



## Regional Overview: Youth in Africa

- Youth (aged 15 to 24) constitute slightly more than 20 per cent of Africa's population.
- In 2050, youth will constitute:
  - 18.6 per cent of the population in Central Africa;
  - 18.5 per cent in Eastern Africa;
  - 18.8 per cent in Western Africa;
  - 15.6 per cent in Southern Africa;
  - 13.9 per cent in North Africa.
- About 36.8 per cent of Africa's workforce are youth.
- In 2009, the youth unemployment rate was at 11.9 per cent in Sub Saharan Africa and 23.7 per cent in North Africa; particularly affecting particularly young females.
- Literacy rates in the region have generally improved. In Over the last two decades, rates for young females rose from 58 per cent to 66.6 per cent, compared to 72 per cent to 78.4 per cent for young men.
- In 2007, an estimated 3.2 million young people were living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa alone.
- More than one out of two deaths among young African females is as a result of AIDS or AIDS- related illnesses.

Africa is the world's youngest continent, as the proportion of youth among the region's total population is higher than in any other continent. 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 to 24. The socioeconomic conditions of young Africans have improved in recent years, but not considerably. There has been an increase in school enrolment over the past 20 years, and the gender gap in education has narrowed, however, young Africans continue to face major difficulties in the realms of higher education, employment, health, and participation in decision-making processes.

African youth have the potential to be a great impetus for Africa's development, provided that appropriate investments in health and human capital are made. However, if youth issues are not addressed, and if high rates of youth unemployment and under-employment persist, Africa's development could be negatively affected.

The recent financial crisis is likely to affect young people much more than the general population, given the fact that most of those presently unemployed are youth. This sentiment has been expressed in terms of civil unrest, as demonstrated most prominently by youth in Northern Africa, and a few other parts of Africa .



The global financial crisis notwithstanding, poverty, low levels of participation in national and local decision-making processes, poor infrastructure, and conflicts have led thousands of young people to migrate from rural to urban areas. Many have crossed borders within Africa, and others have left the continent, in search of better educational opportunities and livelihoods.

Dissatisfied youth are often more likely than older generations to challenge their situation actively, and to become a socially destabilizing force, as evidenced by increasing demands for change on the continent.

For these reasons, many African countries are placing greater emphasis on youth development. While strategies to improve the livelihoods of young Africans have already been put in place, with the youth population continuing to represent a sizeable proportion of the total population, better integrated and scaled-up initiatives on youth development are needed. These could ensure improved health, education, and employment conditions, and also more effective participation in decision-making on issues that directly affect them, both in rural and urban settings.

## Issues and challenges facing African youth:

### Education

There has been significant improvement in access to primary education and literacy across Africa in the last decade. According to the United Nations 2010 Millennium Development Goals Report, the net primary education enrolment rate in the Central, Western, Eastern and Southern African regions combined increased from 58 percent in 1999 to 76 percent in 2008, while in North Africa, it increased from 86 percent in 1999 to 94 percent in 2008.

However, the increase in primary education enrolment rates has not necessarily been followed by an equivalent increase in secondary and tertiary education rates, especially for young women and girls. When it comes to tertiary education among youth populations in Africa, the gross enrolment rate is very low. As an example, according to the Africa Youth Report 2011, Algeria and Mauritius were reported to have the highest enrolment of school-age population in tertiary institutions at 31 and 26 percent, respectively. Increased provision of post-primary education could give young Africans the hard and soft skills that will enable them to compete effectively in the labour market of an ever-evolving and globalized world.

This education deficit particularly affects socially excluded young people such as girls and young people with disabilities. While gender parity has been achieved in many African countries at the primary education level, disparity remains significant, especially at the tertiary education level. Indeed, although over the last two decades, young female literacy rates in Africa have increased from 58

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### *Moving Africa's Educational System Forward:*

Concerted efforts by Governments, partners and initiatives such as Education for All have had a very positive impact on youth education in Africa, but these efforts need to be supported at the post-primary levels of education. Moreover, measurable education returns and favourable outcomes in the labour market remain limited across Africa. One of the reasons for this unsuccessful transition is the mismatch between the needs of the labour market and what the education systems teach.

