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OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOL
LEAVERS OUTSIDE THE MAJOR
TOWNS OF KENYA?
by
Kabiru Kinyanjui
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INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI
P.O. Box 30197
Nairobi, Kenya

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Views expressed in this paper are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Institute for Development Studies or of the University of Nairobi.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the employment opportunities available to Kenyan secondary school leavers are discussed in the light of national statistics and data from the Tracer Project which has followed up the employment history of 1965 - 1969 school leavers. It is pointed out that most secondary school leavers are attracted to Nairobi and the other major towns not merely because of an alleged white-collar mentality, but because that is where most of the opportunities for wage employment exist. In addition, urban life styles and disproportionately high urban salaries exercise a much more powerful influence on secondary school students than the exhortations of school teachers and politicians.

School leavers who are working in rural areas either have the same kinds of jobs they would have in towns, largely in the public sector, or have been forced to fall back on their families' resources in farming and other types of self-employment.

INTRODUCTION

A fourth form school leaver who left school at the end of 1969, writing of his experiences in the urban labour market, had this to say:

While I was unemployed I knocked at the doors of most of the offices in the city centre of Nairobi. I must have missed none. I wasn't well served. The gentlemen [and] the ladies, who are the officers, have motto of "come tomorrow", except for Sundays! I covered so many morrows on foot until I grew very tired, sick and unhealthy.

After many months of such an experience this school leaver concluded that, "a school leaver is nobody's friend. Even the relatives, and his best friends who helped him while at school, have [the] tendency to avoid him, and especially in town."

Since the beginning of 1970 when we started to follow up a national sample of Kenya secondary school leavers, a study which has been termed the Tracer Project, we have shared with many school leavers, like the one quoted above, the frustrations of unfulfilled hopes.¹ These unfortunate school leavers are struggling day and night in our major towns looking for employment opportunities which are not there. We have also shared with other school leavers the joys of school-day dreams fulfilled through participation in gainful and productive employment.

We are concerned here, however, not with the fortunate and happy few, but with the increasing numbers of unemployed school leavers. The frustrations and the indignities which these school leavers are experiencing in our urban centres are well known to many people in our society. It is indeed very difficult for parents, relatives, teachers, employers and government officials, who are daily inundated with requests to help school leavers to find wage employment, to fail to appreciate the seriousness of the unemployment problem in Kenya. In addition, the nature and extent of unemployment in Kenya is perhaps one of the few national problems which has received thorough and detailed study by both local and foreign experts. (See 4, 2 and 5.) Yet the realisation of this problem has not been matched by serious and concerted efforts to provide fundamental solutions.

While the concern shown for the rising unemployment amongst our school output is perhaps sincere, we have often wondered whether the solutions offered by leaders are really genuine. Here we shall attempt to deal with some of the fallacies which are spread, mainly by ranking government officials, in regard to the problem of unemployment among secondary

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1. For a full discussion of the methodology of the Tracer Project See 9.

school leavers.² The first two fallacies which are propagated mainly by the officials of the Ministry of Education relate to the educational system. For one thing, the unemployment of school leavers is seen as the inability of the school system to produce people with practical skills. The answer to this problem has been to provide more and more technical and agricultural education.³ Technical education is now preached as the solution to the unemployment problem. The second tendency has been to blame the victims of unemployment. The problem of unemployment among school leavers is blamed on the unrealistic aspirations of school leavers coupled with their white-collar mentality.⁴ The school leavers are therefore advised to be realistic and change this mentality and their lot will be better. Those following these two approaches tend to view this problem as purely an educational problem and seek solutions within the context of the education system.

Faced with decreasing wage employment opportunities in the major towns relative to the rapidly increasing output of our educational system, some government leaders have also entertained the hopes that there are employment opportunities for school leavers outside the major towns of Kenya. The school leavers, they argue, would benefit from the employment and self-employment opportunities which accelerated rural development would generate. (See 3, Chapter 6, pp. 166-178 and 7, pp. 109-113)

2. For instance, see a speech given by the Assistant Minister of Education, Mr. C. Rubia, at Arya Boys Secondary School and reported in the East African Standard (Nairobi), April 10, 1974, under the title, "Job Opportunities for School Leavers"; and the Minister of Education, Mr. Taita Towett's opening speech at the Annual Careers Conference for School Guidance Counsellors, reported by the Daily Nation (Nairobi), on April 25, 1974, under the heading, "Students Must Give Up White-Collar Ambitions".

