AFRICA'S YOUTH EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGE: NEW PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction: New Perspectives on Africa's Youth Employment Challenge

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Abstract This article frames and introduces the ten other contributions to this collection. First, the dominant narrative around Africa's youth employment challenge is set out, as are four key points of debate and discussion that are subsequently addressed by the various contributions. We then draw from the 'research into policy' literature and note that it says little about how young researchers move into a policy engagement mode, or how they can be helped to move in this direction. This sets the stage for an introduction to the Matasa Fellows Network, which was established to do just this, with a particular focus on the youth employment challenge in Africa. The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* are authored by the ten members of the first cohort of Matasa Fellows and are briefly introduced in the last section.

Keywords: underemployment, engaged excellence, side-hustle, precarious employment.

1 Introduction

Neither youth nor employment are new to development discourse and policy in sub-Saharan Africa. But while both have been on the development agenda at least since independence, over the last decade policy and programme interest in both youth and employment has increased dramatically. Specifically, the youth employment challenge provides an increasingly important focus for policy, intervention and research throughout the continent (as it does globally).

This renewed interest in youth and work reflects a heady combination of ideas, policy entrepreneurship, fear and crisis response, and was kicked off by the 2007 World Development Report, *Development and the Next Generation* (World Bank 2006). The report's primary framing is of young people as an 'investment opportunity', and the central argument is that governments and development partners should invest in youth because their situation presents an 'unprecedented opportunity to accelerate growth and reduce poverty' (*op. cit.*: 2), and that 'if they remain unemployed for long periods…

they could be a drain on the economy' (*ibid.*). The notion of human capital is central to the report, and specifically how policy can be used so that this capital, as embodied in young people, is 'kept safe, developed, and deployed' (*ibid.*). The main part of the analysis is structured around five life transitions: continuing to learn, starting to work, developing a healthy lifestyle, starting a family, and exercising citizenship. The suggestion is that policy reform can most effectively help young people navigate these transitions by focusing on three strategic directions for reform: opportunities, capabilities and second chances. Despite the report's largely instrumental approach to young people, it does acknowledge that an important element of 'getting it [policy] right' is 'listening to youth', allowing them to exercise their 'client power'.

Two closely related ideas – youth bulge (Evoh 2012; Sommers 2011) and demographic dividend (Ahmed *et al.* 2016; Choi 2016; Eastwood and Lipton 2011, 2012) – figure prominently in *Development and the Next Generation*, and have since become key aspects of a now dominant narrative that both justifies and orients policy around youth and employment. A youth bulge refers to the situation that arises when countries reduce infant mortality but still have a high fertility rate, and as a result, a large share of the population comprises children and young adults. As these young people come into the workforce they give rise to a potential, one-time, demographic dividend – a boost in economic productivity when there are 'growing numbers of people in the workforce relative to the number of dependents'.[1] Whether or not this dividend is realised depends on the structure and dynamism of the economy – an economy that cannot provide productive employment to young people will forego any demographic dividend.

Another important aspect of the dominant narrative that was consolidated through the 2007 World Development Report is a concern with 'risky behaviours' among especially under- and unemployed youth, associated with unprotected sex, alcohol, tobacco and drugs. Related to the sense that young people can be drawn into situations and behaviours that put themselves and society at risk is a fear that in the absence of employment opportunities, the youth bulge becomes a threat to political and social stability (Urdal 2004, 2006). Playing on the image of idle young men as 'breakers' (Honwana and de Boeck 2005), the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002), the violence following the December 2007 election in Kenya, the Arab Spring (2010–11) and other examples are used to demonstrate the clear and present danger posed by young people who lack gainful employment.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section introduces four key points of debate and discussion relating to youth and employment in Africa. Each of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* address one or more of these points. Following this, we draw from the literature on how development research affects policy and note that it says little about how young researchers move into a policy engagement mode, or how they can be helped to move in this direction. This sets

the stage for an introduction to the Matasa Fellows Network, which was established to do just this, with a particular focus on the youth employment challenge in Africa. The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* are authored by the ten members of the first cohort of Matasa Fellows and are briefly introduced in the last section.

