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Dealing with the Youth Bulge through Proactive Policy

Introduction

This policy brief explores the challenges faced by youth as a result of the deteriorating socio-economic and political violence and effects of exclusion. It also highlights the importance of understanding youth social networks in building resilience in relation to addressing the challenges of unemployment. The challenges are made worse by the contextual environment where policy making is characterised by a top-down approach, tokenistic to youth issues, and best described as creating a charade that youth are the future of this country. This kind of approach aims at managing youth and promise them a future whilst justifying their exclusion and failure to address youth vulnerability largely caused by unemployment.

In a research project, *Active engagement, social innovation and resilience among young people in Zimbabwe*, the Research and Advocacy Unit (RAU) sought to understand everyday experiences by youth, and how there adapting and coping with the socio-economic and political environment can inform the development of new initiatives. These initiatives are leading towards resilience to vulnerabilities caused by unemployment, and understanding these should inform policies on youth. The research is anchored around the understanding that Zimbabwe, like other developing countries faces a demographic youth bulge, which if not adequately addressed, can result in young people engaging in violence.

Background

The youth constitute a large and fast growing proportion of the population in many African countries, with the UNDP projecting that, by 2055, the continent's youth population (aged 15-24), is expected to be more than double the 2015 total of 226 million¹. In Zimbabwe, youth constitute 76.5% of the population under the age of 34 years, and 35% falls between the ages of 15-34 years².

They are exposed to a rapidly changing world and are faced with many pressures as a result of economic and political instabilities which cause social change. The current socio-economic conditions have impeded the progress of the youth. With the country going through nearly two decades of political crisis, the economy has not been spared. Many companies closed shop that

¹ UNDP,

² Zimstat, 2013

resulted in the economy shrinking. This had a general impact on employment levels, but the youth were hardest hit. Many had to find alternative employment and a new economy driven by the discourse of necessity emerged.³ It is called the *kiya kiya* economy, an economic model based on short term survival. This model brings with it the challenges of informalities but suffice to say that the informal sector employs close to 90% of the working population in Zimbabwe. There is debate concerning the level of youth unemployment in Zimbabwe with government insisting that the figures are as low as 8% The Zimbabwe Census estimated in 2017 that only 7% of Zimbabweans were either unemployed or looking for work⁴.

Other reports claim that unemployment was at 5% between 1999 and 2019⁵, but citizens themselves refute this: the Afrobarometer Round Seven (2017) report claims that only 13% described themselves as being in full-time employment.⁶ However, very little has been made to qualify the kind of employment that is available especially for the youth. The African Union declared 2009-2018 as the youth decade, with its plan of action providing a framework for multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional engagement of all stakeholders towards the achievement of the goals and objectives of the African Youth Charter.⁷ In 2017, the African Union's 2017 theme on harnessing the youth demographic dividend was also indicative of the need to address the youth and treat them as a resource for positive development rather than as a threat to stability.

The philosophy to harness the demographic dividend can be tracked with numerous frameworks formulated as early as 2006. These include the Common African Position on post 2015, African Union Commission Strategic Plan (2014-2017), The Youth Decade Plan of Action (DPoA) 2009-2018, and the genesis of youth empowerment on the continent, the African Youth Charter (AYC) in 2006. The AYC is a political and legal framework for youth empowerment and development with its implementation facilitated in the DPoA 2009- 2018 with one of its key issue concerning governance peace and security. The African Union Commission Strategic plan (2014-2017) provides a framework for development of National Policies to open up employment opportunities for youth through oriented Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET).

It is this recognition of youth as a development driver that the National Youth Policy in Zimbabwe was crafted to mainly address youth development issues in a comprehensive, coordinated multi-sectorial manner. The Zimbabwe government through the Ministry of Youth, Sport, Arts and Recreation hosted a conference titled *Youth Investment and Inclusive Growth Conference*⁸ with the objective to mobilise investments for youth and raise financial resources for youth development priorities in identified areas. This was followed by the launch of the EmpowerBank in 2018, a bank popularly referred to as the *youth bank*.

³ Jeremy L. Jones (2010) 'Nothing is Straight in Zimbabwe': *The Rise of the Kukiya-kiya Economy 2000–2008*, Journal of Southern African Studies, 36:2, 285-299, DOI: 10.1080/03057070.2010.485784

⁴ZimStat (2017), *Inter-Censal Demographic Survey, 2017*, Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency.

⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/809092/unemployment-rate-in-zimbabwe/>

⁶ Afrobarometer Round 7 (2017), Online Data Analysis [<http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online>]

⁷ <https://au.int/en/youth-division>

⁸ Conference hosted from 2-3 October 2017 at the Harare International Conference Centre (HICC)

Government has initiated various programmes aimed at addressing youth unemployment but these have met with limited success. The programmes have been at best haphazard, but importantly they are based on a *political empowerment framework* that seems more a strategy to control youth than to empower them. For example, Mate (2012) observes that the emergence of hip-hop music, through the 75% local content, was a direct reaction to government's anti-Western imperialism rhetoric.⁹ The urban youth especially is deemed as a threat, frequently labelled as *sell-outs*, largely because they are divorced from the liberation narrative, and are yearning for a narrative that addresses their vulnerability caused by massive unemployment. Thus to a large extent, harnessing the democratic dividend remains a mirage. This is partly related to limited knowledge about government programmes and therefore causing youth to be apathetic, but also linked to structural inequalities and systematic exclusion because the governance model is politicised. The exclusion of young women has been mainly due to patriarchy, deeply embedded in governance systems from family to policy level.

