



Empowering youth in sub-Saharan Africa's development
YOUTH AS A CATALYST IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

At this critical time of development in sub-Saharan Africa where the continent's growth actually makes it become a region of great potential, it would be vital to integrate the youth in the development of the youngest continent in the world. Long-time considered as the continent of all worries and social threats, sub-Saharan Africa has become of keen interest from investors all over the world including emerging market giants like China and India which consider sub-Saharan Africa as a major partner to fuel their own development. This is where the need to empower the young African generation arises. With a population boom of 1.5 billion inhabitants, sub-Saharan Africa stands at the cross-roads of economic development. This report identifies the strategic factors that should propel the African youth to benefit from the opportunities that lie ahead, in particular, economic growth, progress and better living standards. It highlights that an investment in education remains paramount to the youth development in the region with already appalling levels of illiteracy. In order to better address the needs and concerns of young Africans, governments must come to their help by promoting incentives and initiatives for advancement. The research also emphasises the need for skills training and development which are more focused to the needs of economic advancement. In addition to that, better focus on information and communications technology could be measures to bridge the digital divide between sub-Saharan Africa and the West while making the young generation more tuned to harnessing the use and benefits of technology. Such measures might already be promoted in advanced economies within sub-Saharan Africa in countries like South Africa, Mauritius, Botswana, among others, but should equally impact other nations that are actually lagging behind in these fundamental areas. Although this research paper is not exhaustive, it sheds light on the key factors that could be of great benefit to an aspiring African youth in today's global economic environment.

Key words: *sub-Saharan Africa, youth, development.*

Introduction

With more than half of Sub-Saharan Africa's population now under the age of 25, and as many as 11 million young Africans expected to join the labour market every year for the next decade, Africa needs to consider the role and importance of youth as a catalyst for the development of the Continent. If on the one hand, observers and demographic specialists consider the sub-Saharan African population to be viewed as a population boom with over 1.5 billion inhabitants, business leaders and governments, on the other hand, might view this as an opportunity for advancement. Africa stands at a critical moment in history where the right actions taken can mean important economic yields in the decades to come. According to Employment Africa (2013), one important aspect here is the fact that the continent has the youngest population globally today. Estimates from analysts project that Africa will have the largest labour force in the world by 2035. In a report by the McKinsey Global Institute, Africa is projected to receive up to 122 million new entrants in the job market by 2020, but is expected to only create 72 million new stable wage paying jobs in the same period.

The key problem in Africa is that the Continent remains broadly poor with a sizeable population earning less than \$2 per day. Added to this is the impending unemployment problem that affects the Continent which depends much on primary and secondary industries where labour utilisation is poorly structured. While many African economies have registered impressive economic growth in recent years, poverty levels across the region have not fallen as much as expected and young people looking for better-paying work have been at a great disadvantage (World Bank, 2013). Singh (2010) mentioned that a booming economic growth has meant that the majority of young people in the region are now better able to participate productively in society. However, widening economic and social gaps have also left many others suffering from extreme poverty, gender inequality, limited access to education, poor health, disability, inadequate housing, and exploitation.

The objective of this report is to support the fact that young people in the African Continent will be vital for the development of their respective economies provided that a series of action could be undertaken in their favour. It states that Africa needs to offer the right educational tools to its young population in order to escape from poverty and unemployment. It also supports the idea that government initiatives for youth would be instrumental to the development of the Continent.

Another argument in favour of integrating the youth in African development could be the need to train them adequately in emerging sectors of the global economy and to harness the use of information and communication technologies for their advancement.

Arguably, there could more factors to consider and the choices selected for this report are not exhaustive. They however focus on the key initiatives that need to be offered to the young generation in order to better face the coming decades while allowing sub-Saharan Africa to make bolder and important steps towards its progress.

