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Understanding ‘Urban Youth’ and the Challenges they face in Sub-Saharan Africa: Unemployment, Food Insecurity and Violent Crime

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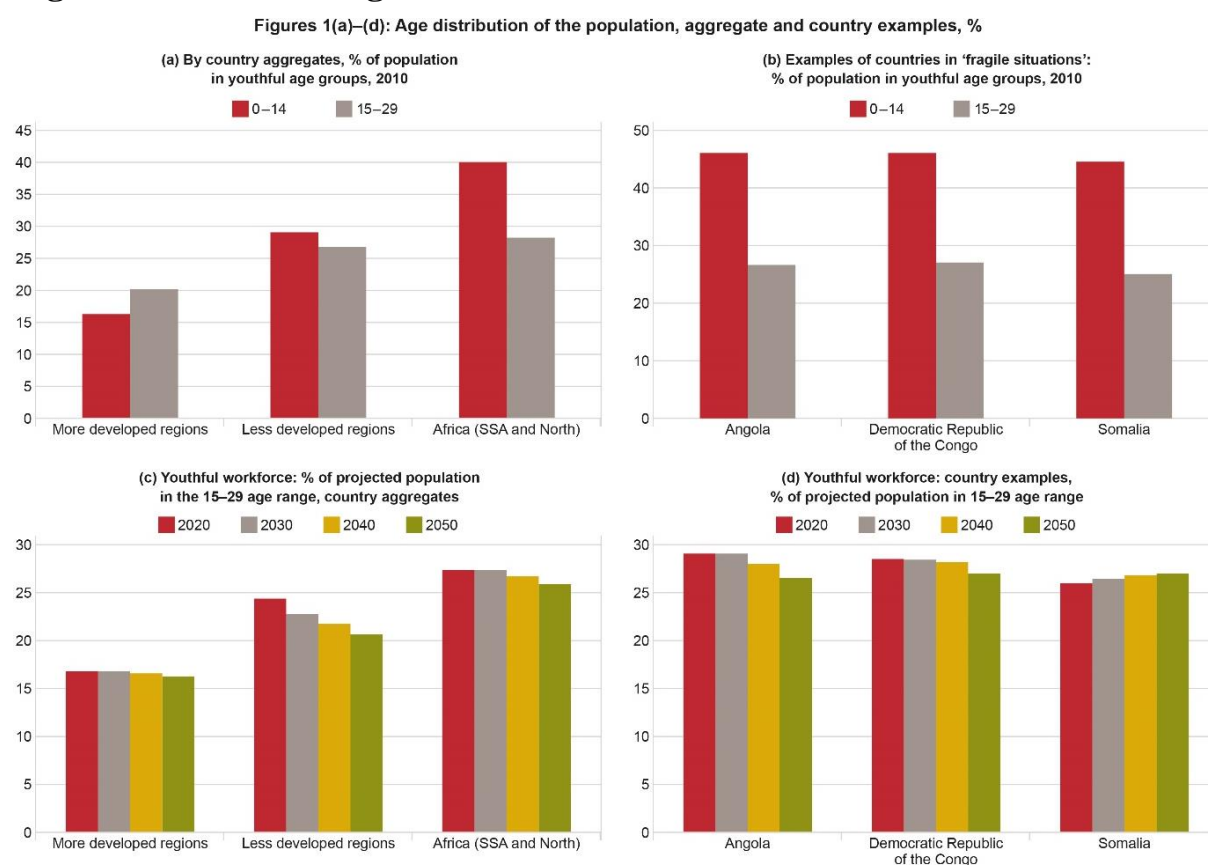
Abstract

Much of Africa is urbanising fast and its young population is projected to constitute the largest labour force in the world. While urbanisation can be linked closely with economic development, we also know that it is the least developed countries that have younger populations than the rest of the world. This duality implies that understanding the nature of risks and vulnerabilities faced by urban youth, how they are impacted by them, as well as how they respond to and may be resilient against them, continue to be important questions for furthering development in sub-Saharan Africa. A key conceptual debate surrounds how the category of 'youth' is understood, as several definitions of the term exist, ranging from age bands to social or cultural framings. In this paper we look to review how the various definitions of 'youth' relate to three dominant discourses about poverty and vulnerability in urbanising Africa: (1) food insecurity; (2) unemployment/joblessness; and (3) violence/insecurity. By doing so, we seek to identify if and when these are responsive to youth needs and practical in terms of policy efforts aiming to reduce poverty and vulnerability in urban areas.

1 Introduction

Urban spaces are changing rapidly. Ninety-six per cent of the additional 1.4 billion people forecast in the developing world over the next two decades are projected to be born into urban areas (World Bank 2013). Therefore an estimated 60 per cent of all urban dwellers will be under the age of 18 by the year 2030 (Garland, Massoumi and Ruble 2007). In the specific context of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), urban populations grew an average of over 3 per cent per year between 1990 and 2000, the highest rate in the world (Pieterse 2010). If these trends continue, this will roughly equate to a doubling of the total urban population, as well as the number of urban agglomerations with more than 500,000 people, by 2030 (UN-Habitat 2014).¹ Even though the overall share of children and youth in the global population is shrinking due to a decline in fertility rates, in SSA the median age will continue to be below 20 years² at least for the next decade, and is likely to remain below 30 until 2075 (United Nations, Department for Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2013).