3. See the Minister of Education, Mr. Taita Towett's speech reported in the Daily Nation, November 15, 1973, and Mr. Charles Rubia's speech to the United Kenya Club, reported in the Daily Nation, November 22, 1973. The creation of the Harambee Institutes of Science and Technology is the outcome of this thinking. See 1.

4. See Mr. Taita Towett's opening speech at the Annual Careers Conference referred to in footnote two, a school leaver's letter to the Daily Nation, printed on January 5, 1974, with the title, "Reflections of a Jobseeker", and an editorial response to the letter printed on January 6, titled "'Plight' of the Jobseeker".

Here we shall attempt to show that the problem of unemployment is not entirely an educational problem and therefore solutions have to be sought outside the education system. Secondly we want to demonstrate that mere exhortation for school leavers to return to the land and engage in self-employment ignores the economic realities of the country, and is therefore meaningless within the present economic structure. In short we shall argue that unemployment of school leavers is essentially an economic problem which, if it is to be adequately tackled, entails dealing with the questions of the restructuring of the economy and the distribution of economic benefits. Our discussion here, however, will be limited to employment of secondary school leavers and will rely heavily on the data from the Tracer Project, a follow-up study of the school leavers who finished fourth form between 1965 and 1969.

EMPLOYMENT IN THE MAJOR TOWNS (Nairobi, Mombasa, Nakuru, Kisumu, Thika and Eldoret)⁵

An inspection of employment opportunities actually available in Kenya today reveals that school leavers gravitate to the major towns not because of their unrealistic attitudes, but because this is where the jobs are. A striking feature of the distribution of employment opportunities for secondary school leavers is the predominant role played by the capital city of Nairobi. Between 1966 and 1968, Nairobi absorbed more than 50 per cent of the total number of school leavers who went into direct employment immediately after school. In 1969 and 1970, the proportion of school leavers entering direct employment who found their jobs in Nairobi declined to about 40 per cent, but even during these years Nairobi provided more opportunities for secondary school leavers than any other place. This was not only true for those seeking wage employment, but also for those interested in entering into post-secondary training and higher education.

While the proportion of school leavers entering into wage employment who found jobs in Nairobi declined between 1969 and 1970, the other major towns (Mombasa, Nakuru, Kisumu, Eldoret and Thika) showed an increase in the proportion of those finding employment from about 18 per cent in

5. The 1969 census figures for these towns were:

Nairobi	209,000
Mombasa	247,000
Nakuru	47,000
Kisumu	32,000
Thika	18,000
Eldoret	18,000

The population in these larger urban centres made up about eight per cent of the total Kenya population, and another two per cent of the total population was found in the smaller towns.

the period between 1966 and 1968 to over 24 per cent in 1969 and 1970. Another indication of employment opportunities is growth of the number of people in wage employment. Thika and Nakuru are two of the major towns which showed the highest annual growth rate of numbers employed in the period between 1963 and 1972. In Thika the annual growth rate was 3.5 per cent during this period, and in Nakuru it was 4.8 per cent. (See 6, p. 227.)

In spite of these indications of growth in other towns, the predominance of Nairobi can be shown in many different ways. Nairobi is not only a major destination of school leavers, but most other rural-urban migrants end up there. Between 1962 and 1969, the Nairobi population grew annually at a rate of 10.9 per cent, a rate that was well above that of any other town in the country.⁶ Between 1963 and 1972, the number of people in enumerated wage employment in Nairobi increased from 143,000 to about 192,000, an annual growth rate of about 3.1 per cent. The wage employees in Nairobi represented 26 per cent of the national total in wage employment in 1963 and in 1972. (6, pp. 226 and 227) In 1963, the wage employees in Nairobi were 53.9 per cent of all those with wage employment in towns of over 2,000 people, and in 1972, this percentage was 56.5.

The dominant role of the city of Nairobi and the other major towns is reflected not only in the number of people entering wage employment, but also in the level of earnings accruing to these towns. In 1972 the major towns provided 41 per cent of the wage employment in the country, while earnings coming from these towns represented 92 per cent of the total earnings of all towns with over 2,000 people in 1969. While Nairobi had 58 per cent of the population of the six major towns, its share of total earnings in these towns was 74 per cent. Mombasa, the second largest town in Kenya and a major destination of secondary school leavers, accounted for about 17 per cent of the total earnings of the six towns. (6, p. 240) On the whole these urban centres played a dominant role in the provision of employment and income compared to their population which was only about 8 per cent of the national population.