Education: The key to the advancement of the African Youth

The very first and bold decision that needs to be taken up at the Continental level is the provision of good quality education to the African youth. Millions of dollars are spent on the military which exploits child labour in warfare which is detrimental to economic advancement. If such capital were invested on the African youth, there would be much higher literacy levels and better chances for the youth to develop their potential. Fox (2013) stated that to promote investment and competitiveness, there was a need for the quality of primary education, the right nutrition for young children, and basic healthcare to improve the quality of life for Africa's young people and their future productivity.

Talking on educational provision for the youth could apparently look like a broad-based policy because every government in the region makes bold attempts to develop educational strategies for its youth. The main problems could be the access to education and a lack of facilities for young people or children located in distant areas. The help of non-governmental organisations has been so far valuable but this might also require the participation of stakeholders including external agencies funding education and private authorities. Diop (2012) states that as working populations age in other parts of the world, young Africans could find their labour and skills increasingly in high demand internationally if their governments pursue policies that improve education and job training for their youth.

Filmer (2013) states that governments could approach the youth employment challenge in two important ways—by helping to improve the business environment to spark more private investment, and also by investing more in young people's education and other skills to create brighter life prospects for them.

From Education to Skills Training and Talent Development

Apart from the quality of education being of paramount importance to the youth in Africa, another suitable factor could be skills training. Training is the acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies as a result of the teaching of vocational or practical skills and knowledge that relate to specific useful competencies. Training has specific goals of improving one's capability, capacity and performance.

Expanding accessibility to quality training is a powerful instrument for empowerment and inclusion of the youth and disadvantaged groups: women, rural dwellers and persons with Disabilities (Gondwe, 2012). In some cases, apprenticeships in the informal economy could offer many young people an opportunity to learn a trade and enter the world of work.

Skills development is a necessary response to the challenge of youth unemployment.

Effective programmes should involve packages of training-cum-labour-market-services.

According to Gondwe (2012), these should include: providing advisory services and career guidance, vocational counselling, job-search assistance and job placement, as well as access to different types of training, including combinations of learning and earning through apprenticeships or subsidized employment in return for on-the-job training. Successful entrepreneurship programmes should also involve providing basic business skills and linking would-be entrepreneurs to mentoring, finance and market opportunities. These integrated approaches are needed to assist young people in their transition from school to work and to tackle the multiple constraints they face on the labour market.

The World Bank Report (2014) noted that manufacturing, services, and agriculture were traditionally labour-intensive sectors that could generate productive work for young people. As working populations age in other parts of the world, young Africans could find their labour and skills increasingly in high demand internationally if their governments pursue policies that improve education and job training for their youth.

Government Initiatives for Youth in Africa

To take fullest advantage of the expected demographic dividends in the coming years, there needs to be consistent and sustained intervention. It is up to governments in Africa to decide how to address youth problems and how to bring about the desired results. African Union Heads of States have committed to reduce youth unemployment by 2% annually until 2015. There are strategic policy actions being taken, e.g. the implementation of the African Youth Charter (2006) through its roadmap, the Decade on Youth Development Plan of Action, but these do not spell out how or what actions to take to achieve the 2% reduction. Whilst the commitment is being displayed, matching strategic action are a distance behind (Infocus, 2012).

Mauritius, as one of the richest economies in sub-Saharan Africa, faces 8% unemployment in the current context. Some 30% of the unemployed population comprises young people between the age 18-24 and this is where the government is trying to make improvements. To combat unemployment, the Mauritian government launched the National Empowerment Programme in 2010 followed by substantial improvements made to it. Today, young graduates are offered the chance to get attachments in local and private companies to fulfil the Graduate Training programme which has the intention of improving employability in the future. There is also a refocusing of courses like the HSC Professional proposed by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources in a bid to reducing the prospective employee's expectations on white-collar and public jobs which are becoming more and more difficult to find today.