Figure 1.1 Youth bulge in sub-Saharan Africa



Source: Adapted from Lin (2012)

¹ Other studies are less certain that all of sub-Saharan Africa is urbanising with such rapidity, and cite recently available census data to show that the rate at which the population is urbanising is much slower now than in the first decades after independence, particularly in mainland countries. See Potts (2012).

² The median age in sub-Saharan Africa is currently 18.1 years, as compared with 28.8 years in Asia, 40.3 years in Europe, and 16 years or less in the ten least developed countries. See Population Reference Bureau (2009).

As such, there are several potentially opposing forces at play. On the one hand, these trends imply that African youth are projected to constitute the largest labour force in the world (UN-Habitat 2014), and that the region stands to gain considerably from a potential 'demographic dividend'. However, we also know that it is the least developed countries that remain younger than the rest of the world. On the other hand, urbanisation is closely linked to economic development, and countries with larger GDP per capita are almost always more urbanised than countries with lower national outputs. We also know that urban areas are not immune to acute poverty and inequality, with several economic, social and physiological outcomes among the poorest urban communities often being far lower than those of comparable rural populations.

The literatures in both urban and development studies have been slow to catch up with these dynamics. Understanding the nature of the risks and vulnerabilities faced by youth in urban areas, how they are impacted by them, as well as how they respond to and may be resilient against them, continue to be important questions for furthering development in sub-Saharan Africa.

1.1 Focus

In this context, a key conceptual debate surrounds how the category of 'youth' is understood, as several definitions of the term exist. A commonly used parameter is 15 to 24 years, although in many African societies older and younger people are often also categorised as youth. And yet, under different framings, the term refers less to an age range than to sociological 'life phases', marking the transition from childhood into adulthood. Here too, there are several variations to the life events that are considered signifiers of transition, ranging from leaving school and becoming employed, to getting married and becoming a parent.

In this paper we look to review how the various definitions of 'youth' relate to three dominant discourses about poverty and vulnerability in urbanising Africa:³ (1) food insecurity; (2) unemployment/joblessness; and (3) violence/insecurity. Some, but not all of these discourses highlight young people. Our discussion of common youth definitions seeks to identify if and when these are responsive to the needs of youth as well as practical for policy efforts aimed at reducing poverty and vulnerability in urban areas.

³ Other challenges similarly highlighted include those around basic service provision, affordable housing, decaying and/or inadequate urban infrastructure, public health and communicable diseases, urban resilience against the impacts of climate change and natural disasters, and challenges around effective forms of local governance.

2 How are ‘youth’ categorised in urban sub-Saharan Africa?

‘Youth’ form a transitional category between the dependence of childhood and the independence of adulthood. The category of youth therefore describes young people who are undergoing a transition ‘from adolescence to adulthood, from dependence to independence, and from being recipients of society’s services to becoming contributors to national, economic, political and cultural life’ (Curtain 2003: 74). The use of an age band (usually between 15 and 24 years), which is reflective of the ages of leaving compulsory education and finding a first job, is common. Using age also allows for rapid census-based classifications. In recognition of this, African countries are increasingly converging towards the African Union Youth Charter definition (Panday 2006). Nevertheless, as shown in Table 2.1 below, there continues to be considerable variation in the age bands used.

Table 2.1 Definitions of youth in selected SSA countries⁴

SSA Country/International bodies	Definition of Youth
Angola	Youth policy of Angola does not specify an age range.
Benin	National youth policy of Benin defines youth as those aged between 12 and 35.
Botswana	National youth policy of Botswana defines youth as between 15 and 35 years.
Burundi	National youth policy of Burundi, whilst not specifying an exact age range, describes youth as between 15 and 26 years.
Cameroon	National youth policy of Cameroon defines youth as persons between the age of 15 and 35.
Cape Verde	Age range for youth not defined. The Cape Verde youth policy describes several youth programmes that have specific target ages. For example, the ‘CulturArte’ arts training programme is aimed at youth aged between 15 and 25 years.
Central African Republic	No age range for youth specified.
Comoros	No official documents specifying an age range for youth are available.
Djibouti	There is no official definition of youth for Djibouti.
Eritrea	Eritrea does not have a youth policy.
Lesotho	The Lesotho Ministry of Gender and Youth, Sports and Recreation website defines youth as aged between 15 and 35 years. The group is split into three sub-categories: 12 to 15 (developing youth); 15 to 25 (well-developed youth); and 25 to 35 (young adults).
Liberia	Youth policy focuses on those aged 15 to 35.
Namibia	The revised national youth policy defines youth as individuals between 16 and 30 years.
UN Secretariat/ UNESCO/ILO	Youth are defined as between 15 and 24.
UN Habitat (Youth Fund)	Youth are defined as between 15 and 32.
UNICEF/WHO/UNFPA	Adolescents are defined as aged 10 to 19; young people as aged 10 to 24; and youth as aged 15 to 24.
UNICEF/The Convention on Rights of the Child	Defines everyone under 18 as children.
The African Youth Charter	Youth are defined as aged 15 to 35.

Source: Authors’ own

⁴ See www.youthpolicy.org and www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf.

