

Common Cause: Developing a Coordinated Response on the Continent to Youth Unemployment

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Africa's Moment of Youth

Nearly 1.1 billion Africans across 54 countries constitute the population of the world's most intriguing continent and by 2050, demographic growth will take the total population to 1.8 billion. Today, over 200 million Africans are between the ages of 15-24, a number expected to double in the next 40 years. Already, this fact makes Africa the youngest continent in the world and sets it up for either a demographic dividend or a demographic disaster. With youth unemployment rates soaring across many African countries – South Africa, for example, has over 50 percent youth unemployment according to the World Bank – the question has to be asked: where will young people turn to for economic opportunity if their governments cannot create the conditions for formal employment for job-seekers?

Recognizing a Multifaceted Challenge

If the youth bulge in Africa remains unaddressed, it will result in a myriad of devastating consequences for the continent and the international community.. When there are situations of state failure, such as in Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo or Libya, we see “hyper-symptoms” resulting from the convergence of the youth bulge with political and economic displacement. In the most familiar of circumstances, with regards to ‘criminality’, we have seen over the last decade the resurgence of piracy activities off the Horn of Africa most notably, and the Gulf of Guinea more recently. This phenomenon was and is often driven by economic demands on young people, and a lack of alternative sources of income (e.g. from fishing due to depleted stocks). Yet, piracy is only the tip of the iceberg of the issues emanating from economically discouraged or deprived youth, especially in times of wider political insecurity.

In Libya, many youth have joined irregular militias since the 2011 revolution in that country, not out of a desire for political change, as Gadhafi was already long removed from the scene, but for a steady income stream. Or in Somalia, the principal militant group that has faced off against the incumbent government today, and the transitional government before, has been the *Al-Shabaab*, a group whose name's literal meaning is youth. The challenge can also be political and that discontent can lead to wider disruptions. While the case in North Africa is most notable, in South Africa today, the leader of the political movement, 'Economic Freedom Fighters,' Julius Malema is riding populist fervor amongst youth to try and upend the country's political and economic establishment.

While some young people may turn to sub-state political or militant groups for 'opportunity,' others turn to Africa's 'informal' economy. The African Development Bank estimates that "55% of Sub-Saharan Africa's GDP and 80% of its labor force" are involved in the informal economy. The lack of government regulation or oversight means that there is a significant space within the informal sector for the trade of illicit goods. Obviously this high-level activity in the informal economy enables immense corruption and theft of the profits of the continent's natural resources. However, this activity also translates into an untracked flow of illegal trade, ranging from counterfeit goods to narcotics. For example, it is widely understood that perhaps half if not more of the cocaine supply from Latin America to Europe passes through West Africa.

Many youth, however, simply do not see opportunity at all, and seek to migrate, hence bringing the issue to Europe's doorstep, enabling a network of human trafficking. A firmly established and brutal route crisscrosses the continent to Libya, where smugglers herd migrants onto unsafe vessels to cross the Mediterranean. Over 3,000 migrants have died trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2014, as of September, according to a recent report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Mapping the Solution Space

The challenge of youth employment, underemployment, and general economic exclusion is a common one in Africa, but Africa is by no means a monolithic social, political, or economic unit. In fact, the situation of youth differs from country-to-country. For example, in North Africa, youth unemployment rates were at a perennial high in recent years, which contributed to upheavals in late 2010 and early 2011. And while in Sub-Saharan Africa the rates have

been lower, the issue has been more about economic well-being and subsistence welfare rather than labor participation.

Yet there is a common set of characteristics of the youth challenge across countries:

- A lack of basic education, with youth literacy at 69.5% in Sub-Saharan Africa, far behind the global average of 89.5%;
- A clear gap between education and skills and the needs of the markets; and
- Inequitable economic growth that does not mobilize local labor forces.

A number of organizations are working across the continent on these dimensions, in a solution space that must involve the community and policy levels. Some notable examples include:

- *UN Global Education First Initiative*: an initiative of the Secretary-General of the UN that seeks to ‘put every child in school’;
- *Souktel*: an organization providing a job-matching service in Somalia, Rwanda and elsewhere over a mobile platform;
- *Young Africa*: a program that builds skills training centers in local communities;
- *Education for Employment*: a network of NGOs focusing on skills training to place youth in the marketplace; and
- *African Youth Charter*: a policy document endorsed by the African Union that provides a framework for action through 2018.

Of course, for any of these initiatives and others to be successful, they must occur within or be complemented by overall growth strategies by governments that promote industries integrated into local economies. The latter can be a significant hurdle in many resource-rich countries on the continent, where the incentive is to bypass or neglect communities in capital-intensive industries (e.g. mining).

Building a Coordinated Response



Policy institutes, civil society, research centers, international organizations and many others have all charted, often in-depth, the challenges and solutions mentioned in this paper. There are no secrets here, and while there is not yet an identifiable panacea, there are ideas abound towards a solution. Nevertheless, a coordinated response is still lacking on the continent and ownership of the issue is not yet clear. While youth unemployment is a 'local' problem on one hand, on the other hand it is clearly one with regional and global dimensions, both in the issues it presents and the solutions required to address the challenge. When young people turn to alternative sources of income outside of formal economic channels, then the networks they become connected to immediately have regional and international security dimensions.

The solution space to the youth unemployment challenge is one that should be a shared responsibility. It is important that there is a coordination of lessons learned and a pooling of knowledge resources on possible interventions. While the *African Youth Charter* was a great document, how can we ensure follow-up practically on the dimension of youth unemployment?

One idea that would be an important development in the next 1-2 years if implemented would be the establishment of an *Africa Youth Center*, both as a physical and virtual space, which would convene the continent's organizations working on youth unemployment issues. This could have several satellite regional affiliates, hosted in West Africa for example, by the Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS), and in North Africa by the African Development Bank, in East Africa by the East African Community (EAC), in Botswana by the South African Development Community (SADC), just as examples. An online platform could collate examples in youth policy from various countries on the continent, and highlight the most innovative organizations such as a couple of the ones listed above, working on the issues that matter.

Seize, Don't Lose the Moment

As we address the burgeoning youth population in Africa and the potential economic exclusion or marginalization of many of these young people, it is easy to think of a demographic danger or threat. Of course, from a security perspective, left on its own, this

challenge could present a devastating blow to the continent, due to heightened piracy, illicit trade, terrorism, and more. Yet, the demographic dividend is still in our grasp, and Africa's young people still have that chance, with the right support, to help the continent seize its moment, and help define the coming decades as Africa's century.

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