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Youth Employment in West Africa – Prospects and Challenges*

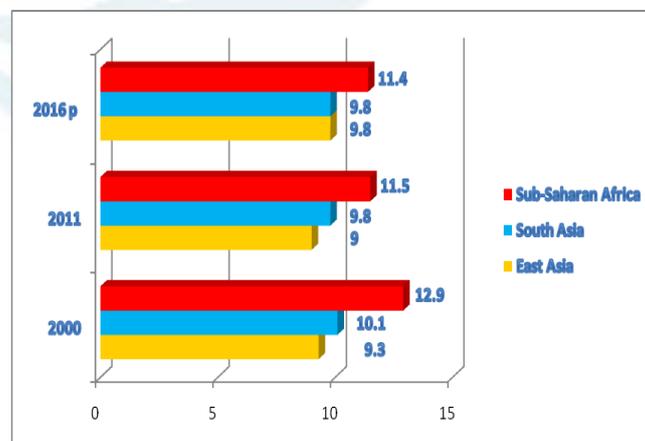
Youths are one of the greatest assets that any nation has, and through their creative talents and labor power they can contribute towards achieving economic development and socio-political advancement. However, one of the major challenges that continues to plague youth in Africa, including the West African subregion, is unemployment.

This issue of the *West Africa Bulletin* highlights the status and challenges of youth employment in the subregion, and specific gender employment disparities. Next week's issue will present recommendations and a way forward in the attempt to generate jobs, targeting all actors with stakes in enhancing youth employment in West Africa.

Employment generation is closely linked to population increase and economic growth. In 2011, the West African population was estimated at over 300 million, with an annual population growth rate of 3 per cent. In sub-Saharan Africa, the UN projects that the proportion of young people (aged 15-24) will reach 36.4 per cent in 2035. Between 2005 and 2011, the average economic growth in the subregion was in excess of 5 per cent, making West Africa one of the fastest growing zones in the world.

However, the current sources of growth are not labor-intensive enough to make a significant contribution to employment generation. Therefore, despite the positive economic growth, unemployment – and especially youth unemployment – remains a major economic and social challenge in most West African countries.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 2011 the youth unemployment rate in sub-Saharan Africa was 11.5 per cent, down from 12.9 per cent in 2000, and is projected at 11.4 per cent in 2016. These rates are higher than those registered in other developing regions of the world. These rates are higher than those registered in other developing regions of the world.



Young people are nearly three times more likely than adults to be unemployed, and the phenomenon is more widespread among young people living in urban areas, and uneducated youth.

Gender Disparities in Youth Unemployment

All 15 West African countries registered in 2009 higher unemployment rates for females than males. Among countries registering a high male active population are Niger (92 per cent), Sierra Leone (86 per cent), and Guinea-Bissau (83 per cent). Female active population is relatively high in Burkina Faso (75 per cent), Guinea (74 per cent), and Mali (70 per cent). Various studies revealed that women in sub-Saharan Africa are involved mostly in agriculture and informal sectors, in activities such as street vending, and petty cross-border trading. Continued discrimination and marginalization of women in the labour market perpetuate gender inequality and the feminization of poverty.

Challenges to Youth Employment

Lack of education, capital, and vocational skills - there is growing consensus that education and vocational skills are *sine qua non* conditions for young people to enter the labour market and increase their productivity potential. There is a strong correlation between educational attainment and employment opportunities: generally, individuals with primary education or less often register the highest unemployment rates. On the other hand, more human capital development and higher levels of education do not automatically translate into improved labour market outcomes. It is crucial that the education and training systems meet current and evolving labour demands.



Prevalence of conflict and unstable political environment

– when violence transcends national borders (as was the case of Liberia and Sierra Leone) and war seems like a lucrative opportunity, unemployed youth are easily recruited as soldiers. Trapped in a vicious circle of economic disempowerment and exclusion, youth coming out of conflict face a labour market for which they lack the skills or attitude. Programmes addressing these issues need to target more job creation and, in the same time, youth inclusion in decision-making.

Slow pace of policy implementation – global, continental, and national commitments relating to youth development, if consistently implemented, can reverse youth unemployment trends. Besides introducing monitoring and implementation mechanisms, it is important that West African countries take national ownership of youth employment initiatives, and lead the process in collaboration with development partners and other stakeholders.

*Based on the 2012 ECA report "Prospects and Challenges for Youth Employment in West Africa"