

# IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

Volume 48 | Number 3 | May 2017

## AFRICA'S YOUTH EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGE: NEW PERSPECTIVES

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# Gambling, Dancing, Sex Work: Notions of Youth Employment in Uganda

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**Abstract** Using the case of Uganda, this article explains how previously displaced youth conceptualise employment compared to what is formally understood as employment by national and cultural institutions. Using key informant interviews, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, the study examined the experiences of formerly displaced youth in Northern Uganda. Findings indicate that in order to survive, these youth participate in socially and culturally unacceptable activities, some of which are criminal offences. This article focuses on these deviant forms of employment, arguing that the youth population has been framed as unemployed based on a formal understanding of work. Yet, in Northern Uganda, this disregards the complexities of the lives of the formerly displaced, leading to the criminalisation and pathologisation of alternative forms of income generation. This research concludes that these forms of work can be transformative and empowering for young people and thus deserving of attention from policymakers and development practitioners.

**Keywords:** Africa, gender, risky behaviour, conflict, sex work.

## 1 Introduction

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines unemployment simply as when people are without work, currently available for work and are actively seeking work (ILO 2010). The ILO in addition adopts particular indicators in reference to unemployment including hours worked, skills required and wages attained by doing a particular job. In this article, I argue that this approach to unemployment and employment disregards much of the work done by people who find themselves in difficult or irregular situations, such as formerly displaced young people from Northern Uganda. It is thus important to re-conceptualise what (un)employment means, taking into account contextually relevant factors including location, age and gender.

Besides unemployment, internal displacement is another challenge facing Africa generally. According to the Internal Displacement

Monitoring Centre, by the end of 2014, there were 38 million displaced people globally with the majority in sub-Saharan Africa (Lenard 2015). Sub-Saharan Africa suffers from protracted displacement,<sup>1</sup> and this hinders reintegration, resettlement and reconstruction, and thus development. Uganda has not escaped these dynamics of displacement. The country has been entangled in decades of civil violence in the post-independence period (Byamugisha, Shamchiyeva and Kizu 2014). The rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) have particularly affected the northern part of the country. Their rebellion started in 1986 when the current government took power and it continued until 2008 (Dolan 2009). The civilian population, and especially young people, have been the rebels' primary target (Cheney 2007; Machel 2000).

This article draws on a larger qualitative study: 'Gender, Age and Violence: Complexity of Identity Among Returning Formerly Displaced Youth in Uganda' (Namuggala 2016). This doctoral thesis adopted an integrated approach to understanding youthhood. The approach moves beyond numerical age definitions (the Uganda National Youth Policy defines youth to include persons between the ages of 18 and 35 years) to reflect local functional and relational perspectives to human growth and development.

Throughout this article, therefore, unless otherwise stated, I use the term youth to refer to persons who identify or who the community identifies as such, irrespective of their numeric age. This population is heterogeneous in terms of gender, location, marital status and so on, and therefore an approach to youthhood based on the notion of intersectionality is useful (Crenshaw 2006). In addition, it unveils the ways interconnected domains of power organise and structure inequality and oppression and thus links research and practice (Dill and Zambrana 2009).

This study examined the experiences of youth affected by the war between the LRA and the Ugandan government in the Northern Uganda region. The research is informed by feminist scholarship, as well as by indigenous studies, childhood studies, peace studies and conflict studies. These interdisciplinary frameworks were crucial in the analysis of complex social issues like unemployment. For instance, by conceptualising unemployment essentially as a male youth challenge, youth bulge theory<sup>2</sup> gives a highly gendered perspective, which is open to a feminist critique. Also, local perspectives provide a contextually relevant counter to the official age-based construction of childhood, youth and adulthood (Chilisa 2012; Chilisa and Ntseane 2010). Such contextual relevance is particularly important for local policy reform.

The article begins by providing a general introduction to the understanding of unemployment and conceptualisation of youth especially in the context of displacement. Section 2 details the methodology that informed the data collection and analysis process. To provide a historical overview to the youth unemployment challenge, Section 3 explains and provides a critical analysis of Ugandan

government strategies and frameworks to address youth unemployment. With a clear understanding of the history informing current employment narratives, in Section 4 I discuss formerly displaced youths' understanding of employment in relation to the official understanding. This includes implications for their work options and choices, as well as for policy.