However, categorisations based on age bands alone are often too narrow to encapsulate the different experiences resulting from local variations in the circumstances of young people. It is evident that diversity among African youth is as great as in any other social group. Some are educated and skilled, with access to the opportunities that urban settings can provide. The majority of urban youth, however, are underprivileged and live in informal settlements (UN-Habitat 2010: 26). Such circumstances have a very significant impact on young people's livelihoods and life choices. For example, youth residing in urban informal settlements in sub-Saharan Africa are more likely to have a child, be married or head a household than their counterparts living in non-slum areas. It is clear that definitions based on singular notions of who 'youth' are would not be able to capture such divergent life experiences.

2.1 What is urban?

While there is no single definition of what constitutes 'urban' contexts, most cited definitions usually reflect national census classifications. Even so, there is significant variation between national and regional circumstances. Classifications may be based on density, livelihood and activity profiles, or number of residents. Countries often further disaggregate between megacities and several tiers of towns. Some countries also distinguish peri-urban (or peripheral) areas (that adjoin an urban area, but do not fall under the administration of the urban municipality), in recognition of continuity between urban and rural contexts. For the purposes of this paper, 'urban' refers to 'areas of dense human habitation that also exhibit a higher density of built space (and reflect higher concentrations of services, infrastructure and socioeconomic activity) than outlying rural settlements and areas' (Gupte 2013: 13). Such a definition recognises the spectrum of urban areas across several dimensions, including the size of settlements, the nature of the built environment and degrees of formality.

3 Relating debates on key urban trends with youth vulnerabilities

Attention is increasingly shifting towards articulating the divergent and complex nature of poverty and vulnerability among urban youth (UNFPA 2011). The demographic significance of young people is increasingly taking centre stage in discussions about sustainable socioeconomic development. For example, five of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) speak directly to improving the situation of young people: universal access to primary education; gender equality in access to education; maternal health; HIV, AIDS and other diseases; and employment creation.

Owing to the complex set of interconnected challenges faced by urban youth in SSA, it is difficult to imagine any one definition or category of 'youth' that is capable of accurately capturing the nuances associated with these various challenges. Consequently, generalisations about the urban condition at large tend to be extrapolated to describe broad categories of 'youth'. As such, these generalisations fail to recognise the diversity of impacts across youth groups, whilst saying little about the interconnectedness of the processes that produce and sustain poverty and vulnerability among urban youth. This in turn has led to an incomplete understanding of urban poverty, and inadvertently, the marginalisation of youth issues from the urban development agenda (Independent Evaluation Group 2013).

3.1 Stress-testing

In order to get a sense of how the various definitions and categorisations of youth function, we undertook a rapid review of three challenges that are predominantly defining the circumstances of urban youth across sub-Saharan Africa, namely: (1) urban food insecurity; (2) joblessness; and (3) rising levels of crime and violence. As part of this review, we stress-tested various definitions and categorisations of 'youth' in order to get an understanding of which were the most meaningful, which seemed inappropriate, and in which contexts they were meaningful or inappropriate. We present our findings in the following sections.

3.1.1 Urban food insecurity

Most existing research on the impacts of urban food insecurity on younger populations in SSA focuses on 'children' and 'adolescents' (De Haen, Klasen and Qaim 2011).

The outbreak of food riots in 2007/8 in cities across more than 30 countries worldwide (including many in SSA) brought the issue of urban food insecurity back on to the international development agenda (Patel and McMichael 2009; Ruel *et al.* 2010). Protests were inflamed by the steep increase in food and fuel prices in response to the global crisis. Compared with their rural counterparts, urban dwellers are more sensitive to rising food prices as they need to purchase the majority (90–100 per cent) of the foods that they consume (Redwood 2009). An analysis of urban consumption data from 38 countries collected during the time of the crisis found a direct consequence of these price increases on both quantity and quality of dietary intake in poor households (UN Standing Committee on Nutrition 2012). Poor urban households are particularly vulnerable as they usually devote more than 60 per cent of their available income on acquiring food (e.g. Nairobi up to 70 per cent of income, Kinshasa 60 per cent) (Cohen and Garrett 2010). Ruel and Garrett (2004) suggest that the household budget share for food expenditure could be even higher in smaller towns where prices for housing, water and fuel might be lower.

Aside from the recent food riots, urban food insecurity generally remains 'invisible'; even more so in small and medium-sized towns that are usually bypassed by national and

international media. In contrast to rural food insecurity that is often a seasonal, community-wide and therefore very visible phenomenon, urban food insecurity is a private challenge that is mostly caused by a household's insufficient income to acquire food. Given the high levels of unemployment, unstable employment conditions and low wage income levels, many poor urban households are chronically food insecure. Even if a household has sufficient amounts of disposable income to procure food, high-quality, nutritious foods are generally unattainable and families are forced to 'live only on bread' (Crush and Frayne 2010: 32). To mitigate this food insecurity, poor urban dwellers (including the adolescents in the household) employ a variety of individual coping strategies including change of dietary consumption (e.g. skipping meals, low-quality foods), diversification of income-generating activities, engagement in the informal sector, reliance on informal food transfers from rural family members and borrowing or sharing food with urban neighbours (Crush and Frayne 2010; Maxwell 1999). Food insecurity forces many young women and men into transactional sex as a coping strategy, thus increasing their risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). A cross-country study of 12 countries in SSA suggests that unmarried youth in poor urban areas are particularly vulnerable (Chatterji *et al.* 2005).

