is to achieve the ultimate goal of its work, namely to create and innovate new avenues of intervention that effectively link growth, employment and

youth. Three ideas or ways forward are suggested:

- First, all discussions and proposals should depart from an acknowledgement that most young Africans are themselves experts in job creation and survival. The task is thus not only to find practical ways of harnessing the potential of youth, but to advance thinking of how young people are already contributing to African economies and how one can add value to their activities. Informality is seen by some donors and international organizations as a problem, but it certainly represents part of the solution in creating and sustaining jobs.
- Secondly, although conditions of economic growth and overall employment creation are necessary to improve employment outcomes in general, they might not be sufficient to improve the situation of young people. Thus, the Commission needs to incorporate into its recommendations modalities ensuring that young people can take full advantage of the opportunities that growth presents, for

example, by minimizing policy and market failures that affect them disproportionately. Spurring economic growth in itself does not necessarily benefit them.

- Thirdly, while the traditional “employment and education” framework tends to limit the terms of discussion to the imperative of providing jobs and educational opportunities for young people, adding a “youth” focus opens up the possibility to see young people as resourceful, dynamic, and capable of contributing to growth and economic development.

## Suggested further reading

Freedman David (2005) *Youth Employment Promotion: A Review of ILO Work and the Lessons Learned*; Youth Employment Network, (YEN) Papers, No.1, Geneva.

UNDP (2006) *Youth and Violent Conflict: Society and Development in Crisis?* Compiled by Michi, E., Izzi, V., Lendon, A., Ngjela, E., Sampson, P. and Lowicki-Zucca, J.; Bureau for Crisis Prevention. New York.

World Bank (2008) *Youth in Africa's Labor Market*; Marito Garcia and Jean Fares (eds.); Washington DC.



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