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## Youth and Jobs

Katherine V. Gough  
April 2016

When jobs are scarce it is young people who are hit the hardest as they are either unable to enter the workplace or are the first to be fired. According to the World Bank (2015), one third of the world's 1.8 billion young people are not in employment, education or training (NEET), and only 40% of youth who enter the job market within the next decade will be able to get jobs that currently exist. While unemployment statistics are notoriously unreliable, youth unemployment is up to four times higher than the corresponding rate for adults. This is a problem for society as a whole, not just for young people themselves. When young people are not fully participating in the labour force there is lost productivity and reduced consumption, a fear of rising youth extremism, and governments incur social security costs and forgo tax revenue. Youth un/underemployment is currently seen as one of the major global challenges.

Young people make up around a quarter of the world's population and in many countries in the global South they make up a third of the population. Only a minority of these young people, even those who have completed high school or university, will ever find a stable job in the formal sector. A large proportion of young people work in the so-called informal sector, often in poor conditions with irregular, low pay, in what is considered 'vulnerable work'. For many young people, starting a business is perceived as an increasingly attractive option. However, while youths are more entrepreneurial than adults, few young people are able to expand their businesses and many of them fail after a short time.

Some key principles for thinking about youth and jobs include the following:

1. Youth tends to be defined by chronological age. The most widely used is the United Nations definition of youth as those aged 15-24. The recently formed Solutions for Youth Employment (S4YE) multi-stakeholder coalition uses a higher upper limit of 29, and in many



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sub-Saharan African countries the upper limit is even higher, typically 35. Age-based definitions, however, do not take into account the diversity and multiplicity of young people's trajectories and lived experiences.

2. Understandings of youth and transitions into adulthood are closely linked to key life stage events such as finding a job, leaving the parental home, getting married and becoming a parent. Whilst these events may be interrelated, they may not occur at the same time, in the same order, or in a linear fashion. For example, losing a job can result in young people having to return to live in the parental home.
3. Jobs are multi-dimensional and cannot be characterised by one term or measured by a single indicator (WDR 2013). They are more than what people do; they are also part of their identity. As such, jobs can be transformational changing what work people do, what they earn, and who they are.
4. Young people's potential to obtain or create jobs varies greatly according to their gender, socio-economic status, education and place. Young women tend to have less education than young men and are more likely to be in vulnerable work. Rural and urban youth have different work prospects and face different challenges. Many young people, however, move between rural and urban areas in search of better livelihood opportunities and may have livelihoods straddling these categories of place.

## Key readings

**Reading 1:** Gough, K.V., Langevang, T. and Owusu, G. (2013). Youth employment in a globalising world. *International Development Planning Review* 35(2), 91-102.

<https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/bitstream/2134/20614/1/IDPR%20introduction%20to%20special%20issue%20repository.pdf>

This introduction to a special issue provides a useful overview of the key issues in a global South context, including conceptualising the terms youth and employment. Key policy approaches to youth employment are also highlighted and the papers in the collection briefly summarised.

**Reading 2:** White, B. (2012). Agriculture and the generation problem: rural youth, employment and the future of farming. *IDS Bulletin* 43(6), 20-32.

[http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7535/IDSB\\_43\\_6\\_10.1111-j.1759-5436.2012.00375.x.pdf?sequence=1](http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7535/IDSB_43_6_10.1111-j.1759-5436.2012.00375.x.pdf?sequence=1)

Why are young people in rural areas turning away from farming despite mass rural unemployment and underemployment? This paper draws on a range of studies from around the globe to show how the deskilling of rural youth, the downgrading of farming, governmental neglect of small-scale agriculture, and problems young people face gaining access to land all contribute to farming being seen by most youth as an undesirable occupation.

**Reading 3:** Hilson, G. and Osei, L. (2014). Tackling youth unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa: Is there a role for artisanal and small-scale mining? (Author's pre-publication copy). *Futures* 62, 83-94. <http://www.gsdr.org/document-library/tackling-youth-unemployment-in-sub-saharan-africa-is-there-a-role-for-artisanal-and-small-scale-mining/>

Artisanal and small-scale mining are often condemned by governments and donors for being dangerous activities which impact negatively on the environment. This paper, however, argues that such income-generating activities can offer a partial solution to the youth unemployment problem in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Reading 4:** Gough, K.V., Chigunta, F. and Langevang, T. (2015). Expanding the scales and domains of (in)security: Youth employment in urban Zambia. *Environment and Planning* 48(2), 348-366. <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/bitstream/2134/19488/4/Employment%20insecurity%20main%20document%20repository%20single%20space.pdf>

Moving to urban areas, this paper highlights employment insecurities faced by Zambian youth in all types of jobs in Lusaka. It shows how these insecurities are closely connected to insecurity in other aspects of young people's lives including within the household, housing and education.

**Reading 5:** Jeffrey, C. and Dyson, J. (2013). Zigzag capitalism: Youth entrepreneurship in the contemporary global South (Author's pre-publication copy). *Geoforum* 49, R1-R3 <http://www.gsdr.org/document-library/youth-entrepreneurship-in-the-contemporary-global-south/>

In this very short editorial, the importance of entrepreneurship among youth in the global South is highlighted. The authors argue that young people are adept at finding economic niches within uncertain economic landscapes but warn against the ideological risks attached to celebrations of youth entrepreneurialism.

**Reading 6:** Izzi, V. (2013). Just keeping them busy? Youth employment projects as a peacebuilding tool (Author's pre-publication copy). *International Development Planning Review* 35(2), 103-117 <http://www.gsdr.org/document-library/just-keeping-them-busy-youth-employment-projects-as-a-peacebuilding-tool/>

Adopting a policy angle, this paper focuses on attempts to use youth employment projects as a peacebuilding tool in post-conflict settings. It is argued that this practice is rooted in untested, problematic and potentially flawed assumptions which limit the possibility for such interventions to be successful.

**Reading 7:** S4YE. (2015). *Overview*. Toward solutions for youth employment: A baseline for 2015. Washington D.C.: Solutions for Youth Employment, 1 – 24. [https://www.s4ye.org/sites/default/files/Toward\\_Solutions\\_for\\_Youth\\_Employment\\_Full.pdf#page=14](https://www.s4ye.org/sites/default/files/Toward_Solutions_for_Youth_Employment_Full.pdf#page=14)

This is the first baseline report of the newly formed Solutions for Youth Employment (S4YE) Coalition. The report provides an overview of the current youth employment situation and explores solutions to the challenges of getting all youth into productive work.

## Questions to guide reading

1. How do the challenges young people face in relation to jobs differ from adults?
2. Why are young people turning their backs on farming when their job prospects in urban areas are so challenging?
3. How are youth experiences of jobs gendered?
4. Which sectors offer the greatest promise for generating jobs for young people?
5. How reliable are data on youth unemployment?
6. Based on the key readings, which policies to promote youth employment are likely to improve the situation and which may make it worse?