It is well established that insufficient dietary intake in early childhood can have long-term irreversible consequences on a child's physical, cognitive and mental growth and wellbeing (Black *et al.* 2013). Several studies also point out that a high proportion of adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa regularly experience food insecurity, with young people living in urban areas being significantly more affected than their rural counterparts (Belachew *et al.* 2013a; Belachew *et al.* 2012; Hadley *et al.* 2012). Young people who still live with their parents and young unmarried men or women who left their birth household (e.g. rural to urban migrants), are affected. Recent migrants are often hit harder by food insecurity than long-term urban residents (Crush 2012). One of the reasons for this might be that many recent migrants have not established strong social networks that could help them to cope in times of acute food insecurity. There also seems to be a gender bias in experiencing food insecurity, with girls being more frequently affected than boys (Belachew *et al.* 2011b; Hadley *et al.* 2008a; Hadley *et al.* 2008b). A population-based study of 2,084 urban adolescents in Ethiopia found that adults in food insecure households often attempt to buffer children and male adolescents from the ill effects of food insecurity, but less frequently adolescent girls (Hadley *et al.* 2008a). One reason for the preferential treatment of male adolescents could be that males will remain with the household and will be important future income earners for that household. In contrast, adolescent girls are likely to marry and leave the household in the near future.

However, lack of food in adolescence also has lasting negative effects on physical development and sexual maturation, mental and emotional wellbeing, and in increasing the risk of illness (Belachew *et al.* 2011a; Belachew *et al.* 2012; Belachew *et al.* 2013b; Hadley *et al.* 2008b; Hadley *et al.* 2012). Adolescence is a time of growth spurt and higher nutrient requirements. Insufficient dietary intake can affect linear growth and result in a shorter adult height (Delisle *et al.* 2005). Female youth and young people who have recently migrated to urban areas are more vulnerable to food insecurity. Food insecurity in adolescents has multiple health, nutrition and non-nutritional consequences.

The inequality of urban food distribution and access

The explanation for persistent urban food insecurity in SSA seems to lie in the unequal distribution of available foodstuffs and the lack of access to food due to socio-spatial (i.e. location of markets and supermarkets) and economic inaccessibility (Battersby 2013; Crush and Frayne 2011a; Dixon *et al.* 2007; Dodman *et al.* 2012; Maxwell 1999; Mohiddin, Phelps and Walters 2012; Ruel and Garrett 2004; Ruel *et al.* 1998). In light of this, we find that the full extent of the causes and impacts of food insecurity on young populations in urban SSA is under-researched in that it can be extended to include a wider range of young populations (those who have already left school, are in employment, or have children of their own).

The informal food system makes an important contribution to the food supply of urban households (Mohiddin, Phelps and Walters 2012; Frayne *et al.* 2010). In cities with low supermarket coverage (including small and medium towns), the informal sector is the main and often exclusive source of food for the poor (Crush, Frayne and Pendleton 2012). For some urban population groups (e.g. young unmarried men without family), the purchase of pre-cooked street food is an important way of being able to afford daily meals (Dixon *et al.* 2007). At present, access to the two food systems is uneven, with the poor having restricted access to the formal sector due to socio-spatial and economic barriers (Mougeot 2000). However, urban food markets are changing rapidly and the two systems increasingly interact and compete for customers (Battersby 2013; Reardon and Hopkins 2006; Weatherspoon and Reardon 2003). Several supermarket chains have recently started to open stores in proximity to poor neighbourhoods, marketing campaigns are targeting the urban poor and fast food chains have launched low-cost meals for poorer consumers. While this poses huge new challenges to informal traders and vendors, supermarkets also allow informal traders and vendors to purchase larger quantities of food products at a cheaper price (Crush and Frayne 2011a).

Increasing agricultural productivity in rural areas is important given that SSA's population is predominantly rural (70 per cent). The urban food system in SSA is characterised by a dualistic structure with a formal food retail sector (e.g. supermarkets, shops) that is often inaccessible to the urban poor, and a large dynamic informal food retail sector (e.g. street traders, wet markets) that responds to the specific food needs of the urban poor. However, the link between urban food insecurity and rural production is more complex and evidence suggests that urban food insecurity is (in most cases) not a failure of rural agricultural supply. Similarly, seasonality also plays a less important role for urban food supply (although one could speculate that this might be slightly different in small and medium-size towns that rely more directly on rural food supply). Naturally, urban food supply remains linked to rural production, although the relationship has become more complex as more and more food (especially food sold in supermarkets) is imported (for example from neighbouring countries) (Abrahams 2010).

The inequality of urban food distribution and access implies that food insecurity among urban youth can be linked to higher levels of school absenteeism and early drop-outs (Belachew *et al.* 2011a), but also to the socioeconomic outcomes of slightly older cohorts. This can operate through multiple channels. The educational attainments of children impacted by food insecurity are lower and so, in turn, are employment opportunities. Unemployment can lead to food insecurity, especially in urban areas where most food needs to be purchased and self-production is low or non-existent. Furthermore, as a cross-sectional study of 457 youths in Kampala, Uganda found, food insecure adolescents were more likely to become victims of violence as well as being perpetrators of violence, compared with food secure adolescents (Swahn *et al.* 2012), and this can have more longer-term impacts as affected adolescents age.