## **Employment**

Employment remains the main concern of youth in the region. Sub-regional and country variations are important to note. For example, youth unemployment rates in Malawi and Rwanda are under 5 percent, whereas rates reach 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).

The exceptionally high unemployment rates in Africa can be interpreted as one of the main factors behind the revolutionary activity and recent civil unrest in North Africa and elsewhere in the region. Youth unemployment stands at 31 percent and 34 percent in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively.

Two of the principal reasons for Africa's high unemployment rates are: a mismatch between educational systems and the skills needed in the labour market, and the saturated public services and small private sector bases that are unable to employ large numbers of people. Other relevant reasons include labour demand barriers, such as observed discrimination by employers towards young people on the grounds of lack of experience; information gaps between job seekers and potential employers; and barriers to the creation and development of business opportunities, particularly in gaining access to financial, physical and social capital.

Another reason for high youth unemployment rates is a mindset that tells educated young people that they must be employed in white-collar jobs. In relation to this sentiment, a low status is also afforded to vocational training. Furthermore, most young people in Africa do not finish school and

### *Key Figures in Youth Unemployment across selected African Countries:*

**Rwanda, Malawi:** below 5%

**Ghana, Zambia, Zimbabwe:** above 20%

**Mauritius, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland, Algeria:** above 30%

**South Africa:** above 60% for females

**Tunisia:** 31%

**Egypt:** 34%

Another reason for high youth unemployment rates is a mindset that tells educated young people that they must be employed in white-collar jobs. In relation to this sentiment, a low status is also afforded to vocational training. Furthermore, most young people in Africa do not finish school and universities with a plan to engage in self-employment. In West Africa, however, this is beginning to change.

Additionally, the ILO's 2010 Youth Employment Report notes that, while unemployment is relatively high across Africa, the degree of underemployment and working poverty is even greater, thus pointing to a lack of adequate job opportunities for youth.

## **Health**

Africa collectively aspires to universal access to health care and coverage (i.e. securing access to promotive, preventive, curative and rehabilitative services at affordable cost). However, the various constraints in health financing are affecting the most vulnerable Africans, including youth.

HIV/AIDS remains a major cause of death among the African youth, and is one of the biggest youth public health issue facing the region, especially for girls and young women, who are more vulnerable to contracting HIV than boys or young men. AIDS is responsible for more than one out of every two deaths among young girls, compared to one out of four deaths among young boys. Young people are still vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS because of lax prevention strategies.

Some of the explanations for the spread of HIV are to be found in inequalities related to gender and age relations. Poverty and risky sexual behaviours also play a role. Deleterious environments and the rapid population changes to which many young people are subjected increase their exposure to the virus. Moreover, vulnerability increases for the many children and youth in the region who suffer from the effects of nutritional deficiencies, infectious diseases like tuberculosis or malaria, rural to urban migration, international migration, and conflict and natural disaster. Girls are particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection due to early marriage, violence against women and sexual abuse.

A lack of information about how HIV is transmitted, stigmatization, and social alienation of infected persons from school and workplaces impede faster progress towards the eradication of HIV/AIDS, particularly among young Africans.

The UNECA MDG Report 2010 states that HIV prevalence and mortality rates among those aged 15 to 24 is falling. In 2008, the prevalence among this age group in sub-Saharan Africa fell to around 5%, and confirming a downward trend since 2005.

Other diseases, such as tuberculosis, are also among the top five killers of young Africans, according to WHO. Although there is limited current data on causes of mortality, WHO reported in 2002 that deaths of young African men were attributable first to AIDS, followed by tuberculosis, violence,

other unintentional injuries and war. Among young women, AIDS was followed by maternal complications, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases other than HIV/AIDS, and malaria. In more recent years, countries have reported decreases in AIDS mortality as a result of reduced prevalence, and the introduction of Highly Active Antiretroviral Treatment (HAART).

Structural challenges and weak healthcare systems contribute to the high mortality rates of young people in the region. As agreed upon by the fourth session of the Joint United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and African Union Commission Conference of Ministers of Finance, improving the coverage and performance of healthcare systems in Africa would undoubtedly reduce morbidity and mortality among young people.