Recent evidence also shows that programmes that help young people acquire a range of complementary skills are very promising. In Liberia, a programme that offered a combination of technical, behavioural skills and business skills to adolescent girls and young women was highly effective in increasing their levels of employment and income. The business and professional-behavioural skills training allowed them to raise their monthly incomes by an average of US\$75—a 115 percent increase (World Bank, 2013).

Harnessing the use of Information and Communication Technologies

To ensure the advancement of African young people, most sub-Saharan countries consider the development and use of information and communication technologies as a major pillar of their economies. Mauritius, a small island state developed since the new millennium, its intention to become a cyber-island. Today, ICT has developed into an industry

of its own with collateral developments in the offshore, banking and data communications sectors. With an Internet penetration of only 16% in sub-Saharan Africa compared to 61% in the Americas and 75% in Europe, there is much to achieve in developing telecommunications and bridging the digital divide between the rich and the poor nations (International Telecommunications Union, 2013). Africa itself exhibits an inner digital divide, with most Internet activity and infrastructure concentrated in South Africa, Morocco, Egypt as well as smaller economies like Mauritius and the Seychelles.

Wamakote et al (2010) state that ICT in developing countries is rapidly transforming the way people do business, access information and services, communicate with each other and even entertain themselves. It is thus not surprising that African governments have taken on the development and use of ICTs as a major driver of national development in the 21st century. While ICTs offer special opportunities to stimulate growth and increase innovation in every local setting, the potential of these technologies cannot be realised unless ICT resources are matched by resourcefulness; combined with other initiatives by local leaders, educators and entrepreneurs to achieve individual and institutional objectives (Microsoft Corporation, 2007).

Given the fact that ICT has been predominantly strong in advanced African economies with some concentration on island states in the Indian Ocean, there is much to do about developing the potential of such technology and see how Africa steps into the coming decades on being better connected to the world. This area of expertise demands higher levels of educational input coupled with excellent technical knowledge that can be only gained through higher education. It is once again the role of stakeholders to consider providing better chances to the youth of Africa.

Much remains to be done and the next major challenge in the ICT sector in Africa is improving the broadband infrastructure and delivering affordable and advanced ICT services to all. This might contribute to the enhancement of the talent of young Africans capable of bridging the digital divide. Zoellick (2007) stated that this access gap must be addressed before Africa can be connected to the globalised economy and use ICT to improve public services, overcome poverty, and enable regional integration. If this can be achieved, it will complete the ICT revolution that Africa has begun (Zoellick, 2007).

A model for interpreting youth development in sub-Saharan Africa

To this extent, this report has identified certain parameters that could be valid for the development of youth as a promoter for development in the region. The researcher has found it useful to present his findings in the form of a model which he considers to be useful to represent the information provided.

The first assumption here is that youth as a catalyst for development in sub-Saharan Africa would first depend on education.

This is represented as follows:

Economic future of sub-Saharan Africa = E_s

Y_d = Youth development through broad education

Initially, the economic future will depend on youth development

Hence $E_s = Y_d$(1)

where Y_d will be an independent variable.

Next, education of the youth needs to be improved through skills training that is youth skills (Y_s)

$E_s = Y_d(Y_s)$(2)

Thirdly, government intervention in youth programmes for sub-Saharan Africa is a must for youth progress.

Government in sub-Saharan Africa is interpreted as G_s

Then

$E_s = Y_d(Y_s + G_s)$(3)

Finally, the report states that the honing of skills like Information and Communications Technology is likely to be broadly adapted to youth development in sub-Saharan Africa. This could be added as I_s standing for ICT knowledge for the youth.

The model is complete as follows:

$E_s = Y_d(Y_s + G_s + I_s)$(4)

or better presented as where Σ sums up all the independent variables

$E_s = \Sigma Y_d(Y_s + G_s + I_s)$(5)

Broadly, it is education for the youth that will be the main catalyst for the achievement of development in sub-Saharan Africa. This is already explained by the views of Filmer and Fox (2013) each stating that “Governments can approach the youth employment challenge by investing more in young people’s education and other skills to create brighter life prospects for them,” and “In addition to promoting investment and competitiveness, the quality of primary education, the right nutrition for young children, and basic healthcare for all are a must to improve the quality of life for Africa’s young people and their future productivity.”