3.1.2 Youth unemployment and informal economies in a rapidly urbanising SSA

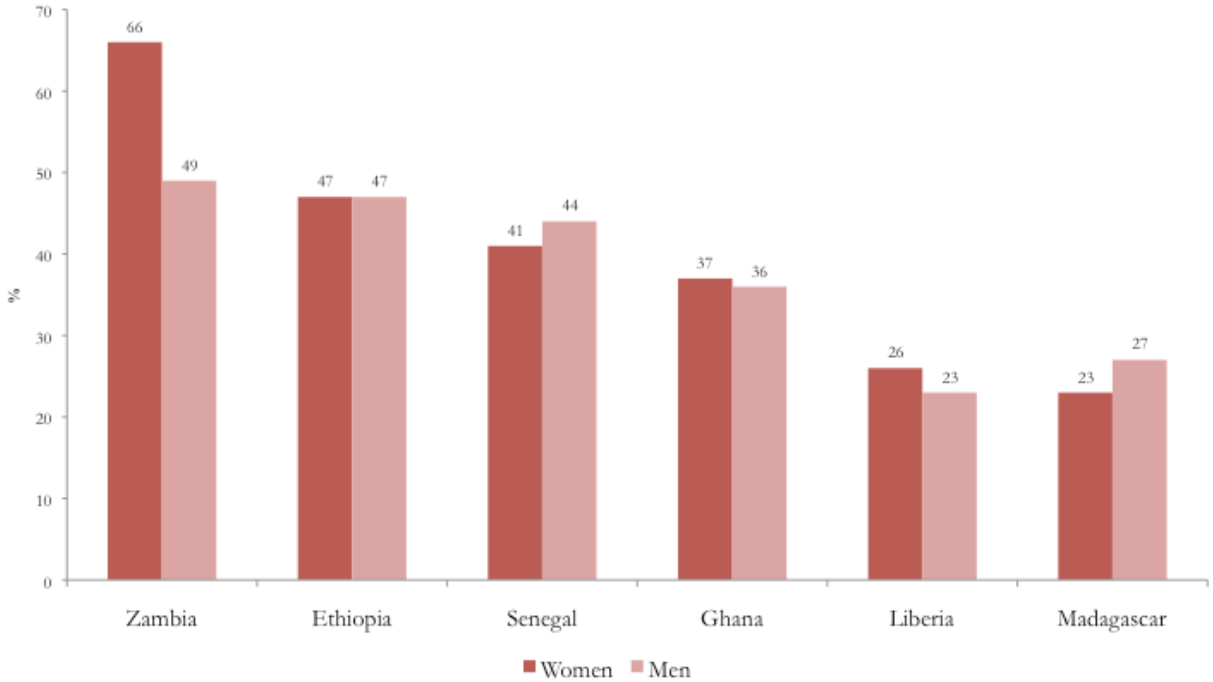
Unemployment, for instance, has affected more than 40 per cent of young people in South Africa since early 2008 (World Bank 2012). The rapid and sustained increase in the number of young people in the global South is one of today's most significant demographic trends. Around 90 per cent of young people reside in developing countries. By 2030, Africa is projected to have as many youth as East Asia and by 2050 its youth population could also exceed that of South Asia (Garcia and Fares 2008). Youth populations in SSA are growing faster than in any other part of the world (Population Reference Bureau 2009). Two hundred million people across SSA are between the ages of 15 and 24 years, making up 20 per cent of the population and 40 per cent of the workforce. In some countries, youth cohorts are

exceptionally large: for instance, in Zimbabwe, 43 per cent of the working age population is between 15 and 24, and in North Africa this amounts to almost 50 per cent (World Bank 2012).

And yet, as the *World Development Report 2013* notes, idleness, unemployment and underemployment are rife. For young people in SSA, obtaining access to gainful employment is now widely considered a major development challenge. Being in employment is not just instrumental in fostering young people’s ability to gain access to food (through the exchange of labour for income and payments in kind), but the right kind of work may also have intrinsic value and bestow a sense of self-worth to foster wellbeing. It would be wrong to assume however that this affects only young populations of working age. Child labour, particularly in urban areas, is common and we find that key vulnerabilities can be linked to particular sub-groups.

Across Africa, young people constitute a disproportionately high proportion of the unemployed (Population Reference Bureau 2011), and gender differences can be large (Figure 3.1). Even in countries where youth unemployment is relatively low, young people are at least double and up to three times as likely to be unemployed than older adults (World Bank 2012). Moreover, the recent global economic crisis hit youth hardest: for instance in Spain, 50 per cent of young people were unemployed in 2012.

Figure 3.1 Share of unemployed who are 15–24 years old; in selected SSA countries



Source: DHS 2003–2008⁵

While globally, a growing share of youth is in schooling or in training, a large number of young people are considered ‘idle’, i.e. not in education, not employed and not in training or looking for work. Typically, these rates are higher for women than men (as societies often impose different expectations regarding their labour participation). For instance, in Ghana and Tanzania, between one sixth and one fifth of all 15–24-year-olds are not in school or in

⁵ See also Population Reference Bureau, www.prb.org/pdf10/youthchartbook.pdf.

work, and a great majority of this group is not deemed to be looking for work. Indeed, in most countries, unemployment rates are small compared with idleness rates (World Bank 2012).