Factoring youth resilience in policy framing

The term, *Resilience*, is emerging in the development discourse, but whether it is a useful concept continues to be a subject of much debate (Ungar M. 2011, Meredith et al., 2011). The term itself is ambiguous and cannot define one specific item. This is largely because human beings are complicated, affected and influenced by complex interacting factors that are specific to contexts. Perhaps the fact that the term is borrowed from other fields makes it problematic to apply in development discourse. However, despite resilience being malleable, it is important to youth policy formulation. The central question would be whose resilience and who defines it as well as the question about what does the policy on youth seek to achieve?

These questions are fundamental because there has been a tendency to use the *political framework* to define resilience amongst youth built around notions of “patriotism”. The challenge this creates is a policy mismatch, policy that does not address the challenges presented by the context, but framed to cater for the needs of the state. This is unsustainable.

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as “*the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress—such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors.*” Three elements are associated with resilience – coping, adapting and transformation. The adaptive and coping elements can result not only from positive but also from negative events.¹⁰

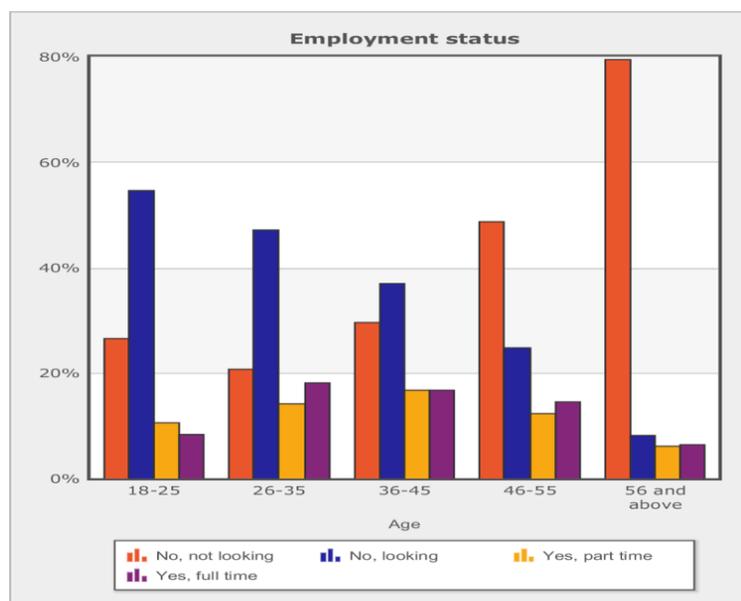
Central to resilience theory is the ability ‘*bounce*’ back from adversity and produce positive outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation of development.¹¹ The stressors are posed by the environment, and, for youth in Zimbabwe, nearly two decades of economic and political challenges have made them vulnerable and they have to cope with the shocks, risk, and other

⁹ Rekopantswe Mate (2012) *Youth Lyrics, Street Language and the Politics of Age: Contextualising the Youth Question in the Third Chimurenga in Zimbabwe*, Journal of Southern African Studies, 38:1, 107-127, DOI: 10.1080/03057070.2012.642722

¹⁰ Bonanno, 2004

¹¹ Masten, 2005; Rutter, 1987

contingencies. Research shows that youth have been facing multifaceted challenges such as breakup of the family unit (which has caused the development of child headed families), forced child marriages, climate change to mention a few. These challenges have forced them to adopt various survival mechanisms which include livelihood projects (such as poultry and horticulture), cross border trading and small scale vending. However, others have engaged in illegal activities such as touting, prostitution, drug abuse and criminal activities. These challenges have affected young men and women differently; for example a number of unemployed young men have been recruited to carry out violence by political parties.



Employment will be a major factor with the high rates of unemployment, shown in the Afrobarometer data for 2017.

The success of government's efforts to address this rate of unemployment will constitute the single most important factor determining whether the country puts itself on the right path to economic recovery and achieving its vision 2030 of attaining the upper middle income status. A youth Situational Study report notes that about 7% of youth are formally employed

These challenges have resulted in many youth resort to drug and substance abuse, forced early marriages, commercial sex work, criminal activities, and participation in political violence. It is unemployment that is the major risk factor in youth bulges.¹², but there is very little effort in understanding why Zimbabwean youth have largely been able to avoid participation in political violence. This is against the wider policy discourse on youth unemployment and violence which concludes that political violence manifests as the major socio-political consequence of urban youth unemployment in Zimbabwe ().¹³ This is a rather reductionist view of causes of violence, and the majority of youth does not engage in violence ().¹⁴ This is equally true of Zimbabwe.¹⁵

Policy making must be informed and framed around the everyday experiences and successes of youth and how they have managed to navigate the socio-political context.

¹² Urdal, H., (2006). *A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence*. International Studies Quarterly. Volume 50, Issue 3, 607–629

¹³ Torque Mude 2014:109

¹⁴ Cramer 2010; Dowd 2017; Izzi 2013; Sommers 2015, 2017

¹⁵ ActionAid (2013), *Eager or Slumbering? Youth and Political Participation in Zimbabwe*. March 2013, Denmark: ActionAid

Recommendations

- There is need for policy makers to understand the everyday living of young people and how these are helping them to mitigate the unemployment challenges. By so doing, policy response is informed by the youth themselves; There is an urgent need to create opportunities for youth, with tremendous potential impact. Addressing the multi-faceted causes of youth unemployment on the continent will help drive inclusive economic growth, turning Africa's demographic dividend into an economic one;
- There is need for youth friendly policies that support youth initiatives to enhance resilience such as access to finance and skills development. , that match the needs of the market in particular countries.

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