

# Africa's Youth Unemployment Dilemma

I remember, as if it was yesterday, the first time I became officially unemployed. Monday, 19 June 2006. On that day, I officially completed my bachelor's degree at Uganda's Makerere University after handing in my certified dissertation. It was also the day that, per the University's rules, I ceased to be a student, which meant that I could no longer stay in the sprawling University Hall of Residence for free. At that time, there was a bunch of stubborn students who always 'hung around' the campus, some for years, after completing their studies, for a variety of reasons, chief of which was not having anywhere else to go. Home was out of the question.

Some old-school parents, who didn't know better, continue to naively think that there are (mostly government) jobs waiting for their children after completing school, perhaps with an official car to go with it. Such was the attitude of my oldman. Boarding a bus to my far-flung countryside home, therefore, wasn't one of the options. So I hung around. To cut the story short, the campus management would later throw me out after a new regime tightened the rules.

How it all ended for me is a story for another day, but it took me 2 years to get the job I really wanted. Fifteen years later, I can't even imagine how harder it is for current unemployed young people.

Uganda's universities churn out over 40,000 graduates every year, according to the country's Council for Higher Education, [but only about 9,000 jobs](#) are waiting for them in the country's job market. It is a common spectacle for a couple of low-level job vacancies to attract thousands of mostly overqualified graduate applicants who do the aptitude tests in a stadium.

Uganda is not alone. About 60% of all of Africa's jobless people are youths, [according to the World Bank](#). When strictly defined to mean a couple of hours of work done each week as the International Labour Organisation [does](#), it may look like everyone has a job in Africa, as subsistence scavenging for survival is the norm for most people. But when you consider quality vs qualification for the job, many, young people especially, are in serious trouble.

The heartbreaking deadly journeys many of them have to make across the Sahara and the Mediterranean in ill-fated attempts to reach the EU is one example of the level of desperation.

### **So what should be done about it?**

The potential of Africa's young people is enormous. The median age for the continent is only 19. Many are willing to work but have few opportunities to do so. The burst of creativity one witnesses from Kinshasa to Dakar, from Soweto to Casablanca, is impressive.

Firstly, Africa cannot import its way into the first world. We have to fast track industrialisation and, at the very least, produce most of what we consume. We have to address our balance of payments and balance of trade problems. Africa's share of world trade is a [pitiful low 2%](#), an unbelievable statistic given the amount of natural resources at our disposal – oil, diamonds, gold ... not to mention all the agricultural products, such as coffee, tea, cocoa, etc. One [estimate says](#) that if Africa were able to increase its share of world trade from 2 to just 3 per cent, the 1 per cent increase would generate about \$70 billion of additional income annually for Africa, about three times the total 'development assistance' Africa gets from the entire world. The number of jobs that would be generated from this kind of increased trade interface with the world would be enormous. We can't do that because of many factors, including an unfair global trade regime but also our weak export capacity due to low levels of

industrialisation.

Secondly, most African young people lack skills for the 21st-century economy. Colonial education that was intended to drill the ideals and dictates of the colonial master into Africans remains on the curricula across the continent. Most of our young people, therefore, are not just unemployed but unemployable. This is not only absurd but a dereliction of duty by some of our leaders. We need to overhaul our education system to impart hands-on skills in IT, agriculture, and business and finance to ensure that our young people acquire the skills fit for purpose.

Lastly, we have to improve the quality of our explosive population or manage the growth better. I don't entirely buy the optimism of many analysts who only see the sunny side of the population growth challenge. Africa's youth population is expected to double to [nearly a billion by 2050](#), and while this comes with potentially great opportunities – enlarged markets, job creation, etc. – our problem is that Africa's economies aren't growing at a corresponding rate. Any gains in economic growth are normally immediately wiped out by an equal or even greater increase in birth rates. Therefore, the [demographic dividend](#) for the continent might not be maximised. This calls for government-led structural efforts to ensure that our growing population is of a desirable quality and equipped to face the challenges of the 21st century.

In conclusion, unemployment in Africa can be addressed using a multi-level approach. At the macro-level, the state should take the initiative to structurally change things through government policies. At the intermediate level, other actors such as those in academia and the private sector should invest the right intellectual and physical resources. While at the micro-level, creativity and proactive initiatives by the young people themselves will lead to job creation at the individual level to complement the efforts of governments and other higher-level stakeholders.