## **2 Methodology**

This research was qualitative. Data collection methods used included in-depth face-to-face interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. In total, 50 interviews were conducted with 34 females and 16 males ranging between 10 and 35 years of age. Ten key informant interviews were conducted with non-governmental organisation (NGO) employees working as youth, local and cultural leaders. Six focus group discussions with the youth were also held.

Soroti District provided a good location for understanding youth experiences because it hosted a number of camps for internally displaced persons and a large number of returnees upon closure of the camps. Following the successful Juba peace talks which took place between 2006 and 2008, displaced people have returned to their communities. However, there have been land disputes, marginalisation and violence, which has at times resulted in secondary displacement – where formally returned populations are forced to depart again. The situation has been exacerbated by high unemployment, especially among young people. While the general national unemployment rate is high – ranging between 64 and 70 per cent (Magelah and Ntambirweki-Karugonjo 2014) – the situation is worse in Northern Uganda given the breakdown in social structures and systems as a result of the war.

Study participants were recruited using lists of formerly displaced persons provided by a community organisation called Community Integrated Development Initiatives (CIDI), which has worked in the region since 2007. Two gender-specific lists of young people were drawn up from which names were randomly selected until the desired number of participants was attained. These youth included those displaced from neighbouring districts but also those from Soroti displaced within the district, as well as those born and raised in the camps with nowhere to return to. Key informants included individuals working on youth issues through civil society, NGOs and government. Initial reflection on each interview informed subsequent interviews. Upon completion of the fieldwork, all interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed.

## **3 Overview of youth unemployment**

Unemployment, especially as it affects the younger generation, is a long-standing development challenge in both developed and developing economies. Actors including states, international development partners such as the United Nations, World Bank, and civil society have focused on unemployment, but in Africa little progress has been made (Cleland and Machiyama 2016). Africa has the 'fastest growing and

most youthful population in the world' (AERC 2013: 1), but youth unemployment on the continent is also attributed to interrelated dynamics between economic underdevelopment, political instability, and a lack of political will (Opute 2015).

Given the diversity of situations and young people, dealing with unemployment in Africa requires a multifaceted understanding of work that privileges the different experiences and perspectives of young people themselves. For example, in Uganda, while the entire youth population is affected, the rate of unemployment among female youth is twice as high as that among males (Ahaibwe and Mbowa 2014). In addition, female youth are more susceptible to vulnerabilities emanating from unemployment, such as sexual exploitation. Besides gendered differences, labour market experiences of rural and urban youth can also be very different.

The government of Uganda appreciates the challenge that unemployment poses and has implemented a range of policies to promote youth employment. These must be examined against the backdrop of major reforms implemented during the 1990s that resulted in the retrenchment of many civil servants and the privatisation of public enterprises. These reforms reduced the role of the state as an employer and the private sector is currently the biggest employer in the country (Ahaibwe and Mbowa 2014). To encourage private investment, the Uganda Investment Authority (UIA) was established in 1991 through a parliamentary act. It has, however, not delivered to desired standards and is critiqued for failing to create employment, especially for youth (Ahaibwe and Mbowa 2014). In addition, the UIA is urban based – despite the majority of Ugandans residing in rural areas. For instance, youth in rural regions such as Northern Uganda could not access the investment schemes because they were urban centred, and because political instabilities meant that the youth lacked information and skills for self-employment.

Following disappointing results from the UIA, the government began to focus on enterprise development and particularly promoting self-employment among the youth. The Youth Entrepreneurial Scheme (YES) was established in the 1990s, under which youth were given loans to start businesses. YES proved unsuccessful because it was used as a political tool and the expected loan recoveries were not made (Ahaibwe and Mbowa 2014). Other loan schemes implemented by the government included the Youth Venture Capital Fund (YVCF), the Graduate Venture Fund (GVF) and the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP). All of these prioritised urban youth; in addition, they had such stringent conditions and collateral requirements that relatively few young people could access them. While these schemes were gender-neutral in principle, they delivered gendered consequences. The stringent conditions hindered female youth, who generally have more limited access to resources including land, motorcycles and other household items, which could be used as collateral.

