

# I. Introduction

Today, African young people have visions and aspirations that may seem unattainable, yet they make an essential contribution to today's societies and the future that awaits coming generations. In all parts of the world, young people live in countries at various stages of development and within differing socio-economic situations, where they generally aspire to live full lives as members of the societies to which they belong. Today's young people are also considerably more educated and much more aware of global opportunities than was the case a decade or so ago, giving them high expectations of a better life.

Certain factors which are of vital importance in realizing these expectations are very limited in their availability, such as: access to education and employment opportunities; adequate food and nutrition; a politically stable environment that promotes good ethics, integrity and health; enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms; participation in decision-making processes; and access to cultural and recreational activities. African young people have limited opportunities when it comes to maximizing their social welfare, and have often become victims of social and economic regression from previous decades.

The evolving global situation is creating conditions that could either create more opportunities or make youth aspirations even more difficult to achieve, depending on the ways in which governments react to the situation.

In order to conceptualize the youth education and employment nexus in the global context, there is a need to understand the definitions and perceptions of "youth" (in this report, used to mean those aged 15-24). To some, young people are a burden on the status quo, while to others they are an asset for the future, both scenarios having political, socio-economic and socio-cultural implications for policy formulation and programme planning and implementation.

In several African countries, young people can be as young as 12 years of age and as old as 35, with the African Youth Charter definition covering the range between 15 and 35 years.

Among scholars and policymakers, there is increasing recognition that young Africans are the key to realizing an African renaissance. Therefore, more information and analyses are needed of the potential of African young people and the conditions they face. These conditions include national, subregional and global forces which either intensify the level of social exclusion of many young people or provide opportunities for transforming their situation. As governments devise policies and strategies to address the development issues facing young people, they should take into consideration the bigger picture and the effects of globalization. This report analyses, provides information and identifies best practices, as well as posing questions that policymakers and development stakeholders should take into consideration when addressing youth development issues.

Having understood the unavoidable influences of globalization, the report addresses the education-employment nexus of African youth in the global economy. The education-employment nexus was chosen for deeper analysis because investing in youth education as part of an investment in human capital is an opportunity that no country should squander.

Furthermore, helping them to realize their full potential by gaining access to employment is a precondition for poverty eradication and sustainable development. Education and employment are interlinked and mutually influence social dimensions that are essential for translating economic growth into human development. Young persons' employment prospects are closely related to the education received. Well-educated young people provide efficient and effective productive labour, producing a highly skilled and motivated workforce essential to being globally competitive. Therefore, well-educated youths form the core of a productive labour market upon which an economy depends.

However, youth education and employment linkages do not just constitute a casual link where education enhances opportunities in the labour market. In a number of countries, many highly educated young people are unemployed or underemployed. This phenomenon appears due to inappropriate matching of qualifications with occupations and the lack of demand for jobs in the formal economy that can accommodate the large number of young people joining the labour market.

Discussion of the youth education/employment nexus should go beyond the question of ensuring that young people find ways to earn their livelihoods and

be part of the productive machinery in their countries. The discussion should also extend to the issue of social inclusion of youth. Engagement in the labour market and paid work has traditionally been viewed as being core to the process of social integration in many societies, yet education and skills development generate important economic as well as social benefits.

Unskilled young people, including socially excluded young people, such as the disabled young, and young people in conflict and post-conflict areas, are more vulnerable to economic shocks, less likely to find work and more likely to be stuck with underemployment with few opportunities to develop their potential, and are more vulnerable to demographic changes.

Efforts that have been made to address the youth development agenda in general, and education and employment issues in particular, include the adoption of policies and strategies in recent decades in response to various global and regional commitments and instruments. Despite these efforts, African youth education and employment challenges remain. ECA therefore, in partnership with other United Nations organizations and the African Union Commission (AUC), will continue monitoring progress made in the implementation of youth development programmes and plans and follow-up on youth-related commitments, as well as conducting research in order to provide member States with information for appropriate decision-making.

