



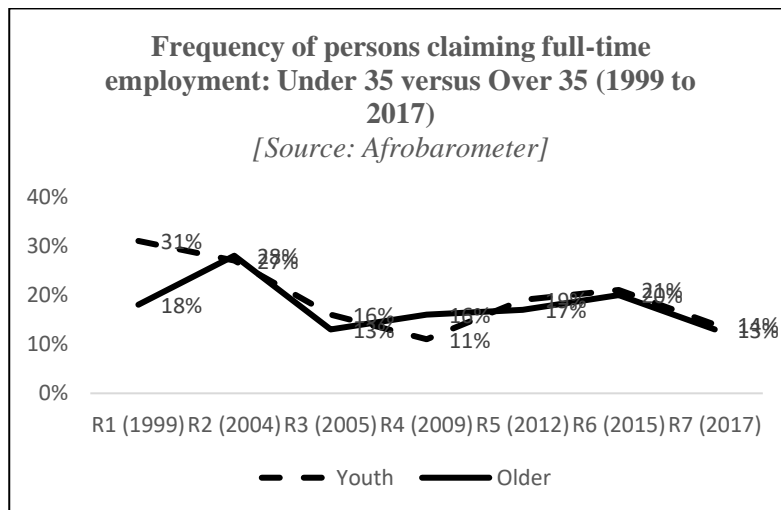
## 2021 International Youth Day Statement

### "Transforming Food Systems: Youth Innovation for Human and Planetary Health"

There is something important about the theme for this year, and almost exactly the day that the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issues its latest report. The IPCC report basically issues a “red alert” for the planet, indicating that urgent action must be taken today if we are to avoid the worst effects of climate change. As Mark Heywood points out in the Daily Maverick, we need to act urgently for the youth:

*“Do it for them. This is not somebody else’s problem. It’s your children’s problem. It can’t be deferred any longer. Think of the changes you can make and consider your actions as being like giving your child a gift, a symbol of your love, a future investment. And act today”.*<sup>1</sup>

Even a cursory read of the IPCC report tells us that Zimbabwe and Southern Africa as a whole are in deep trouble, and this is the legacy bequeathed to our youth. However, the youth of Zimbabwe have not been central to any kind of future planning for decades, and the rhetoric of becoming a “middle-income” in 10 years (or ever) is wholly at variance with the predictable future.



<sup>1</sup> “Climate emergency: Do it for your children”, Mark Heywood, The Daily Maverick, 9 August 2021. [<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-08-09-climate-emergency-do-it-for-your-children/>]

The young, those under 35 years are now two-thirds nearly of the entire population, but, as can be seen from the Figure above, only miniscule numbers have any formal employment. Contrary to the views of the Census, that claims only 6.6% of the 69.5% economically active population, most Zimbabweans do not see themselves as employed. Actually, and this applies to both the young and the older, most – more than 80% - see themselves as unemployed: they do not count the informal sector as being employed, not in the sense that they have a paid job that provides a wage or a salary. However, do not miss the fact that the contrast in unemployment between the old and the young is enormously different in numbers: the unemployed are the young!

The trend since 2004 is obvious, all the youth cohorts since 1999 have faced only the prospect of employment in the informal sector, or, if they were lucky, the possibility of migration.

What then does “*transforming food systems*” mean in the context of mass unemployment due to sustained economic decline and the inevitability of the environmental stresses of climate change? How will the drive to a “middle-income economy” both square with the demand for jobs and the necessity for creating a “green economy”? How will the drive for a capitalist economy provide both jobs and protection against climate change?

Actually, the youth are the developmental dividend that can create the kinds of mitigation against a dismal future for all. It was the youth giving China the labour and energy to transform its economy, but it is improbable that Zimbabwe can mimic China or any of the South-East Asian economies. As the IPCC points out, the direction must be urgently away from carbon-based production and a rapid move towards all things green: away from extractive industries; away from carbon-based industries; away from mass (carbon-based) food production; and away from the ideology of “growth” that has been responsible for the disaster we are now facing.

This will require the kind of mind shift that only the young are capable of, and their ability to learn new skills and innovate. It is their future and they must be highly engaged in determining how this will work. None of this is impossible. In fact, it is utterly necessary to involve the young, not to do this can make all the problems of climate change much worse. As a UNICEF and International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) report pointed out in 2015, large youth bulges can result in greater instability in countries with *weak governance, low resilience to the impacts of climate change, significant youth cohorts, livelihoods that are vulnerable to environmental change, and fragile underlying security conditions*.<sup>2</sup>

The response is clear, and involves considerably more than merely involving the youth in “transforming food systems: it puts youth in the centre of solving problems. As the report recommends, the policies needed must:

- **Tackling disaster risk** in a manner that is sensitive to the political context, especially specific dynamics of conflict or fragility, provides opportunities to reduce long-term disruption to youth education, livelihoods and well-being that can follow from disasters and potentially increase the risk of conflict;
- Forward-looking policies that invest in **education, secure employment opportunities and representation in governance** can avoid further

---

<sup>2</sup> *Climate change, violence and young people: Report for UNICEF*, Institute for Strategic Studies, 19 February 2015. [<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/climate-change-violence-and-young-people-report-unicef-uk>]

marginalising youth, and instead harness their potential to boost growth and development;

- **Creating sustainable and inclusive economic growth that provides opportunities for young people and is resilient to future climate impacts** will be particularly important for countries that face concurrent demographic and climate risks.

The question that Zimbabwe needs to ask itself in our pell-mell rush to middle-income status is this what the youth want or need for their future? Will the youth have a voice in their future, and what kind of future will they demand? We surely won't know, and, if we don't ask them, perhaps be unsurprised if the UNICEF predications come true.