The concentration of employment opportunities in Nairobi and in the major towns is not unique to Kenya. The colonial and neo-colonial countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America have tended to

6. The author wishes to thank Henry Rempel of the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, for this information.

have primate cities, one or two in each country, where economic, political, administrative and cultural activities are concentrated, thereby becoming major centres of formal sector employment. In other words, these cities become the national metropolis while rural areas are the national periphery. The national "development" is therefore concentrated in the national centre which corresponds to the national capital, while the rural areas remain relatively stagnant and underdeveloped. Although Kenyan development may be unique in certain ways, the city of Nairobi is definitely the national centre of development.

As most of the industries and commercial enterprises and indeed most of the government bureaucracy is situated in Nairobi, it has been a logical destination of those wanting wage employment, high-incomes, status and power. In 1972 about 65 per cent of high and middle level manpower was located in Nairobi. (6, p. 235) Because of this concentration of economic, political and cultural activities and the presence of the national elite, the national life style, attitudes and values tend to be shaped in this capital city. The life styles of Nairobi in turn are not determined in Kenya, but in the developed countries. The development of a tourist industry, with Nairobi playing a prominent role rivalled in importance only by the whole of the coast, has reinforced the foreign style of the Kenyan capital. The international meetings which are now being hosted in Nairobi are another factor which helps to alienate the city from its periphery and cultural milieu. In short this cultural penetration not only prostitutes our women and our elite, but its educational impact in terms of influencing the aspirations of our population is tremendous.

The foreign influence, through tourism and reading materials, the life style of the national elite and the economic and social rewards that the few school leavers who are successful enjoy in the urban centres, are all crucial factors in the formation of the attitudes and aspirations of those in our schools. The very process of acquiring formal education in Africa, and in Kenya in particular, orients students in the direction of urban migration. The propensity to migrate to urban centres increases in proportion to the level of education attained.

This propensity to migrate is one indication that socialising agents from the towns are more influential than the school. So to give our school system the task of imparting values and aspirations which are

contrary to what the wider society is encouraging is to ask the teachers and the school system to accomplish the impossible. The role of the school system in the formation of attitudes and values is marginal in a society where a value system different from that of the schools is fostered and rewarded. It is in this wider context that career guidance and the exhortations directed to school leavers to change their alleged white-collar mentality should be assessed and understood.

In the first five years of independence, most of the school leavers found their skills in great demand because of the economic expansion and the Africanisation that went on at that time. The economic and social rewards that accrued to the educated strengthened the demand for education which found expression in the Harambee school movement which reached its zenith around 1970. By 1969 however, the demand for school leavers with mere academic training started to decline. At this time our school output started to saturate the labour market, the output having risen from 6,500 in 1964 to about 13,000 in 1968, an increase of about 100 per cent. The employment opportunities which school leavers had enjoyed immediately after independence were mainly in the public sector which was rapidly expanding and being Africanised. The private sector, unfortunately, did not show and has not shown the same capacity for absorbing school leavers as the public sector. The nature of investments and choice of technology in the private sector seem to be related to a low level of employment generation in this sector of the economy. (See 8, pp. 147-148.)

Although the absorptive capacity of the major towns in Kenya is bound to decline in absolute terms, in relative terms they are going to continue to absorb the bulk of our school leavers both in the formal and the informal sector. The present policies and the pattern of investments, the concentration of economic and administrative activities, coupled with foreign influence in the major towns, and Nairobi in particular, do not indicate that there will be any fundamental change in the destinations or the aspirations of many of our school leavers.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL TOWNS AND RURAL AREAS

The data from the Tracer Project show that the proportion of school leavers who were employed in small towns (Nyeri, Kericho, Nanyuki, Embu, Kitale, Webuye, etc.) and in the rural areas did not change significantly in the period between 1966 and 1968. In this period about 20 per cent of the school leavers who went directly into employment were absorbed in

these areas. In 1969 and 1970, the data show that about 30 per cent of school leavers obtained their first jobs in the small towns and rural areas.

The analysis of our follow-up data shows that the major source of employment opportunities in the small towns and rural areas is the public sector. Two categories seem to emerge as far as public sector employment is concerned. First, most of the school leavers are employed as either untrained or trained teachers by the Teachers Service Commission (T.S.C.) and scattered all over the rural areas. The second category of public sector employees is concentrated in provincial, district and divisional headquarters. These usually work as clerks, health and medical assistants and agricultural assistants. On the whole, the school leavers working in this sector are usually employed as teachers or as clerical staff. In other words, they are an extension of central government bureaucracy which is situated in Nairobi. In the early years of independence this bureaucracy was expanded into most of the rural areas and school leavers benefited from the opportunities which were available at that time. However, it seems that this rural bureaucracy, like the bureaucracy in Nairobi, has reached a point of saturation.