As urbanisation processes are accelerating in much of SSA, and urban economies are drivers of growth, the combination of an increase in the number of young people and widespread unemployment is often associated with insecurity, urban social unrest and political instability (Frederiksen 2010; Urdal and Hoelscher 2009).⁶ Economic and political stakes in urban youth unemployment are high and many observers have noted how unfulfilled hopes and expectations contributed to the political instability witnessed in the Arab Spring. Moreover, unemployment involves unfulfilled economic potential and costs not only in the short run but also in the longer term. Urban unemployment among young people can lead to lower future earnings. A lack of job opportunities can lead to discouragement and withdrawal from the labour force (World Bank 2012).

Young people are not only disproportionately affected by unemployment, but also face unfavourable working conditions when they do find work. Typically, jobs provide no or low wages, or are otherwise of poor quality. Large numbers of young people derive their livelihoods through informal means (see for example Obeng-Odoom 2011), and are more likely to do so than older workers. For instance, in Egypt, informal work is twice as common among 15–24-year-olds than among 35–54-year-old workers (World Bank 2012).

Of course, informality is an endemic feature of African economies, especially in rural but also substantially in urban economies. Informal is normal. Thus, the overall economic contribution of the informal sector in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger, Senegal and Togo has been assessed as amounting to 63.6 per cent of total GDP and 50.2 per cent of non-agricultural gross value added (Charmes 2012). Moreover, the great majority of employment in SSA is informal. Outside the agricultural sector (which is predominantly informal), informal economies provide (on average) a source of employment for 65.9 per cent of workers. These constitute workers in the informal sector plus workers who operate in the formal sector but lack labour contracts. Such workers do not benefit from contractual labour arrangements and are in practice, if not also legally, outside the remit of state labour, health and safety and social security regulations. They typically take the shape of self-employed (home workers) as well as waged labour (Chen 2007). Such informal work tends to generate low living standards, enhanced vulnerability to ill health, disability, temporary or enduring income loss, and can drive social cohesion deficits in communities (World Bank 2012). It is also largely outside the official tax regimes of urban authorities.

There are however widespread differences in the contribution of informal economies for employment: whereas in South Africa almost one in three workers is part of the informal economy, this amounts to 84 per cent in Cameroon and 87.2 per cent in Mozambique (Charmes 2012). Since the 1980s, when structural adjustment drove the dismantling of government infrastructures, public employment opportunities have been severely rationed in many SSA states. For instance, in Zambia, public employment shrank from 17 to 11 per cent of total employment. Newly generated private sector jobs (which globally account for 90 per cent of job creation (World Bank 2012), increasingly tend to be informal in nature, and informal jobs within the formal sector are huge and growing. They are estimated to amount to nearly one fifth of all informal jobs in SSA (Charmes 2012: 108). This trend of an increasingly casual labour force is accompanied by a slow but gradual rise of labour brokers, who when poorly regulated can substantially increase the vulnerabilities of workers (CPAN 2013).

While scarce data makes it difficult to ascertain trends in SSA with confidence, signs are emerging that the growth of employment in the informal economy witnessed from the 1960s

⁶ Arguably, such studies privilege violent youth over non-violent youth, and capital-based youth over those living in the smaller towns and cities (Peters 2011).

to the 2000s is being *reversed*, at least in some countries such as Mali, Tanzania and South Africa. Thus, between 2000–4 and 2005–9, the share of total employment that was informal decreased in South Africa from 46.2 to 32.3 per cent and in Tanzania from 57.7 to 46.0 per cent (Charmes 2012). This trend reversal may be attributed to economic growth rates (averaging almost 5 per cent over the first decade of the twenty-first century in SSA) that exceed population growth rates (Charmes 2012) and drive a formalisation of taxed economic activity. Yet, as noted above, jobs in the formal sector do not equate with formal jobs based on labour contracts, with attendant social security benefits, improved working conditions and greater income security. Indeed, the evidence suggests that young people remain disproportionately likely to be working informally.

In countries with large youth cohorts, youth unemployment tends to be high and wage levels depressed. This happens within contexts already showing a ‘desperate survivalist need for as many [household] members as possible to work and earn even tiny incomes’ (Potts 2012: 2). Across urban SSA in the 1980s and 1990s, wages were pushed down to a level where they were insufficient to cover household costs of food, shelter, clothing and education (Potts 2010, 1997). Labour markets may be segmented, with few young people able to make the transition from informal to formal jobs. For instance, in Tunisia, even in those sectors that largely employ youth labour, employment is often temporary and informal. Moreover, urban informal economies embed within them many inequalities. For instance, in Lusaka’s streets and markets, the presence of adults in the more lucrative jobs limits young people’s entry to low-level and low-skill jobs that offer few prospects for upward mobility (Hansen 2010).

Furthermore, opaque labour market information on employment opportunities disadvantages young people. In countries where private and public agencies and other sources of labour market information are not well developed, personal networks are important for matching people and jobs. For instance, a majority of workers in most Middle Eastern and North African countries found their jobs through family and friends. Adults tend to have better networks than young people, and because for many young people peers are unemployed, chances of finding a job are low (World Bank 2012). The role of parents may be especially important in high unemployment settings, where job information and references represent scarce, valuable commodities, and where low mobility may create gender-based poverty traps. For example, in South Africa, it was found that employed fathers serve as important network connections to enhance their sons’ employment rates by one third (no such effect was found for their daughters, and mothers were not found to perform these employment networking roles) (Magruder 2010).