Besides promoting enterprise development, the government has also taken steps to upgrade the skills that young people bring to the labour market. This has been done through the Ministry of Education. For example, the government increased pay for science teachers and sponsorship for students taking sciences at higher education institutions. Skills promotion also involves curriculum review, and encouraging technical subjects, entrepreneurship and vocational training. Despite being a practical step to dealing with unemployment, this approach has been perceived negatively by some (Ahaibwe and Mbowa 2014). For example, local communities see vocational training to be for academically weak students who may not be able to make it to higher education institutions. This has resulted in low recruitment and retention rates. Vocational training also suffers from gender biases. Female youth are expected to take on training in areas that are traditionally seen as ‘women’s work’; for instance, tailoring and catering, while male youth go for carpentry, motor vehicle mechanics and welding, among others.

It is clear that the government has not turned a blind eye to the youth unemployment challenge. Its policies and programmes, however, have not been effective. This is particularly the case in areas such as Northern Uganda that have been affected by armed violence. In assessing the state of livelihoods in Northern Uganda, scholars have shown that economic opportunities open to youth are abysmal, with the principal form of income generation being *leje leje* (casual labour). This kind of work is unprofitable, and ‘the median youth have just days of work per month at wages of 55 cents per day’ (Annan, Blattman and Horton 2006: v).

#### **4 Re-conceptualising youth employment in Northern Uganda**

In post-conflict Northern Uganda, young people have developed alternative forms of work that allow income generation and survival, but which have either been overlooked, not considered as legitimate employment or condemned as criminal. In some cases, these forms of employment can be transformational. I argue that in order to challenge dominant discourses that frame youth in Africa as violent and unproductive, rather than being socially pathologised, these forms of self-identified employment must be recognised and much better understood.

##### **4.1 Sex work**

Sex work is common in situations of conflict and displacement (Machel 2000) and despite the formal declaration of the end of conflict in Northern Uganda, it remains a survival strategy amidst food shortages, extreme poverty and unemployment. Scholars have referred to such sex work as ‘survival sex’ because if it is not performed, family survival may be curtailed (Mulumba and Namuggala 2014). Sex work is highly gendered and at the same time it is also age sensitive: in agreement with other scholars, my research showed it to be dominated by young women.

Factors explaining sex work in Northern Uganda include women’s limited access to communal resources and high rates of domestic

violence. Domestic violence takes the form of physical abuse and rejection of previously displaced youth by family and community members. Rejection can reflect a blaming of the young people for collaborating with, marrying and/or having children with rebels. While mothers were encouraged to return with their children, they have not received adequate support for reintegration (see Irin News 2015). Indeed, some female captives who gave birth during captivity returned to have these children labelled as 'rebel children'. Some former captives were drawn into sex work in the search for belonging, support and survival. Gendered victimisation in this case becomes a cause and a consequence of unemployment. While male youth might have fathered children during displacement, they do not go through the same experiences as females, especially relating to childcare.

Besides being perceived negatively by society, prostitution is also a crime in Uganda. As such, for their own safety sex workers operate under cover. Yet the income young women generate through it is used to fulfil important social and cultural responsibilities, for instance to pay for childcare and the care of elderly and/or disabled family members. One respondent, a young woman and mother of four noted:

*People think because we get money from sex, we are not good people. But we use that very money to provide for our families, our children. If I cannot acquire basic needs like food for my children, what do you expect me to do? This is the only alternative... we are criticised for being loose but no one criticises us for putting food on the table.<sup>3</sup>*

Sex work therefore becomes an accommodated form of employment among vulnerable female youth given the circumstances in which they live. These circumstances include their failure to attain a socially acceptable role in their communities. One female aged around 24 years explained the dilemma she encountered upon returning to her village following abduction:

*Yes, I was abducted but I was confined and I did not kill anyone. I did not even hold a gun. I was married off and used to cook for others during the abduction... when we came back, people think we are all murderers and heartless. Neighbours mistreated me and no one wanted to talk to me. That's how I joined some other friends and we went to the [town] centre, and later started prostitution for food, money and other needs.<sup>4</sup>*

The fact that the community labelled this girl as a 'murderer', and the resulting stigmatisation, discrimination and eventual isolation, led to a failure to re-integrate and unemployment. For excluded young women, sex work may be the only available employment option.