2 Four points of debate

In this section, we introduce four points of debate and discussion in the emerging 'research–policy–intervention' nexus around youth and employment in Africa. Not surprisingly, they are also important concerns of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*. The four points are: 'Who are the youth?', 'What is the problem?', 'Are entrepreneurship and self-employment the solution?' and 'What about youth aspirations?'.

The 'Who are the youth?' debate arises because different age-based definitions of youth are used within and across countries and development organisations, with implications for official statistics and cross-country comparisons. From a policy coherence perspective, the issue is not so much with the lower age cut-off, but rather the upper age cut-off and the resulting range. There can be as many as ten years' difference between the oldest youth by some United Nations definitions compared to some national definitions. Further, a typical definition of youth lumps together individuals who span a range of 20 years, which begs the question: do a 15-year-old and a 35-year-old have enough in common to enable coherent policy? More fundamentally, the hard boundaries that are inherent to age-based definitions, and the resulting compartmentalisation of policy, provide little space for the notion of transitions that is now so central to modern understandings of young people's lives (Locke and te Lintelo 2012). Related to this is the other – and perhaps more important – aspect of this debate, which is the tension between the age-based definitions from the worlds of law and policy, and more fluid cultural and lived-reality understandings of youth that may take account of markers like dependence and independence, marriage and childbirth. Again, do a 17-year-old dependent student living at home and a 17-year-old working mother have enough in common to enable coherent policy?

It is clear that there will always be a need for unambiguous definitions of the age at which young people can, for example, leave school, vote, marry, sign contracts, join the army or hold public office. It is not obvious, however, if or why policy relating to young people and employment must continue to be bound by arbitrary and overly broad definitions. Even if in a particular country anyone between the ages of 15 and 35 continues to be defined as youth, it does not follow that policy and interventions could or should not focus, for example, on either the lower end of the range, or those individuals who, regardless of their age, find themselves at a particular transition.

The 'What is the problem?' debate has two important dimensions. The first revolves around unemployment versus underemployment.

The fact that the official statistics estimate unemployment means that it is commonly used to frame the problem, with the absolute levels and differences between youth and adult, and rural and urban unemployment being most often cited. However, some observers argue that these figures are of little value, particularly in rural Africa, because unemployment is generally low, while underemployment, which is less often estimated or reported, is high (Gough, Langevang and Owusu 2013; Hino and Ranis 2014: see also ILOSTAT, the International Labour Organization (ILO) database of labour statistics). This matters because policy responses to unemployment and underemployment should be quite different, and a faulty framing of the problem will likely result in lost opportunities and wasted resources. The second dimension of this debate is reflected in the choice of related but subtly different terms, including employment, self-employment, job, work, entrepreneurship and career, and the additional complexity that comes from combinations like 'gainful employment' and 'decent work'. What are the explicit or implicit messages that accompany alternative framings like the 'the youth employment challenge', the 'youth jobs challenge' or the 'youth work challenge'? From the perspective of (some) policymakers and/or (some) young people, is wage employment in the formal sector the gold standard, while everything else is simply work, or 'waiting'? And where should, for example, domestic work and unpaid care work fit into our thinking about the youth employment challenge (Chopra 2015)? As illustrated by Victoria Flavia Namuggala (this *IDS Bulletin*), in some situations the boundaries between employment, socially unacceptable activity and criminal activity are becoming increasingly blurred.

The 'Are entrepreneurship and self-employment the solution?' debate, such as it is, remains extremely one-sided, with most policymakers and development professionals committed to entrepreneurship as the best (and only) response to the youth employment challenge. This commitment must be set against two observations. First, there has been a move from 'strong' to 'weak' conceptions of entrepreneurship, so that it is now considered synonymous with self-employment – any activity that is undertaken to generate income is considered entrepreneurship (Langevang *et al.* 2015; Singer, Amores and Moske 2015). This inclusiveness risks draining the terms entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial behaviour of any meaning. Second, by accepting that entrepreneurship and self-employment are synonymous, it forces one to take seriously the conclusions of a recent ILO review of self-employment programmes for young people, which concluded:

> It is not clear, on the basis of the evidence and data reviewed, that the [self-employment] schemes that have been tried actually created new self-employed jobs, nor is it clear whether these jobs are of sufficient merit to be worth creating (Burchell *et al.* 2015: 40).

