

Youth and Unemployment: Our Present Problem and a Missed Opportunity

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Tshepo, a young South African, has faced huge life challenges in the last four years as he has struggled to focus on his studies amid numerous student protests against the hiking of university fees. Despite these challenges, he was determined to complete his undergraduate degree, which he did at the end of 2020. With the COVID-19 pandemic persisting and lockdown rules in place, he was content with an online graduation ceremony in March of 2021. With a degree in hand, he entered the job market, expecting to soon get employment and begin a new and better life. Little did Tshepo know that getting a job was not as easy as he had thought. On June 16, Youth Day in South Africa, to his dismay, he heard devastating news in a televised speech, in which President Cyril Ramaphosa was addressing the nation on the commemoration of the 1976 student protests known as the Soweto uprising. Ramaphosa said, "Young people in our country still remain unemployed, and this is a national crisis; more than half of South Africans aged between sixteen and twenty-four are unemployed." This statement hit Tshepo hard. He had believed young people occupied an important place in South Africa, although remaining marginalized. More than four decades have passed since they began struggling to be recognized and have their plight heard, and yet now they find themselves unemployed.

Darlington Mushongera caught up with Tshepo at one of the main hardware shops in Johannesburg, holding a placard saying PAINTER. He was one of many frequenting the place in the hope of attracting a client among those coming in to buy building material. Darlington stopped his car, and he was immediately surrounded by youths claiming they could do various home repair and renovation works. Tshepo was the lucky one, as Darlington picked him to do the work needed at his house. As they drove home, Tshepo shared his story. Darlington asked him how much money he made each day and why he had ended up doing this. Tshepo answered, "If you get one client on a single day, you're very lucky; otherwise you go home empty handed." A stone's throw from these young men were young women. Darlington asked Tshepo about them, and he answered, "They're also waiting for clients. People come to look for someone to do their laundry or clean their homes. Life is so hard, and people are desperate. Any job will do."



Figure 1. Tshepo waiting for clients. Photo by Darlington Mushongera.

As researchers, we understood that unemployment was a problem in South Africa but had not come face to face with the reality of the problem, as demonstrated in Tshepo's story and the stories of many more who wait outside the hardware shop or along the streets, looking for any job. Tshepo's story gets us to think more deeply about the issue of unemployment in South Africa, particularly youth unemployment.

As a result of this encounter, we set out to find the causes of unemployment among youth and investigate what the government was doing about it. The results of our research are telling. First, youth unemployment is a reality and a huge challenge. Second, government initiatives fall far short of absorbing most of those willing and able to work. Third, there is a clear mismatch between the skills youth have and existing jobs.

Youth employment is a major challenge, not just for South Africa, but for Africa as a whole. A report from a local South African news show reported the youth saying:

We, as the youth of today, don't see the freedoms that those youth of 1976 fought for. We still have too much unemployment. If we can actually see everything coming to the youth (better jobs, unemployment rate coming down), then I'd say that June 16—what they fought for—we can actually see it. But we don't have jobs. Each and every day, you have to sell something so that you have something to eat; you have to have a proper job to have something to put on the table to eat.

In Africa as a whole, more than half the population are young and under the age of twenty-five. Africa possesses huge development potential in its youth. Unfortunately, as Tshepo's story demonstrates, Africa's youth face high levels of unemployment and have difficulty entering the labor market despite having a certain level of education. The labor market is failing to absorb them into employment, and many full-time jobs have become scarce, beyond the reach of young people.

The root of unemployment in South Africa is structural; the effects of discriminatory policies of the apartheid government still haunt the country: however, the situation is ironic in that, on one hand, there is high demand for jobs when few exist, and on the other, people with specific specialized skills are in short supply. Observers often call this situation a skills mismatch problem. However, the reality is that the number of youth entering the job market is too high to be absorbed. We find that huge inequalities in the schooling system lead to poor education for many disadvantaged groups, such as Black Africans; however, more than two decades after the fall of the apartheid government, the employment situation has not improved. In fact, we see a worsening situation, where now there is access to education but a lack of jobs. In contrast, there is a huge shortage in scientific and technological skills: where these jobs exist, youth do not possess the skills needed to take them up.

It is not as if the government turns a blind eye to the youth unemployment problem: officeholders at various levels of government have made efforts to deal with it. The Gauteng Provincial Government has implemented a youth-empowerment initiative called Tshepo 1 Million, designed to help youth access opportunities regardless of their level of education. (*Tshepo* is a local term for hope.) The program offers young people training in suitable skills, learnerships,¹ and entrepreneurial opportunities. A partnership between the government and the private sector, it is a good example of a program that can empower youth and enhance their employability. Its initial target was to create employment for five hundred young people, but it has grown to involve more than one million—an indication that more youth are in need of a job.

Tshepo's history and our research have allowed us to reach some simple conclusions regarding the lessons to be learned from the South African youth unemployment issue.

The national government, despite certain failures, has tried to deal with youth unemployment. In 1996, it promulgated the National Youth Commission Act 16, which paved the way for the formation of the National Youth Commission and the development of the National Youth Strategy (Harrison 2013; RSA 1996). Reinforcing its commitment, it established the National Youth Development Agency to tackle a variety of challenges that young people were facing, particularly unemployment.