Although looked down on by the community, sex work is a form of employment that is potentially open to everyone and brings quick income for young women. Nevertheless, it comes at a cost since it is culturally and religiously despised, stigmatised and pathologised (Namuggala 2016). My informants noted that access to some public services such as education

and health, and loans, was thwarted when personal recommendations were required from opinion leaders and other community members. In these circumstances, and given the poor health service provision in Northern Uganda reflected in the shortage of health practitioners, drugs and outbreaks of preventable diseases like malaria, diarrhoea and cholera (Annan *et al.* 2011; Spitzer and Twikirize 2013), sex work becomes a source of livelihood. Survival sex may eventually result in long-term consequences including unwanted pregnancies, and exposure to sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS.

In addition to the negative moral connotations associated with sex work, it runs counter to expectations about the temporal aspects of acceptable employment. In Northern Uganda work is expected to be done during the day. Sex work, however, is principally night activity, when societal gatekeepers are less vigilant. When local leaders and government officials observe youth sitting 'idle' during the morning hours, the assumption is that they are jobless and unemployed. For those who are sex workers, however, mornings are used as 'free' time after working nights. Because sex work is not officially acknowledged as employment, working conditions are unregulated and poor, resulting in risk, vulnerability and exploitation for those involved.

It is also important to highlight that, while cash is a dominant payment method for formalised employment, in some cases, young sex workers are paid in kind, for instance in the form of food including *posho* (maize flour), beans, groundnuts and millet. Such youth therefore understood employment broadly as work for survival, even if cash is not exchanged. Phrases like 'working for food' were commonly used. One youth explained that a way to tell if someone is employed or not is whether they are 'having food every day'.

#### 4.2 Gambling

Gambling is another activity that youth consider as income-generating employment. It takes various forms with the most popular being playing cards – locally referred to as *zaala* or *matatu* – and sports betting. Unlike sex work, gambling is male dominated. It takes place round the clock, hence the popular phrase 'any time is gambling time'. Gambling is popular among young people because it has the potential to bring quick cash with little effort. Compared to ILO standards relating to time, skills and wages, gambling does not require any particular skills and thus is not considered work. The youth, however, consider gambling as 'working smart'. Asked about this work, one youth said:

*Now what's wrong with that?? Whom have I cheated? We play I win. It takes the brain. You get money easily and quickly... Agriculture???? How long does it take and how am I going to survive? I have no land, I have no hoe and no seeds. We just work smart.<sup>5</sup>*

In another interview, a youth explained sports betting as a type of employment:

*Sports betting is a full-time job. It is not easy I'm telling you. You have to keep informed in sports. We listen to radio, read newspapers in order to bet right. You have to know how teams are performing in the season, which team is likely to win or lose. Otherwise you make losses.*<sup>6</sup>

Young people believe gambling and sports betting are forms of employment: while they do not require the physical effort associated with local notions of work, they engage the brain. In this context, youth understand employment to require access to up-to-the-minute information locally and internationally, for example to track particular sporting teams or individuals. It also involves the ability to take short-term risks. Such an understanding of employment is individualised and not community focused. This deviates from common understandings of work and employment that emphasise the value of a relatively long-term community orientation, such as investment in agricultural activities like crop production and animal rearing.

Like sex work, gambling is illegal and youth can be incarcerated if they are apprehended. Local leaders believe that gambling reduces young people's productivity, and they use this to rationalise restrictions.