Moreover, young people experience disproportionately high levels of unemployment because of age-based discrimination in labour markets (UN 2005: 192). For instance, in Sri Lanka, while there was no ‘youth bulge’ (World Bank 2012), youth made up nearly 80 per cent of all unemployed in 2006, and were almost eight times more likely to be unemployed than adults (Gunatilake, Mayer and Vodopivec 2010).

Another explanation for high youth unemployment is that despite growing education rates,⁷ the skills transmitted are not matching those demanded by employers. While such mismatching would matter if there were many unfilled vacancies, this is rarely the case in SSA. Instead, the *World Development Report 2013* points to the Middle East and North Africa to posit that barriers to entry and growth limit competition, reducing employment opportunities, especially for highly skilled youth. For many entrepreneurs, political connections remain more important than entrepreneurial capacity and such privileges must be ended to enhance employment for youth (World Bank 2012).

⁷ However this is not the case all across SSA. Notoriously, in Zambia, the current generation of young people are less well educated than their parents as a consequence of structural adjustment-induced state withdrawal (Locke and te Lintelo 2012).

The *World Development Report 2013* cautions that distribution of jobs within society, and perceptions about who has access to opportunities and why, shapes expectations for the future and the impression of fairness. Children's aspirations may be influenced by whether their parents have jobs and the types of jobs they have. Disappointment, especially among youth, about the lack of job opportunities and frustration with the allocation of jobs based on connections rather than merit echoed across Arab Spring countries (World Bank 2012). Others argue that such tensions are not limited to employment. Indeed, a broad 'crisis of youth' engulfs SSA because young people are unable to attain *social* adulthood because of continuing gerontocratic and patrimonial control of resources (Peters 2011), such as farmland (Peters 2011; White 2012).

3.1.3 Rising levels of urban crime and violence

Urban settings are increasingly equated with high levels of crime and violence (Muggah 2013). Goldstone (2010), for instance, describes heavily urbanised countries, especially those with younger populations, as more likely to be prone to civil unrest and 'experience Dickensian poverty and anarchic violence' (Goldstone 2010). Recent research links the presence of jobless and idle urban youth with higher levels of violence, substance abuse and gang activities (World Bank 2011; Narayan and Petesch 2010), and following the recent youth-led Arab Spring, African heads of state noted that high youth unemployment is an impending threat to stability in Africa (AU 2011). However, the relationship between urbanisation, youth populations and violence is more complex than this linear relationship suggests. Just as urban youth populations can perpetrate violence, they are also victims of it, and for some, violence can be a route to identity and voice (Narayan and Petesch 2010).

On the one hand, cities and towns present themselves as hot spots for youth violence to occur. This is due to several factors. For one, cities and towns concentrate 'precisely that demographic group most inclined to violence: unattached young males who have left their families behind and have come to the city seeking economic opportunities' (USAID 2005: 7). Urban living places a number of severe demands on young people, through social fragmentation and the often precarious living conditions of the urban poor, as well as the hazards of air, water and noise pollution, which can all tip charged urban settings into violence (Moser and Horn 2011). In this context, rapid urbanisation overwhelms the state's ability to provide basic services, including public safety and policing. This often creates the space for the privatisation of violence, where gangs and vigilante groups made up primarily of young males (see Ismail 2009) take policing into their own hands. The pressures of such a dynamic imply that urban youth life can appear to take place in worlds that are largely separate from the rest of society (Sommers 2011).

In this regard, politicians and policymakers tend to talk about young people either as thugs and perpetrators of crime, or as victims (Jefferies and Smith 1995). As thugs they steal, vandalise public property and disrupt classrooms, and this kind of activity tends to be portrayed as criminal violence or motivated by private (economic) greed. As victims they can't find work, receive poor schooling and are brought up in dysfunctional families. Urban youth violence, even that which is perpetrated or experienced by younger cohorts, need not necessarily be detached from wider political dynamics in terms of ideology, actors and bounded territory (Kunkeler and Peters 2011). Vigilante activity, for example, often draws widespread support in that it is seen as a response to state failure, while participation in vigilante activity is also an expression of discontent (Smith 2006), and belligerent political movements often rely on youth violence to mobilise support.⁸

On the other hand, not all countries with a 'youth bulge' necessarily experience social unrest in urban areas. Despite being underserved, cities in SSA continue to be fiercely competitive

⁸ See for example www.mercycorps.org.uk/sites/default/files/somaliabrief_2_13_13.pdf.

economic environments, while alternative non-violent modes of youth socialisation across urban SSA also abound (Barker and Ricardo 2005). Importantly, urban settings continue to be attractive to youth populations, even those affected by conflict, as they provide opportunities that are simply not available in rural areas (Sommers 2010). A significant proportion of refugees and internally displaced persons, many of whom are children and young people, tend to congregate in or near urban centres in order to access relief efforts (Dupuy and Peters 2010: 25). As such, urban youth might also be seen to constitute a cohort that seeks stability.