## **Participation in the Decision-Making Process**

Efforts to engage youth in policy formulation have increased over the past few years at all levels. Youth participation across Africa occurs through various fora, such as through youth organizations, national youth councils, and youth parliaments set up at the national or regional levels. Examples of these include the African Youth Parliament, and the Mano River Union Youth Parliament. Youth are also getting involved in regional youth-based advocacy groups and are consulted in national processes, for example in those related to developing Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). However, the work of national youth councils and youth parliaments is often limited to one-off events. Evidence of current and ongoing activities tends to be lacking.

### *Understanding the constraints of African youth participation:*

Few opportunities exist for active youth participation in decision-making processes due to limited skills, tools and resources, among both young people and the Governments that are required to engage in effective consultative processes, and to implement action plans. Often, Governments lack an understanding of the benefits of youth involvement in consultation processes, and advocacy-based groups have limited capacity to maintain momentum for continued actions.

## **The United Nations System's Approach to Youth in Africa**

There are many UN entities working on youth issues in Africa, which also work closely with the the African Union Commission under the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) process to address youth issues in the region.

The UN system is charged with monitoring and reporting upon the advocacy and implementation of youth related commitments, carried out through each entity's respective mandate. Such commitments include, for example, the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY), which provides a policy framework for Governments and identifies 15 priority areas to advance youth development. In 2006, following the review of progress on implementation of the WPAY, the UN system in the region and the African Union, together with their development partners, dedicated the Fifth African

Development Forum (ADF-V) to the theme, “Youth and Leadership in the 21st Century”.

Other areas of activity include implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All, which also provide guidance to countries on promoting youth development and empowerment.

#### *UN entities working on youth issues in Africa:*

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

## **Regional and National Efforts in Creating Youth Policies**

### **Regional Efforts**

In recent decades, a number of global and regional initiatives spurred by the UN have been adopted by Governments to push the youth development agenda forward.

Among the initiatives undertaken by the African Union to address youth issues are the following:

- The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) launched a youth desk that gives youth a platform for dialogue and enabled them to contribute to policy debates.
- In 2006, the African Union Heads of State adopted the African Youth Charter, a legal instrument defining the rights, duties and freedoms of young people, which underpins youth empowerment. The Charter emphasizes the importance of education and skills development for improving the livelihoods of youth. As of May 2011, 23 countries have ratified the Charter, and 37 have signed the charter.
- The global Education for All movement led to the adoption of the African Union’s Second Education Plan of Action (2006-2015), which provides the key guiding framework for African countries to promote the right to education and the development of relevant skills as important instruments for facilitating access to decent work.
- The African Union further developed other tools and instruments to effectively engage youth, such as the 2009-2018 Ten-Year AU Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment and Development, the AU Youth Volunteer Corps Programme and African Youth Day. The African Union also celebrated the launch of the International Year of the Youth on 1 November 2010.

## National Efforts

Realizing the importance of youth participation in development and governance processes, as well as the need to harness the great potential of young people, many countries in Africa have put in place national youth policies or action plans.

Numerous Member States have enacted policies aimed at generating employment through enhanced skills development in the economically active population. As part of efforts to boost job opportunities for young people, countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and Tunisia have developed young entrepreneurship programmes and business start-up schemes supported by small industry development organizations (SIDO), which provide technical skills for new businesses. Another strategy provides incentives to firms for the hiring of young people. Such efforts have yielded some positive results; for example, 1.27 million jobs were created in Tanzania over the last three years as a result of these programmes.

Public works programmes have further been implemented in a number of countries, including Senegal, Ghana, South Africa and Nigeria. These provide unskilled young people with short-term employment that can serve as work experience in fields such as road construction, maintenance, irrigation infrastructure, reforestation, soil conservation and urban sanitation programmes. National youth service programmes (NYS) adopt an integrated approach to community service, skills development and access to employment opportunities and have proved effective in countries such as Nigeria and South Africa.