Private sector employment in the rural areas is very limited and where available it is generally unattractive to secondary school leavers. A very few employment opportunities have been provided by firms such as banks which have branches in the small rural centres, but private firms, except those involved in estate and plantation agriculture (coffee, tea, sugar and sisal), are situated in the major urban centres, and even the estate and plantation enterprises have their headquarters and processing plants in the cities. The few private sector jobs which have gone to secondary school leavers in the rural areas are the same types of jobs as those filled by leavers in the main urban areas. These jobs are in essence urban jobs in a rural context, and they are created as a result of the penetration of urban enterprises into the rural periphery.

From the data we have, very few school leavers are finding wage employment in large farms, small holdings or rural enterprises. A traditional explanation of this phenomenon has been that the school leavers are not interested in agricultural employment. We would argue, however, that the low wages and on the whole the poor conditions of service prevailing in farming enterprises make this type of employment unattractive to secondary school leavers. Another fact which needs to be

taken into consideration is that the large farms and small-scale rural enterprises do not cater for people with high school education. Consequently, the jobs which have been generated in the agricultural sector, on large-scale farms as well as small holdings, have mainly benefited the uneducated and primary school leavers. It is also perhaps people from this social category who benefited from the opportunities brought by land settlement in the early sixties. The Africanisation of the White Highlands through the transfer of large-scale farms to Africans, which has taken up a great deal of energy and financial resources in the last ten years, has perhaps not generated any additional employment opportunities over the prevailing level before the transfer.

The data on 1968 school leavers, and even more on the 1969 leavers, show that an increasing number of school leavers who are not recruited for higher education, training or employment are spending more time on their parents' smallholdings. There is also an indication of their willingness to do piece work (kibarua) for subsistence. This is noticeable among school leavers who come from the high potential agricultural areas where seasonal jobs are usually available and indicates their attempt to adjust to the changing employment situation, an attempt that seems to come after long periods of futile search for formal sector jobs. Nevertheless, the school leavers make it quite clear that they are not resigned to this kind of life, but see this as a way of subsisting while they search for better opportunities.

This brief review of the data available from the Tracer Project leads us to ask ourselves whether the change observed in the proportion of school leavers finding employment outside the major towns in 1969 and 1970 represents an increase in employment opportunities in the rural areas. The evidence we have indicates that there is no fundamental shift in the pattern of distribution of employment opportunities which have traditionally gone to school leavers. The jobs they are doing in the rural areas are not qualitatively different from those being done by school leavers in urban centres. In other words, these school leavers are doing essentially bureaucratic jobs within the rural context. The second question is whether the aspirations and attitudes of the school leavers are changing in line with the available rural employment. Again from the evidence we have there seems to be no fundamental change in the aspirations and attitudes of school leavers immediately after leaving school, but once they have been in the labour market for more than six months without finding formal employment their attitudes towards employment become flexible and show

a willingness to take anything that might come their way. Hopes for formal employment are still entertained, however, even when the school leavers have begun earning a living in the rural sector and the situation in the formal sector is still not promising.

To reiterate, economic activities, foreign investment, technology, innovation and talent will continue to be concentrated in Kenya's major urban centres, and for a long time to come they are going to be the centres for relatively high-income jobs and therefore the major destination of our school output. The few school leavers who achieve success in these urban areas are the ones who shape the attitudes and aspirations of those in secondary schools, as well as of other rural people, rather than teachers and politicians, who exhort them to look for opportunities in the rural areas.

SELF-EMPLOYMENT

In our 1968 sample, ten school leavers were found to be self-employed. Five of these had farms which they had inherited from their parents and had begun to farm on their own. Four of the others had joined their parents' businesses or farms as junior partners, and one was an entrepreneur in the field of music. On the whole, these school leavers had performed poorly in the East African Certificate of Education (E.A.C.E.). Unfortunately we could not follow them up for more than two years to know whether they were successful or not.

The 1969 sample shows that more than thirty school leavers became self-employed. On the whole, they were involved in farming, the exceptions being two who were selling logs and charcoal, one who was a fisherman and one other who was a shopkeeper. These school leavers tend to come mainly from the less well-established secondary schools, and their performance in E.A.C.E. is usually poor.