## **B. Implications of the demographic profile**

In the past, the push to invest in youth education and employment in Africa relied on the theory of the demographic transition, which anticipates that Africa will soon reap a demographic dividend resulting from declining mortality and fertility rates. As the population becomes older and people begin having fewer children, the population of working age (15 to 64) will grow relative to the number of children and the elderly. This implies that the working population will have fewer people to support with the same income and assets, significantly lowering their dependency burden, and that in the coming decades the dependency ratio<sup>1</sup> will be lower in Africa than in other world regions. This will create a window of opportunity for better productivity, economic growth and investment in social services.

Since Africa is not homogeneous, and has subregional and country variations, the demographic transition is likely to be realized at different times in each African subregion. When ECA carried out population projections by subre-

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<sup>1</sup> The dependency ratio is the ratio of the sum of the population aged 0-14 and 65+ to the population aged 15-64.

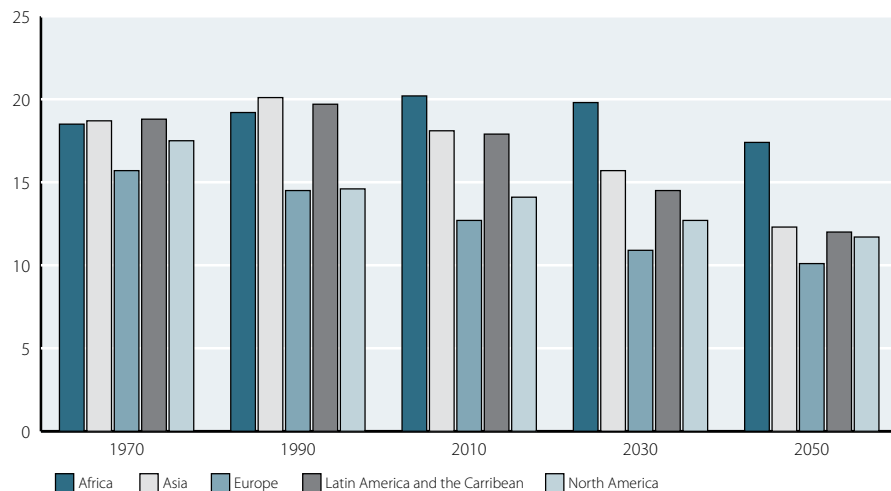
gion to determine whether there will be a demographic dividend by 2050, there was an indication that Southern Africa, followed by North Africa, would be experiencing the demographic transition sooner than Western, Central and Eastern Africa, which will experience the transition later because they still have relatively high levels of fertility, despite high mortality rates.

Although the projections indicate that a majority of African subregions will not have reached the transition, the importance of investing in youth education and employment remains critical for effective planning and adequate utilization of human capital.

Trends in the African youth population will generally remain higher than in other world regions by 2050, as indicated in figure 1, despite subregional variations: 18.3 per cent in Eastern Africa, 18.5 per cent in Central Africa, 17.8 per cent in West Africa, 16.4 per cent in Southern Africa and 13.9 per cent in North Africa (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Population Prospects, 2008 revision; ECA, 2011).

The large youth population in Africa can be seen as an asset for the continent's development if appropriate human capital investment measures are taken. Decisions to invest in African youth should be based on the type of skills that young people are attaining in preparation for the labour market; the presence of an enabling policy environment for the labour market which will allow for job creation and employment; the social and political implications of uneducated and unemployed youth; and the competitiveness of African youth in local, subregional, regional and global jurisdictions.

**Figure 1. African youth population (age 15 to 24) in comparison to other regions (percentage of total population)**



**Source:** United Nations Secretariat, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision, <http://esa.un.org/unpp>.

Investing in African youth not only has implications for social and economic development, but also puts into focus the urgent need for a critical understanding of evolving opportunities and challenges that young people face in the world today. Understanding the demographic profile of the continent at the localized and regional level is important because there is ample evidence to support the notion that youth education and employment makes an important contribution to national and regional economic progress. High-quality and demand-driven education that enhances innovation and the employability of young people, together with a labour market that is receptive to large numbers of young people, are imperative for many African countries.