Tremendous efforts were put in place by all stakeholders to reduce HIV prevalence among and young people. While initially most of the focus of these interventions was on behavioral factors, emphasis has gradually been placed on other biological and socioeconomic factors that drive HIV incidence among young people and the complex relationship between them, including gender.

However, many youth policies have significant shortcomings and experience challenges in their full implementation. These gaps can be addressed through various means, including by approaching young people as valuable resources rather than as a source of problems. Policy development must take into account regional variations of the national situation of youth as well as the needs of vulnerable youth such as young girls and young people with disabilities. Moreover, national youth policies need to be complemented with legislation that acknowledges and guarantees the involvement of young people in decision-making processes. Policies should outline the steps to be taken at all levels of government administration, and should be supported by inter-ministerial cooperation to ensure a cross-sectoral approach in addressing youth development issues. Finally, Governments should ensure adequate and efficient financing for youth programmes and policy aims.

## The Way Forward

In order to take full advantage of its youth population and to ensure future prosperity, heavy investment is needed in education, health and employment, for men and women, in both rural and urban areas. The effective implementation of youth policies in these areas across the region requires that youth-related issues be given high priority in national development agendas. Youth-related issues are often marginalized due to challenges such as internal conflicts or poverty. Youth issues require more critical thinking and strategic planning. To date, many relevant issues have been responded to in an ad-hoc manner without adequate consideration for their long-term implications on youth populations.

Unemployment, underemployment, decent work and integration into the mainstream of development remain priority concerns for young Africans, and are linked to recent situations of civil unrest in the northern Africa. These issues should therefore be tackled with urgency. If African youth are to be competitive in the new global economy, all stakeholders, including Governments, the private sector, civil society, faith-based and youth-focused organizations, should strengthen cooperation and partnerships to ensure that returns from both formal and non-formal education bring about highly productive outcomes in the labour market.

Special attention is needed for youth in conflict zones, who are particularly vulnerable to violations of their rights, poor health, limited educational and employment opportunities and poor working conditions.

Furthermore, Governments and development partners would benefit from implementing more socially inclusive policies. As long as interventions do not target specific groups of people due to age, sex, ethnicity, location of residence or disability status, the specific challenges faced by vulnerable and socially excluded groups will persist.

African countries, in collaboration with development partners, should expand the development of action plans for youth and allocate sufficient resources to ensure that policies and programmes are operational and implemented. They should involve young people in all stages and areas of policymaking, from Poverty Reduction Strategies to national development plans and youth policies, and they should work to enhance research on youth development issues, including the collection and analysis of disaggregated data through national statistical offices. Beyond that, collection and analysis of data is instrumental to ensure that interventions and policies are evidence-based and responsive to situations on the ground. Such measures can enable young Africans to have improved access to valuable information and opportunities, so that they might make informed decisions about their lives.



## For further information:

- African Development Forum V <http://www.uneca.org/adfv>
- African Union - Youth at the AU website <http://www.africa-youth.org/>
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- UNDESA, World Population prospects, 2010 revision.
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- UNECA (2010): Economic Report on Africa 2010, Promoting high level sustainable growth to reduce unemployment in Africa, Addis Ababa.
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- UNECA (2010); The 2010 Africa MDG report: Assessing progress in Africa toward the MDGs.
- UNECA (2011): Africa Youth Report: Addressing the Youth Education and Employment Nexus in the New Global Economy.
- UNESCO (2010): Education for All Global Monitoring Report [www.unesco.org/en/efareport/reports/2010-marginalization](http://www.unesco.org/en/efareport/reports/2010-marginalization)
- United Nations (2010), Millennium Development Goals report, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG%20Report%202010%20En%20r15%20-low%20res%2020100615%20-.pdf>
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- World Bank (2009): Africa Youth Employment Indicators 2008/09 <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXT-STATINAFR/Resources/ADI-200809-essay-EN.pdf>
- WHO Revised Global Burden of Disease 2002 Estimates; Countries from the WHO-AFRO region – see [www.afro.who.int/home/countryprofiles.html](http://www.afro.who.int/home/countryprofiles.html). The AFRO region includes all sub-Saharan countries, excluding Eritrea and Somalia, together with Algeria.

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