Next, the improvement of youth skills remains a priority for African governments. Gondwe (2012) sums up that, skills development can make a critical contribution to youth employment promotion and income generation. Coordinated policies linking education, skills formation, and employment are required. Well-designed active labour market policies linked with technical and vocational education, on-the-job training and apprenticeships – both formal and informal – are essential for skills development, employment and entrepreneurship and can help alleviate unemployment and underemployment.

Government intervention with the participation of the private sector is of paramount importance to the development of the youth in sub-Saharan Africa. Kasenene (2011) purports the important contribution of government in youth development. Governments need to employ a paradigm shift in implementing youth policy. It is high time for governments to ensure national youth representation bodies (youth council) have been established, establish inter-

ministerial working group that can involve technical personnel, incorporate stakeholders participation (civil society and youth groups), and adequately finance the implementation of youth policy.

Finally, the importance of Information and Communications Technology was also mentioned. The view is summed up by Diop (2014) who states that making high-quality science and technology education more accessible to young people and shaping higher education courses to fit the skills needed by the modern jobs market was increasingly a high priority for many African countries. Wamakote et al (2010) consolidate the point with by stating that African governments have taken on the development and use of ICTs as a major driver of national development in the 21st century.

Assumption

This report did not include other variables like unemployment, HIV-AIDS, warfare etc. as these would make the assumptions vague and over-burdened. It highlighted the key points that are critical for youth to act as a catalyst for the development of sub-Saharan Africa. The priority remains education since this will balance the deficit between a soaring population in sub-Saharan Africa and illiteracy that might accompany such a rise. The model is therefore simplistic but useful in the sense that certain key points are mentioned.

Conclusion

Having a growing population and being the youngest continent in the world, Africa has enjoyed consistent economic growth over the years and aims at becoming the place where business opportunities are bound to thrive in the future. It is in its young population that the African continent, in particular, sub-Saharan Africa which is expected to make important steps ahead. Problems are not solved unless the youth is integrated in the long-term development of the continent. World Bank (2014) mentions that while many African economies have registered impressive economic growth in recent years, poverty levels across the region have not fallen as much as expected and young people looking for better-paying work have been at a great disadvantage.

Next comes the concept of inclusion of youth in the development of their economies. The World Bank (2014) cites three reasons of why it is difficult to develop successful youth policies. First, it states that a successful youth policy requires working across many sectors to develop one coherent, holistic and inter-sectoral strategy, with clear priorities and measures for concrete action. Second, youth policies fail because young people's voices are not included in the design and implementation of the policies that affect them. Third, achieving success in youth policy is challenged by the fact that there are few success stories and examples of best practice.

It is unacceptable to leave the youth behind in development. Booming economic growth has meant that the majority of young people are now better able to participate productively in society (Asian Scientist, 2011). However, widening economic and social gaps have also left many others suffering from extreme poverty, gender inequality, limited access to education, poor health, disability, inadequate housing, and exploitation.

The problems of young Africans will remain impending if bold action is not taken. There is no great need to think negatively of African development although the future will still be affected by the ongoing problems of the developing world. If Africa aims to move ahead and enjoy the benefits of economic growth, it will need the inclusion of its young population. A large and growing young population can be a driver for economic growth and social progress provided they access quality education and health, and are engaged in decent employment, without which, many young people will not be able to escape negative social vices and poverty (Gondwe, 2012). It is difficult to speak of changing Africa's prospects at all levels of society without dwelling on the importance of young people in the equation (Africa Youth Panel, 2012). From this standpoint, it is clear that the future of the Africa is dependent on placing young people as the catalyst for its development. Education, skills training and government support will be of immense value in this fast-developing region.

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