Africa's youngest are the driving force behind positive outcomes in future decades. If policies in place are implemented and strategies developed to enhance an enabling policy environment for full participation by young people in the global economy, then Africa will derive great benefit from the investment. Positive outcomes would result from the increasing number of highly educated people in the workforce who can harness domestic resources and effectively strengthen the capacity of public and private institutions in the region.

## C. Youth education and employment

In order to be competitive and have a chance of finding gainful employment at a national, regional or global level, African young people need to acquire knowledge and skills through basic and higher education, including technical and vocational training. Many education and employment policies and programmes are already in place. Reports on progress being made towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) indicate that youth literacy has increased in the region and that gender disparities in educational attainment are narrowing. Ghana and Uganda are examples of countries that have prioritized education, achieved universal primary enrolment targets and have now moved on to universal secondary education.

A critical analysis of the current education situation in the region has led stakeholders to believe that there seems to be an overemphasis on enrolment numbers rather than attendance and the relevance of education. Understandably, the rigorous emphasis on raising universal primary education targets was based on a desire to increase literacy. However, there seems to be a lag in the revision of strategies once goals have been attained. Many African countries continue to over-emphasize the provision of basic education in order to achieve the goal of universal primary education, forgetting that nurturing young people who will participate in the constantly evolving labour environment requires skills that can be acquired only at higher levels of learning. African governments should therefore begin investing more in post-primary education in order to sustain the gains made over the last decade with high enrolment in primary education.

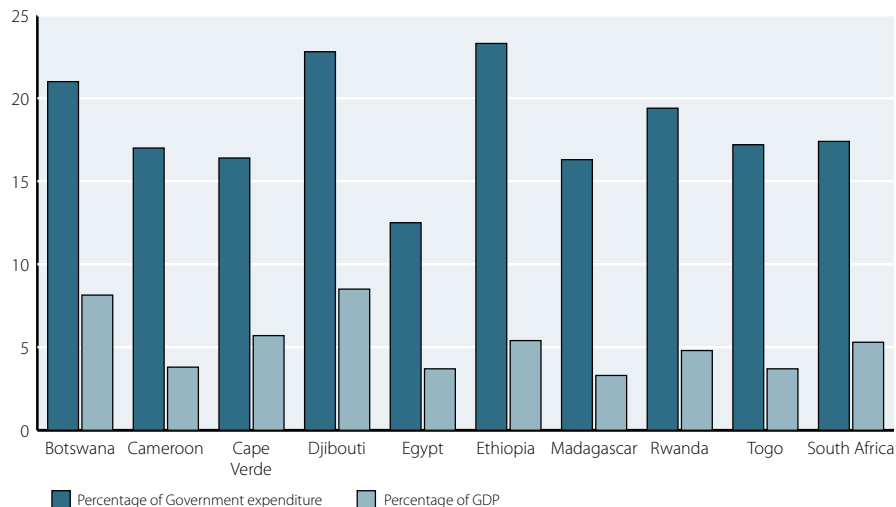
When the UNESCO Institute for Statistics conducted research on gross enrolment ratios in tertiary education for selected countries in the region, Algeria and Mauritius were among the countries with the highest enrolment of the official school-age population in tertiary institutions, at 31 and 26 per cent respectively in 2009. Interestingly, both countries had more young females (36 and 29 per cent) enrolled in tertiary institutions than young males (25 and 23 per cent). On the other hand, countries that recorded tremendous successes in universal primary education, like Uganda, had very low tertiary enrolments, at 4 per cent (4 per cent male and 3 per cent female). Zimbabwe, with high literacy rates, also reported 3 per cent total tertiary enrolment (4 per cent male and 3 per cent female). Generally, the disparities between female and male enrolment are narrowing even at tertiary levels, despite the lower enrolments.

Countries would argue that they are spending more on education than before. However, although government expenditure on education seems relatively

high, as indicated in figure 2 below, closer examination reveals that a significant proportion of these public resources comes from external sources. In Ethiopia, for example, external resources are financing approximately a third of the national budget [Development Assistance Group, 2010]. Public expenditure on primary education is also higher in most African countries than expenditure on secondary and tertiary education.