In order to convey a sense of what is involved when somebody decides to become self-employed, we quote at length the experiences of one school leaver. He writes:

I would like to give you a clear picture of my struggles to get a job. I enrolled for form five in my school in 1969. Bad luck, I obtained 37 points and was not admitted to form five. There was no alternative except to be on the streets looking for a job.

I started by enrolling with the Kenyanisation of Personnel Bureau. But with no success. I tried through the Ministry of Labour but with no success. I tried the Sugar Industries in Nyanza but with no success.

In Nairobi, I would contact a relative in a position somewhere, and if there was contract, I would toil with my hands to get some few shillings and I would then be stopped, and keep on walking in the streets.

Lastly, I decided to go back to the LAND, after one full year's hopeless street-walking in Nairobi. I could do nothing in the countryside since I had no capital. I decided to take the jembe and help my mother and family dig their small garden and I also helped my uncle farm his small sugar-cane plantation. From this source I managed to get some amount which I used to pay fees for the college I am attending.

My present fear is how I am going to get employment when I am out of college this year since the college is private and does not guarantee employment. I am really afraid of the future.

The experiences of this particular school leaver who turned to self-employment after unsuccessful attempts to get formal sector employment are the labour market experiences of many school leavers. The fear of this school leaver is also the fear of many unemployed school leavers in Kenya today. The 1969 school leavers who ended up in self-employment had very similar experiences.

From the experience of the above quoted school leaver, a few characteristics of the leavers who go into self-employment emerge. To begin with, these school leavers spend a great deal of their time and energy in the urban centres looking for formal sector employment. They end up unsuccessful and very frustrated. The school leaver quoted at the beginning of this paper expresses this frustration succinctly. The failure to find employment generates lack of faith in the government institutions and the personnel charged with the responsibility of selection and allocation of school leavers into training and employment.⁷ This has led most of the unsuccessful school leavers to seriously believe that unless one is related or known to an influential person one cannot obtain a formal sector job. A 1969 school leaver expressed his disappointment with the formal system of getting jobs in this way:

I have roamed in Nairobi for two solid years after which I became tired and went home. During all this time I filled so many forms from different places, and all have resulted negatively. This has brought me to a point of despair.

After this period of unsuccessful job seeking the disappointed school leaver like the prodigal son returns to his father's smallholding in the rural area.

7. The school leavers have tended to lose confidence in the Kenyanisation of Personnel Bureau, the Ministry of Labour Exchanges and other employment agencies. A number of school leavers have fallen victim to bogus employment agencies.

Another important characteristic of the school leavers who go back to the land is that these leavers have resources to go back to. Out of the thirty 1969 school leavers who went into self-employment, only two came from landless homes, but even these two had some resources to fall back on. The other 28 came from homes where parents owned land ranging from two to thirty acres. This seems to be a crucial factor in making the decision to return to the land. An unemployed school leaver who has no resources such as land to return to in the rural area will most likely remain in the urban centre despite the disappointment he encounters. It seems therefore that any policy which takes the solution of unemployment among school leavers to be the return to the land and self-employment in the rural areas has to contend with two basic questions. First, where is the land to which our school leavers will return, and second, can the land in the densely populated areas carry more people with a chance of the productivity being maintained at the present level or being increased?

A third point is that the school leavers who become self-employed continue to entertain hopes that one day they will get formal sector jobs. One school leaver pointed out that working on his father's farm was "mere waste of my precious time" and that he was "suffering with bitterness".

From this discussion it is clear that secondary school leavers do not venture into self-employment until they have failed to get wage employment. This seems to indicate that secondary education is still viewed as preparation for wage employment. The rewards which are attached to wage employment are crucial factors in influencing parents as well as students to view their secondary education as preparation for entry into the formal sector. Secondly, a school leaver venturing into self-employment has to have resources, skills and confidence, and these are usually lacking among school leavers. Access to family land is therefore vital for a school leaver thinking of self-employment, and lack of access to land or resources of this kind means that self-employment is not a feasible alternative to unemployment.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to raise doubts concerning views which have been expressed on unemployment among secondary school leavers. We have attempted to show that this problem is mainly an economic problem and solutions have to be sought outside the educational system. While educational innovations and changes are very welcome, the limitations of the educational system in bringing changes to the broader society must be recognised.

We have also attempted to show that the destinations of many of

our school leavers will continue to be the main urban centres. The concentration of economic activities and high-incomes in the towns will continue to influence the attitudes and aspirations of school leavers towards urban employment. The pattern of land ownership and utilisation and the nature of rural enterprises are crucial factors which will determine whether school leavers will find rural employment and scope for self-employment in rural areas.

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