Yeboah *et al.* (2016) suggested that the commitment to entrepreneurship and self-employment as the main responses to the youth employment challenge in Africa indicates an 'imagination gap' between the

employment futures that policymakers imagine for young people, and those that young people imagine for themselves. A more explicit focus on the demand side of the youth employment challenge will be necessary if this gap is to be addressed (Flynn *et al.* 2017).

Reference to the imagination gap brings us to the closely related 'What about youth aspirations?' debate, which touches on a number of related concepts including aspirations, expectations, dreams and imagined futures (Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell 2015; Leavy and Smith 2010). In a sense, the question is how seriously young people's stated aspirations should be taken: for example, while some are adamant that it is not realistic to think that everyone can be a salaried professional, others applaud such imagined futures for their ambition, despite the fact that they may not be grounded in local or personal realities. On a practical level, their aspirations and imagined futures – however they are judged by adults – are the most important basis on which young people can engage with policy and programmes concerning their working futures. If the idea of bringing young people into discussions about how best to address the youth employment challenge is to move beyond rhetoric, taking the futures they imagine for themselves seriously will be an absolute necessity.

3 Research plus

Reflecting the broader influence of the evidence-based policy movement, the renewed interest in youth and employment in Africa has been accompanied by calls for evidence of what works. While the existing research base from which evidence can be drawn is quite limited, there are signs that the level of potentially relevant research and evaluation activity is increasing.

What are the chances that this research will actually be useful in informing policy around youth and employment, and how can these chances be improved? In recent years, much has been written about the 'research into policy' problem (Court and Maxwell 2005; Eames and McGeevor 2007; Stone 2009, 2013; van der Arend 2014; Young 2005). Approaches to this reflect different understandings of knowledge and evidence, and of the policy process. The research into the policy problem looks very different to those who see the policy process as linear and largely technical, compared to those who argue that both evidence and policy processes are always contested and deeply political. The research and policy in development (RAPID) framework (Court and Maxwell 2005; Court and Young 2006; Young 2005) for the analysis of impacts of research on policy draws from both the technical and political approaches. It highlights the need to understand context (i.e. forces that influence research uptake crucially include the extent of civil and political freedoms in a given country, political contestation, institutional pressures and vested interests; and attitudes and incentives among officials, etc.); the evidence (which needs to be credible and of high quality, timely and relevant); the links between policy and research communities (i.e. the importance of links with communities, networks

and intermediaries, the media and campaigning groups); and external influence (notably the impact of donors' actions on the research–policy–practice nexus and international politics and processes).

The notion of 'engaged excellence' (IDS 2015; Oswald, Gaventa and Leach 2017) is also relevant. In *IDS Bulletin* 47.6, Oswald *et al.* (2017) suggest that engaged excellence reflects a recognition that in development, the quality of research is dependent upon it linking to and involving those people who are at the heart of particular change processes. They also identify four interdependent pillars of engaged excellence, namely: delivering high-quality research; co-constructing knowledge; mobilising impact-oriented evidence; and building enduring partnerships. Crucially, an engaged excellence approach is based on an appreciation of the importance of knowledge politics and an ability to engage with and navigate the politics of policy processes in different fora.

There is another strand of literature that focuses more on the individual, and specifically the links between personal political commitment and scholarship. Along these lines, O'Connell described what he referred to as politically engaged scholars who 'entered research settings as change agents and openly admitted values into their scholarship' (2011: iii).

But significantly, these literatures say relatively little about how young researchers get into a policy engagement mode, or how they can be prompted or helped to move in this direction. For those in a university environment, criteria for promotion come into play, as these often prioritise publication over policy impact. There is also a particular challenge if new PhD researchers return to their universities to find they are heavily burdened with teaching and other duties. Understandably, learning the ropes of effective policy engagement often takes a back seat in these crucial early years, and regrettably, this may set a pattern that continues long into the future. The Matasa Fellows Network was designed to help address this challenge.