Strategies therefore need to be revised to ensure that equilibrium is achieved between universal primary education and higher levels of learning, notwithstanding improving instructional quality and good educational infrastructure to enhance ICTs and student proficiency levels. With rapid globalization, it is especially important to ensure that secondary education becomes the new minimum level of attainment,, with an emphasis on tertiary education. Periodic reviews and revision of educational curricula are other steps that some countries have taken to ensure that young people are equipped with learning opportunities through apprenticeship and professional and creative skills required for the evolving labour market. The labour market should be closely monitored and adequate labour information should be generated to allow for effective national and subregional planning.

**Figure 2. Public spending on education as a percentage of public expenditure and a percentage of GDP, 2007**



**Source:** World Bank, African Development Indicators. Retrieved on 26 November 2010. Calculations based on data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of tertiary education graduates in specific fields. The data, which were collected by UNESCO, indicate that most countries in Africa have a significant number of graduates in the social sciences, business and law, while engineering, manufacturing and construction as well as health recorded the lowest percentage of tertiary graduates. In 2009, 43 per cent of the students who graduated from tertiary education in Ethiopia had studied social science, business and law, while only 6 per cent graduated in engineering, manufacturing and construction. Health and welfare accounted for 7 per cent.

**Table 1. Enrolment in tertiary education by broad subject area**

Country	Enrolment in all programmes	Education	Humanities and arts	Social sciences, business and law	Sciences	Engineering, manufacturing and construction	Agriculture	Health and welfare	Services	General programmes	Unspecified
Algeria (2009)	1,149,666	18,614	238,696	414,854	105,825	9,874	20,998	58,260	8,032	-	109,513
Burkina Faso (2009)	47,587	2,040	9,383	24,919	6,624	654	512	2,943	512	-	-
Cameroon (2009)	174,144	10,159	11,963	108,480	31,406	6,601	779	4,027	728	-	-
Central African Republic (2009)	10,424	349	2,726	3,089	957	332	213	1,141	...	...	1630
Ethiopia (2008)	264,822	71,310	7,672	98,005	18,450	19,578	26,863	22,384	-	-	560
Morocco (2009)	418,833	5,205	78,401	174,091	90,025	35,968	3,504	21,433	9,172	-	1,819
Zimbabwe (2009)	49,645	4,872	5,642	26,158	1,948	2,561	2,478	1,859	873	-	579
Namibia (2008)	11,376	4,350	2,651	8,171	1,948	527	647	1,089	244	.	343

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

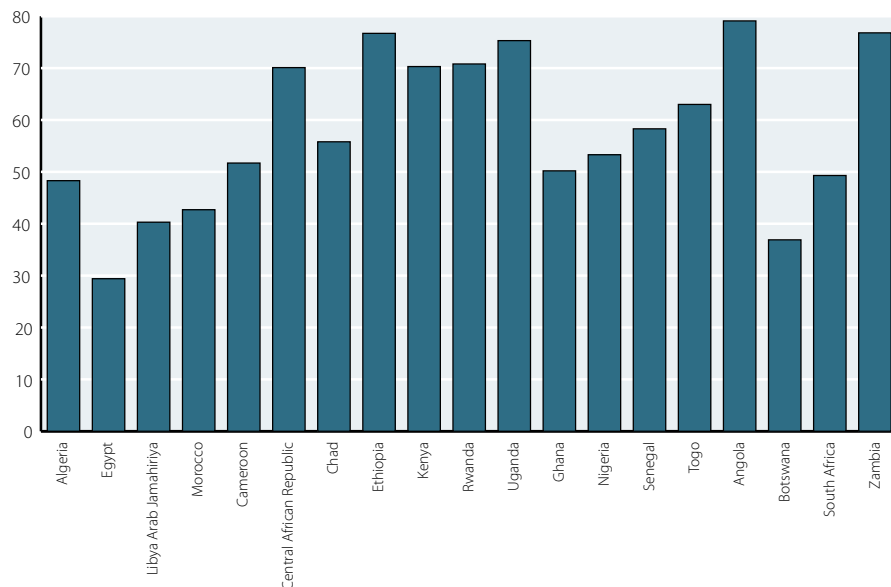
This information is essential given the current scenario, where potentially 200 million young Africans could effectively participate in the labour market. This large entrant cohort presents either an opportunity or a challenge. The opportunity lies in using the large cohort in a variety of sectoral industries which are essential for development in the region. However, the main lesson learnt from different countries shows that ensuring decent employment for a large number of young Africans remains a huge challenge. While in some countries demographic change, i.e. a large number of young people joining the labour force within a short period of time, is the main factor behind high youth unemployment and underemployment rates, many of the youth employment challenges can also be related to overall labour market dynamics and market opportunities. In a nutshell, the ease with which jobs can be found for young