4 Practical categories of ‘youth’ for public policy?

As we have presented in the sections above, there is an uneven, but growing amount of evidence on the impacts of food insecurity, joblessness and violence on urban youth in SSA. Importantly, these processes do not occur in isolation of each other. In this section, we look at the degree to which the various definitions and categorisation of ‘youth’ can be reconciled with our broader understanding of these processes, and as such, we are also interested in highlighting those definitions and categorisations that are more meaningful in a policy context in urban SSA.

4.1 Ensuring meaningful definitions

At one level, the challenges facing youth urban populations in SSA are so diverse that it is difficult to imagine one ‘catch-all’ definition of ‘youth’ that would be appropriate in all circumstances and contexts. We find, in particular, that even though the nature of challenges facing urban youth is wide ranging and diverse, necessitating an equally wide range of categorisations, from youth classified into age groups, to youth classified as victims or perpetrators, youth policy is often singular.

4.1.1 The value of generic categorisations

We find that there are tangible benefits of having generalised categories of ‘youth’. A generic definition of youth can be an empowering tool for researchers and practitioners in drawing attention and resources to the issues of young people. Much has been achieved, for example, by the African Union Commission in its efforts to promote youth development under a unifying African Youth Charter (2006). These efforts constitute a continental legal framework that seeks to reposition the challenges, potential, contributions and rights of young people in the mainstream of Africa’s socioeconomic growth and development. A generic definition has also helped in collating baseline data on the status of young people (see for example UNFPA 2011). The standard definition of youth adopted by the UN and key international partners has been essential for assessing progress towards global goals and for making cross-country comparisons (Webb *et al.* 2006). Generic definitions also help reduce large variations in budgets and coverage targets, and the often-resulting uncertainty between various governmental ministries and non-governmental bodies at the national level.

4.1.2 Limits to age-based or singular categorisations of youth

Our rapid-review and stress-testing exercise showed clear indications of the limits of definitions based on age alone, which we find are insufficient to capture the range of issues arising from the developmental processes of young people living in deprived circumstances (see for example Lipina and Colombo 2009; Minujin *et al.* 2006). We grouped these limitations into two broad categories.

First, how somebody aged between 15 and 35 (the AU’s definition of youth) experiences food insecurity, joblessness and violence, and whether they can cope, thrive or fail, does not depend only on their age, but crucially, also on other social and cultural drivers linked to gender, ethnicity or life circumstances. For example, boys who have experienced violence as child soldiers face significantly different challenges to those who have not but are nevertheless refugees, displaced by violence. And second, transitions between life-stages, and therefore the degree or gradation of impacts on young people, are not necessarily linear with age. The nutritional and livelihood needs of a young girl depend greatly, for instance, on whether she has children. As such, becoming a parent is a much more significant predictor of changes in circumstance, than age. Furthermore, the extent to which a young person is

economically dependent, independent, or 'depended-on' can change extremely rapidly, and has significant implications for present and long-term wellbeing. This dynamism of life-stages is often missed by age-based framings used to functionally define or categorise young people (Moore 2005).

4.2 What are the implications?

Our main conclusion is that any definition or categorisation of young people must account for developmental processes, as well as the social and physiological realities of young people as they mature from childhood through to adulthood (ranging from brain plasticity and cognitive development, to social skills, literacy, numeracy, physical activity and artistic competencies, for example). This is of particular relevance to younger age groups who are just beginning to make the transition from childhood. Furthermore, how we understand young people must also be relevant to context-specific realities. This implies that definitional frameworks used in youth-focused research and urban policies need to exhibit flexibility towards the contextual and localised circumstances of young people, particularly in rapidly urbanising contexts characterised by a high degree of flux and contestation, including peri-urban spaces (see Béné *et al.* 2014). In such contexts, an inflexible definitional framework can be limiting, and becomes a particular problem when generic notions of 'youth' are equated with 'problems' in policy discussions, with responses being limited to the imposition of more control on the one hand (Jeffs and Smith 1995), and on the other, the direction of 'remedial' resources and interventions at those deemed to be in need.

Recent studies have showcased that definitional flexibility in youth-focused research could involve the addition of participatory or respondent-driven methods for the purposes of categorisation (see for example, Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead 2009), and articulation of target groups (Rodríguez and Brown 2009). Such a strategy also involves understanding youth poverty and vulnerability as dynamic and multi-dimensional (see Laderchi, Saith and Stewart 2003). Similarly, definitional flexibility in youth focused urban policy implies that inclusion of locally extended definitions of 'youth' are crucial to reduce both inclusion and exclusion-based discrimination and to ensure better programming and outcomes for the intended target groups (Lipina, Simonds and Segretin 2011).

These studies notwithstanding, we also find that there continues to be an evidence gap warranting further research on the social and cultural meanings placed on younger populations, as these can vary significantly between and within countries. Importantly, this includes the need to be cognisant of the wide array of contexts that characterise urban SSA and to apply current advances in poverty-related knowledge. Critically, we also found some evidence that highlighted distinct sets of relationships between on the one hand broad macro-definitions and their usage for surveillance purposes, and on the other, more nuanced definitions and their usage as targeting criteria for programme responses. How, in what contexts, and for which types of programmes these relationships hold true, also present themselves as areas for further systematic research.

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