4 Matasa Fellows Network
The Matasa Fellows Network was launched in 2015 as a joint initiative by The MasterCard Foundation and IDS. It aims to develop a network of young African researchers with the commitment and skills to make a positive contribution to policy around youth employment in Africa. Ten Fellows, who either recently completed or would soon complete PhDs were selected from 222 highly qualified applicants. The Fellows' academic training covers economics and applied econometrics, anthropology, geography, development studies, international education, politics, women and gender studies, and migration. This breadth of disciplines reflects the complexity and multiple dimensions of the youth employment challenge.

Fundamental to the Matasa initiative is the proposition that no matter how innovative or rigorous the research, policy influence will seldom be achieved by bolting on a few policy recommendations or a short discussion of policy implications to a research report or paper.

Rather, influence requires careful reflection, strategy, planning and tactics, and above all, a nuanced understanding of the context and the politics that shape any given policy process. Unfortunately, this orientation, and the skills needed to put it into action, are seldom part of PhD training programmes. This is the gap that the Matasa Fellows Network seeks to address.

In September 2016, nine of the ten Matasa Fellows participated in a week-long workshop at IDS. Different aspects and understandings of the African youth employment challenge were explored, as were academic and practitioner perspectives on the policy process. A 'walkshop' over the Sussex Downs provided space to reflect on the value of concepts like 'imagined self' and 'imagined future' in addressing the youth and employment challenge, and also helped consolidate the group's *esprit de corps*. The Fellows walked and worked together to develop their ideas for the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* – many of which were drawn from their PhD research. A second workshop was held in December 2016 at the University of Ghana at Legon, at which the articles were finalised and a series of policy briefs prepared. Two additional events provided valuable insights into workings of national public policy processes in Ghana.

5 Introduction to the articles
The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* address four core areas: the evidence on youth employment policy and interventions; the politics of youth policy; the changing nature of young people's work; and promotion of entrepreneurship.

Setting the scene, Kilimani (this *IDS Bulletin*) provides an overview of the youth employment challenge across the developing world, with a particular focus on policies and interventions. This review identifies two critical factors that are commonly seen to limit employment opportunities for young people: human capital, including education, training and skills; and a business environment facilitating access to key resources such as credit, infrastructure and markets. But as many interventions are based on little more than faith and theory, as opposed to evidence, they generally fail to deliver jobs. Greater support for labour-intensive sectors and public works may be warranted. There is in any case strong arguments for more integrated and coherent policy across education, labour markets, financial services, and infrastructure.

Turning to the politics of youth policy, Gebremariam (this *IDS Bulletin*) provides a critical analysis of the development and contradictions of youth policy in Ethiopia. He charts a shift from government portraying unemployed youth as 'threats' and 'vagrants' to their incorporation into the emerging developmental state, reflecting a reframing of youth as 'entrepreneurs' and as the 'seeds of democracy and development'. This shift reflected the role that young people played in giving the government a bloody nose in the fiercely contested 2005 national elections. An important conclusion is that context matters in shaping

youth policy and interventions, and that a focus on changing framings and narratives provides an extremely useful window through which to analyse these political and policy dynamics.

How young people find, access, create, combine and perceive work – how they navigate an increasingly precarious employment landscape – are the concerns of five articles. Using the notion of 'side-hustle', Mwaura (this *IDS Bulletin*) documents efforts by six educated young people in Kenya to generate income through agriculture. Their efforts challenge a number of important assumptions – that being employed means having one job; that individuals work in either the formal or the informal sector; that educated youth are not interested in agriculture; and that a choice to get involved in agriculture reflects long-term intentions. The diverse livelihoods, mixing and matching across formal and informal employment and agricultural entrepreneurship that characterise side-hustling can be read as young people successfully struggling against adversity. But Mwaura argues that more than anything else they reflect the failure of the state to uphold its end of the intergenerational bargain. Along similar lines, Namuggala (this *IDS Bulletin*) contrasts formal understandings of work and employment with the range of income-generating activities undertaken by young people displaced by the war in Northern Uganda. While the law and mainstream society criminalise or stigmatise sex work, gambling and dancing, for these young people they are among the few available forms of employment. To classify these young people as either unemployed or deviant is to completely misread their situations and motivations. This point is brought home in the fact that income generated through these activities is used to fulfil family and social responsibilities. Broader perspectives on the nature of work urgently need to be brought into public policy debate.