#### **4.3 Contemporary dancing**

Dancing is also used by some young people to generate income, especially, but not only, young women. Advertising companies hire both male and female youth to dance on advertising trucks, podiums and at promotional events and are paid in either cash or in kind in the form of phones, drinks or clothing. Informants noted that it takes practice and determination to get to the level where they can be hired. They also have to dress in 'trendy' ways and develop links with event organisers and promoters who provide access to information hiring and also recommendations. Once engaged, they must hang around town centres to ensure they can keep up with the trends in the form of songs, dancing styles and dressing. The young people reported that this work empowers them to make decisions affecting their lives, for example in the way they dress, act and express their sexuality. Also, since most female dancers are not expected to be mothers, many young women use contraceptives as a way of avoiding unexpected pregnancies, which they also see as empowering.

Although dancing might appear to be a more acceptable means of earning an income, and be a less risky occupation, most elders expressed disapproval of young women who dance: in their opinion, they dress 'indecently', but as a group their disapproval includes the use of drugs (especially marijuana), and their disrespectful language and behaviour. Also, such dancers are frequently away from home – at times for days – and travel during the night, which challenges parental control and dominance.

#### **5 Discussion and conclusion**

The previous section used examples of sex work, gambling and dancing to illustrate that formerly displaced youth in Northern Uganda do not necessarily see themselves as unemployed but rather as involved

in forms of gainful employment that are not recognised or legitimised by official definitions and frameworks, or by members of local communities. For example, they do not meet the ILO criteria relating to time, wages and skills. Because of this, their work is not acknowledged in international, national and local labour statistics, nor are their activities supported through youth employment policy and programmes. This undervalues young people's agency and frames them as vulnerable, idle and undeveloped.

The three forms of survival employment, though different, share some important commonalities. First, with their comparatively low barriers to entry, they are open to young people who have been rejected, victimised or marginalised because of previous displacement and/or association with rebels. Second, despite the fact that these forms of work allow them to earn an income and survive and to fulfil family, social and cultural responsibilities, they are all either illegal, seen as morally deviant or frowned upon by community elders. Third, they can be associated with the use of drugs. Some informants, for example, reported that the use of marijuana was common because it increases stamina, determination and endurance in distressing circumstances that included police brutality. Drugs are used at times in combination with alcohol and tobacco. Finally, aside from the individual income and in-kind benefits, these activities promote unity and solidarity among groups of young people who meet regularly. It was reported that if a particular individual does not appear for daily meetings consecutively, the group endeavours to reach out and help if necessary. Regardless of negative community opinion, for the youth involved, these activities may be seen as empowering and transformative in the sense that they made it possible for them to earn an income and survive in difficult circumstances, and in addition, those involved form a valuable support system.

These details make it obvious that these forms of income-earning activity are not to be seen as attractive career choices to be actively promoted among young people. Nevertheless, they must be seen as an integral part of any community-level post-conflict reconstruction in which the authorities engage. An important first step would be to bring the perspectives of the young people on their work into public debate with one objective being to ensure that they have access to essential services. This access must not be denied on the basis of public opinion. Local leaders, both male and female, along with other local actors must therefore be engaged in this public debate.

There remains the issue of criminality and illegality of these income-earning activities. Although this issue would appear to be a significant obstacle facing any attempt to legitimise or support these income-earning activities, this has been addressed in a number of countries in different ways and exploring these would seem to be a step in the right direction.

Acknowledging youth agency and resilience would be one way of encouraging attitudinal and behavioural change among the returned

population. Young people's ability to survive and cope amidst such distress is commendable. Youth have created their own support networks, which need to be accommodated institutionally. Since they are an especially at-risk population among the returned populations, health service centres can for instance come up with youth-friendly services targeting the vulnerabilities that youth face. They could also avail youth with information relating to HIV/AIDS, and reproductive health services such as birth control and family planning.

### Notes

- 1 Protracted displacement is displacement that lasts more than five years (Lenard 2015).
- 2 Youth bulge theory is a theory of violence that conceptualises poor male youth as a security threat. High percentages of young people in the population poses insecurity since youth can easily use violent means as a way of engaging with the state hence their participation in armed and other forms of violence (Urdal 2004).
- 3 Interview, June 2015.
- 4 Interview, June 2015.
- 5 Interview, June 2015.
- 6 Interview, June 2015.

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