In 2011, the government made a further commitment through the National Development Plan 2030. In this plan, it laid out the fundamentals of addressing unemployment, including (but not limited to) creating conditions for sustainable employment and economic growth and promoting employment in labor-absorbing industries, such as small to medium enterprises.

Despite these efforts, youth unemployment has remained high, casting doubt on the efficacy of these policies (Harrison 2013). Despite the good intentions and well-crafted policies, more is required to solve the problem. The government has admitted in the National Development Plan 2030 that unemployment is a problem affecting the whole country (National Planning Commission 2013). This calls for more attention to be paid to youth unemployment (Harrison 2013; Mayer et al. 2011; National Planning Commission 2013). Participation of youth in the economy is particularly important because it affects future economic growth and inclusivity, without which the absorption of young people into the labor market is hampered (DBSA 2011). Perhaps South Africa needs joint efforts from academics, policymakers, industrialists, and the youth themselves to accumulate evidence to help solve this problem.

Much is to be learned regarding how to tackle youth unemployment all over the world. In general, South Africa and many developing countries should distinguish between discouraged unemployed youth and actively job-searching unemployed youth. Separate strategies are needed. Furthermore, young men and young women require different strategies to ensure that they fully participate in the labor market. Youth disconnection is of huge concern (Bridgeland and Milano 2012; Sellers et al. 2012). High rates of youth disconnection—leading to low educational attainment, unemployment, poverty, involvement in juvenile justice systems and foster care, and early parenthood—not only contribute to youth unemployment, but tend to perpetuate it. Youth disconnected in late youth stages are likely to have been disconnected in early youth stages, and experience elsewhere, as in Atlanta in the United States, suggests that interventions to tackle youth unemployment are likely to be more effective in the early stages of youth (Covenant House Institute 2009; MacDonald 2008). Policymakers should therefore create interventions that focus on engaging youth in their early stages. Should we appeal to most African constitutions that declare that everyone has the right to work? Could this be an entry into facilitating a dialogue among all stakeholders to foster inclusivity in job creation? If so, how can this be done in our capitalistic nations? Are owners of capital concerned with inclusive social justice, which might compromise short-term profits for longer-term prosperity? How can we nudge changes in social behaviors that will view the youth not as a burden, but as an asset? What political economy discussions are required to improve the attraction to youth labor?

This piece does not suggest solutions, but calls for action in the desperate and urgent need to review the analysis of youth unemployment. Since the wonderful policies and previous recommendations from different studies do not seem to be yielding the desired reduction in youth unemployment, we ask some questions below.

Should a face-to-face, in-depth survey of the youth be conducted to shed better light on their specific needs?

Should we research more and better the strengths that can make youths more attractive to employers, such as technological savviness, the ability to work from anywhere in the world, the ability to be multifaceted, networking abilities (enabled by social media), the risk-taking that allows them to "think outside the box," the quest for social justice, and so forth?

Training programs tend to be successful in developing and transitioning countries toward employing their youth. For example, most BRICS² countries have used training as a successful tool to reduce occupational immobility, helping youth keep up with a fast-changing labor market and improving long-term employment prospects (Fox and Thomas 2016; Govindjee 2014). Would an audit of skills be a logical first step in identifying the skills of unemployed youths? At the same time, would such an audit provide valuable insight into possible vacancies in the economy? This may then reveal clearly if there is a mismatch in job-market information. In this type of research, it would be important to consider the heterogeneity of the youth, including gender, and therefore any possibly different needs. At the same time, how can we influence the youth to choose seemingly unattractive occupations, which require little or no initial training? How can society be made to change its attitude toward occupations such as waste picking, farming, tourism-related activities, and green-related activities? What political-economy discussions are required to encourage youth entrepreneurship?

Perhaps African countries should have joint efforts regarding policy planning and economic cooperation. It could be useful for African policymakers and businesses to discuss a more porous exchange, so that youth could find employment where they are most suitable. Some countries have large informal sectors, which, if youth were allowed entry, might well be modernized and transformed, to the advantage of the continent. By contrast, other countries are rich in agricultural potential, and freely allowing youth who have the desire and the skills to start farming in those countries might lead to more youth employment and transformation of the agricultural sector. Should Africa be more open to allowing freer movement of labor?

The story of Tshepo and the evidence found in our current research highlight how Africa's young people confront high rates of unemployment. We argue that unless governments and society take steps to curb the scourge of youth unemployment, social unrest and an exodus of youth out of the continent are likely. We pose a few questions that take us away from the usual questions asked and researched when it comes to youth unemployment. These questions and others can set a new agenda for studies on youth unemployment in Africa. Creating conditions for economic growth and human-development efforts for preparing youth for the future and ensuring they have the right skills demanded by the labor market are important interventions that African governments can implement. The question should not be left only to economists and policymakers, but must be viewed as a social justice issue. The case is urgent, as more and more youth are entering the job market every year. Perhaps South Africa should begin by asking what lessons can be learned from the rest of the world and what it should do differently to attain more favorable results for youth unemployment. As countries look forward after the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, this may be the best time to reimagine solutions for youth unemployment. We owe it to the many Tshepos out there.

NOTES

¹In South Africa, a learnership is a work-based learning program leading to a National Qualification Framework (NQF) registered qualification. Learnerships are directly related to an occupation or field of work, for example, electrical engineering, hairdressing, or project management.

².BRICS refers to the group of developing countries including Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

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