people is dependent on how well the labour market is prepared to receive them, and on how well they are prepared for the labour market.

The youth labour force participation rate in Africa remains relatively high in comparison to other regions of the world. Africa's average rate of 57.8 per cent was the second highest after East Asia, which was 59 per cent in 2009. Angola, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda and Zambia all had a rate which was even higher than the African average of 70 per cent [World Bank, African Development Indicators, 2006] (see figure 3 for youth labour participation rates in selected countries).

Such high labour force participation rates call for an understanding of the labour force for this demographic cohort in order to take the appropriate decisions to invest in youth education and welcome opportunities that will address employment challenges faced by young people.

**Figure 3. Youth labour force participation (percentage of total labour force), 2006**



**Source:** World Bank, African Development Indicators. Retrieved on 26 November 2010.

In 2009, the International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that the youth unemployment rate in Africa was approximately 20 per cent. While unemployment is relatively high in the region, the degree of underemployment among

the working poor is even greater. Many young people do not desire unemployment and so they engage in any form of economic activity, no matter how insignificant or inadequate and irrespective of the working conditions and income. Increasingly, many of them, especially the educated, are settling for survival jobs in order to sustain themselves.

Considering that young people are not homogeneous, it is clear that the dimensions of youth unemployment and underemployment vary. In a number of countries, young women have a different transition to working life from that of young men – in particular, it is more protracted. Employers in many countries, irrespective of gender, display a striking preference towards hiring young men over young women, for a variety of reasons. Many young women are not able to enter the labour market easily or to leave earlier because of such prejudices and limitations, reducing the labour force participation rates for young women. This gap is largest in North Africa, where the participation rate for young men is higher than that for young women by 28 per cent (ILO, 2010). African governments should take corrective measures to address the gender gap in labour force participation because of the benefits of engaging more women in the labour market. Research studies have shown that women engaged in the labour market have lower fertility and higher bargaining power and benefit from an improved allocation of resources at the household level. Therefore, targeted job opportunity programmes for girls and young women may in the long run have many beneficial consequences.

Exclusion of young women in the labour market starts right from the education and preparatory levels, where girls are encouraged to pursue more of the social science and arts courses over the life sciences and engineering subjects, resulting in their marginalization from labour-absorbing sectors.

In addition to young women, young persons with disabilities, young people in camps for the internally displaced, young refugees and young migrant workers are also often excluded from obtaining an education and from being employed. While other world regions have taken it upon themselves to invest in early childhood education, special education and educational infrastructure for purposes of inclusivity, many countries in the Africa have yet to take such initiatives.

A number of countries have many private educational institutions, but although they reduce the burden on the public sector, they are mainly profit-driven and are not accessible or affordable to students from poor backgrounds. Clearly, social inclusion policies will reduce unemployment and poverty rates.

In the quest for greener pastures, many youths migrate from rural to urban areas or within urban areas, creating more competition for the limited number of jobs in the urban areas without necessarily improving the job prospects of those left in rural areas. In addition, the provision of public services, education, utilities, housing and infrastructure is affected by the demographic and skills composition in both urban and rural areas.

Efforts to address employment issues and challenges faced by young people are of crucial importance, and should be linked with general labour market measures and strategies. Aggregate economic conditions are among the major causes of youth unemployment, and therefore governments need to adopt macroeconomic policies which encourage overall economic and employment growth with prudent social development considerations. In addition, stakeholders including young people themselves must work to understand the education-employment nexus so that they can devise strategies, policies and programmes that enable African youth to be a productive and competitive force for economic development in the continent.