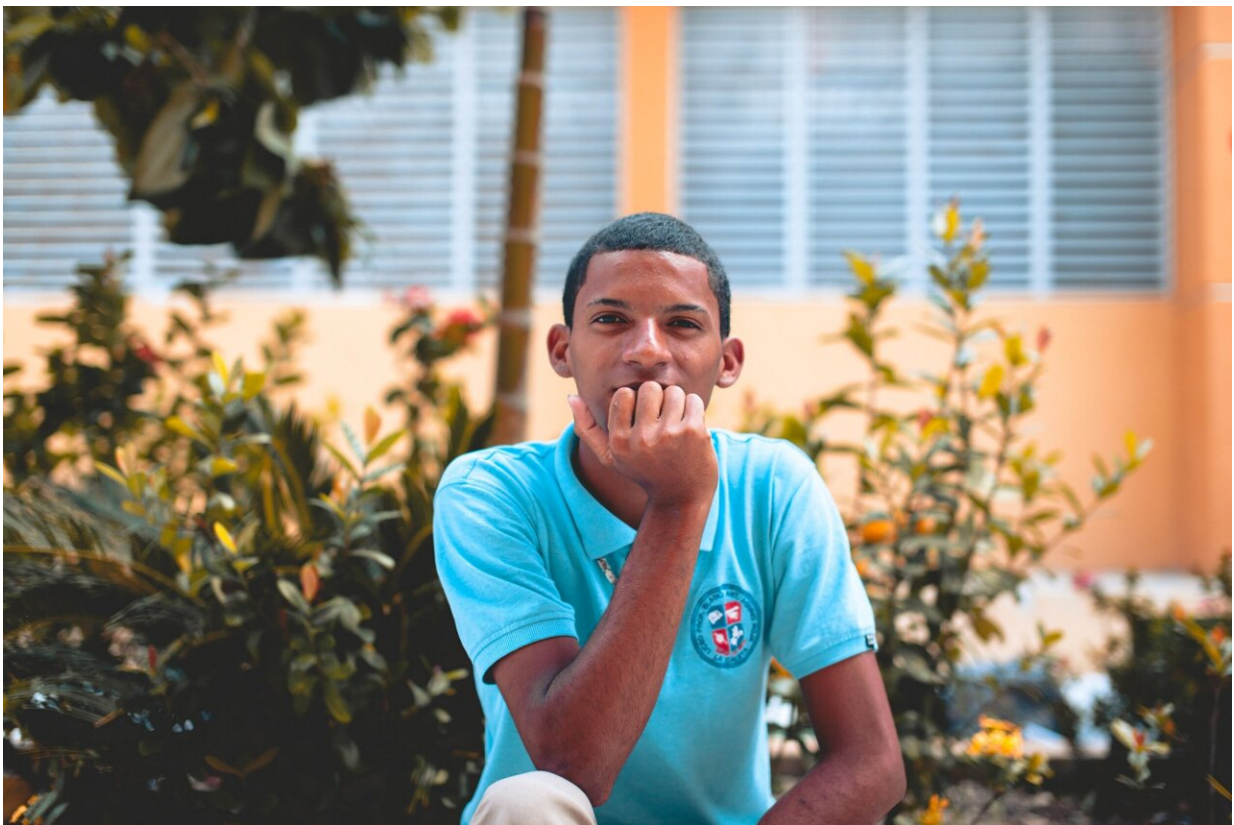


Africa's 'youthquake': Huge numbers of young people have no jobs, the wrong skills and little hope

August 29 2024, by Moina Spooner



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By 2050, one in every three young people on Earth will be of African origin, according to the 2024 International Labor Organization's (ILO)

[Global Employment Trends for Youth report](#). Africa's young people will be key players in the direction of future global consumption, culture and even stability.

It's estimated that by 2050, about 72.6 million [new jobs](#) for sub-Saharan Africa's young people will be needed. The ILO report warns of an African "youthquake" unless the continent creates new jobs. Recent countrywide protests in Kenya provide a glimpse into the scale and energy that these quakes may have.

But, worryingly, many African countries aren't actually producing enough secure jobs that can help young people meet their needs and have a good quality of life.

Youth unemployment

As highlighted in the ILO report, sub-Saharan Africa already shows a [youth unemployment rate of 8.9%](#), and only a small minority of young adults get what would qualify as a "decent job."

We've published various articles which highlight the extent of the youth unemployment problem and what's driving it.

Youth unemployment is a major issue in South Africa—the [unemployment rate is 49%](#) for young people aged 15–24. As inequality scholar Imraan Valodia explains, the drivers of these rates can be global (such as changing employment patterns) or specific to South Africa (such as the legacy of the country's apartheid past).

Skills mismatch is one of the main reasons given by economist Stephen Onyeiwu for Nigeria's high youth unemployment rate. Youth unemployment in Nigeria stood at [15.3% in 2019](#). Onyeiwu argues that these official statistics often underestimate the severity of the problem.

For example, they don't account for the fact that over 80% of Nigerians with [primary education](#) (or more) who are regarded as employed are grossly under-employed in low-productivity informal-sector work.

Skills mismatch is also a problem in Kenya. A group of management scholars argues that it's one of the drivers of [youth unemployment](#) in Kenya: graduates don't have the skills needed by the job market. Young people [make up at least 80%](#) of the unemployed population in Kenya. Despite being educated, significant numbers of young people remain unemployed or underemployed.

Insecure work

As highlighted in the ILO report, without many options, Africa's young people are turning to insecure work. Nearly three in four working young adults in sub-Saharan Africa [are in insecure work](#); one in three paid workers [earns less](#) than the median wage.

There are various types of work and strategies that young people will engage in. For instance, researcher Hannah J. Dawson reveals that young South Africans will run car wash ventures, fix cars (as informal mechanics), and rent back rooms or shacks. They might also wire illegal electricity connections for a fee or street-side gamble.

These informal strategies to make a living can be stressful and frustrating. Researcher Laurent Fourchard reviewed Daniel E. Agbiboa's book [They Eat Our Sweat: Transport Labor, Corruption, and Everyday Survival in Urban Nigeria](#), which explores the world of drivers of minibuses (danfo) and motorcycles (okada) in Lagos. Like many informal workers, these transport operators have no fixed income, no days off and no social protection.

Anthropologist Peter Lockwood shows just how difficult this precarious

situation can be. He shares insights from the diaries of young Kenyans in Nairobi which reveal lives of joblessness and endless searching for money, all punctuated by substance use.

Ways forward

What can be done about this situation?

Each country will need a different approach. As economists Derek Yu and Christie Swanepoel explain, it's important to understand the different categories of the "unemployed" even within countries in order to create more effective policies.

For instance, their study found that nearly 43% of unemployed South Africans fell into a transitory category. Those without a job throughout the whole seven-year study period represented just 4.33%. Their policy suggestions therefore related to improving the quality of education and ensuring labor skills meet the needs of the labor markets. They also emphasized the importance of better industrial policies which allowed for labor-intensive employment, combined with hiring people with lower levels of education. Manufacturing, in particular, was highlighted as the sector that's best placed to absorb unskilled or semi-skilled workers.

The need for jobs across the continent is critical. And good policies for job creation require good data.

Data scientist Katharina Fenz is part of a team that launched the [Africa Youth Employment Clock](#). This provides real-time insights into the employment status of individuals aged 15–35 across the continent. Employment numbers are always changing, showing new predictions every day. In this article, Fenz reveals how the clock works. She also flags some interesting trends—like a decline in agricultural employment across all countries on the continent, indicating a shift in employment

patterns towards industry and services.

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