The links between young people, migration and work have generated significant research and policy interest, and Yeboah (this *IDS Bulletin*) engages with these debates with a particular focus on migrants' social networks. The article draws on interviews with 30 young migrants from rural northern Ghana who were working in and around Agbogbloshie market in Accra. Migrants draw on their social networks to obtain the funds to travel to Accra, and to secure work and navigate risky and precarious employment situations. But these same social networks are also associated with discriminatory and exploitative practices. Yeboah argues that the key policy challenge is not how to stop migration or strengthen migrants' networks, but rather how to enable young people from poor families and poor areas to remain in school, so that they can enter the labour market from a more advantageous position. The challenges facing young people in marginal rural areas are also addressed by Mutua *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) with specific reference to livestock production and marketing in Baringo County, Kenya. Results of a survey are used to explore how social norms and micropolitics enable or constrain participation. This analysis indicates a disconnect between Kenya's youth policy which advocates for equitable distribution

of employment opportunities, and the reality at community level, where access to and control over livestock resources remains far from equitable. This poses particular challenges for livestock development programmes: can implementation strategies be developed that challenge existing barriers in ways that increase employment opportunities for male and female youth, without attracting backlash from other groups?

Continuing with the focus on rural areas, Lambon-Quayefio (this *IDS Bulletin*) takes a critical look at the common narrative that the rural non-farm economy has the potential to generate a significant number of jobs for young people. Reviewing evidence from Ghana, she concludes that rural non-farm enterprises are highly heterogeneous, and many function essentially as coping mechanisms. At the present time, these enterprises have little potential for growth or employment creation. Lambon-Quayefio suggests that a much more disaggregated understanding of the rural non-farm economy is needed, and in particular in relation to operators' motivations. In addition, policymakers must follow through on long-standing commitments to invest in rural infrastructure – without this, the rural non-farm sector will be of little interest to young people seeking productive employment.

The last three articles in this collection look at efforts to promote entrepreneurship as a response to the youth employment challenge in Africa. Sikenyi (this *IDS Bulletin*) questions the effectiveness of the Kenyan Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF). This flagship credit programme was meant to transform large numbers of under- and unemployed youth from 'job seekers' to 'job creators'. However, the eligibility criteria are such that few young people can qualify; but perhaps more importantly, the fund has been mired in accusations of political meddling, mis-management and corruption. Government credit programmes like YEDF are problematic by their very nature, but the possibility that they benefit under- and unemployed youth could be improved with more reasonable eligibility criteria and mentoring, greater accountability and transparency, and more effectively coordinated by state and non-state actors.

Shittu (this *IDS Bulletin*) focuses on the role of mentoring in promoting youth entrepreneurship. His main conclusion is that in order to address the scale-up of mentoring programmes, there is a need for much more research on in what situations and for whom group mentoring models can be made to work. Finally, Mgumia (this *IDS Bulletin*) draws on her PhD research in Tanzania to document the experience of 52 participants in a youth-oriented entrepreneurship programme. The programme tried to induce entrepreneurship through training and access to credit. However, this effort at 'programme-induced entrepreneurship' is shown to have been of limited relevance to participants who either aspire to salaried employment, or whose demanding family situations make it impossible to accumulate and effectively manage the capital required to establish a small business. This analysis strengthens the call for a more nuanced, contextualised and constrained approach to the promotion of

entrepreneurship and self-employment as primary responses to the youth employment challenge in Africa.

In summary, the contributions to this *IDS Bulletin*: first, underline the enormity of the youth employment challenge in Africa; second, demonstrate how politics and political context shape youth-related policy; third, illustrate the need for critical reflection on the multiple and divergent meanings of work and employment; and fourth, highlight an urgent need to rethink interventions that promote entrepreneurship and self-employment. The scope for quality research and effective policy engagement is tremendous.

Note

1 United Nations Population Fund, www.unfpa.org/demographic-dividend.

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