



Youth Bulge in Kenya: A Blessing or a Curse

The youth bulge is a common phenomenon in many developing countries, and in particular, in the least developed countries. It is often due to a stage of development where a country achieves success in reducing infant mortality but mothers still have a high fertility rate.

The result is that a large share of the population is comprised of children and young adults¹. Kenya is in transition from high to low fertility. This coupled with low mortality has resulted in high population growth. Kenya has a youthful population with over 80 percent of the population aged 35 years and below. Youth bulge has become a global phenomenon and Kenya is no exception. Youth definitions are contextual, depending on the social, economic and political environment. The youth in Kenya, are defined as person's aged 18-34 years, however this brief will focus on person's of ages 15-34² years. The youth are and will remain a significant proportion of Kenya's population in the foreseeable future as they constitute 35 percent of the Kenyan population³. In Kenya, the youth bulge presents a number of opportunities and challenges for both the youth and the country. The current number of youth presents an opportunity for them to drive the economy if they have the right skill sets and are gainfully engaged. However, youth face many challenges including lack of access to reproductive health, skills to match the job market requirement and unemployment, among others. Developing and implementing appropriate strategies, policies and programmes to mitigate the risks and challenges the youth face must be a priority for the government. This policy brief will focus on the skills and strategies put in place to create employment for the youth.

What is the Youth Bulge?

A youth bulge occurs when more than 20 percent of a country's population is comprised of youth. It is due to a stage in development where a country achieves success in reducing infant mortality but fertility rate remains high. As a result a large share of the population is comprised of children and young adults. In a country with a youth bulge, as the young adults enter the working age, the country's dependency ratio of the non-working age population to the working age population will decline. If the increase in the number of working age individuals can be fully employed in productive activities, the level of average income per capita will increase and the youth

bulge will become a demographic dividend⁴. However, if a large cohort of young people cannot find employment and earn satisfactory income, the youth bulge will become a demographic curse, because a large mass of frustrated youth are likely to become a potential source of social and political instability. One basic measure of a country's success in turning the youth bulge into a demographic dividend is the youth employment or unemployment rate⁵.

Current Situation of the Youth in Kenya

Youth employment is a pressing challenge throughout sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) today. With a median age of only 24 projected by 2050, the UN estimates that Africa's 15-24 year-old age group will swell by about six million each year for the next decade. These young people will be joining the labour force hence the need to create more jobs. Most young people in the region work in low-income and low-productivity jobs. Improving these outcomes is critical, given the region's large youth bulge and the potential development spillovers that go along with a productive and engaged youth⁶.

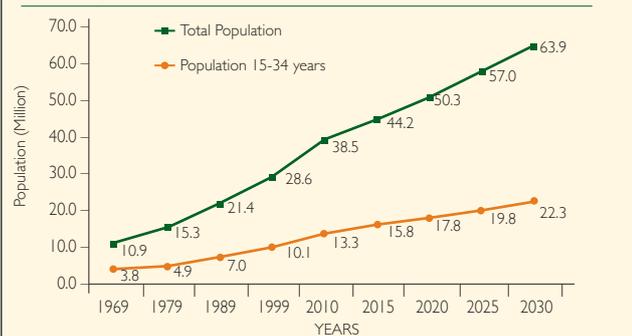
The population in Kenya is projected to be 50.3 million with 17.8 million being 15-34 years of age by 2020 and 63.9 million with 22.3 million aged 15-34 years by 2030.

Table 1. Percentage of Population aged 15-34 (Youth) 1969-2030

Year	Total Population (Million)	Population aged 15-34 (Million)	Percentage of Youth aged 15-34 years to total population
1969	10.9	3.8	30.41%
1979	15.3	4.9	32.25%
1989	21.4	7.0	32.97%
1999	28.7	10.1	35.49%
2010	38.5	13.3	34.55%
2015	44.2	15.8	35.75%
2020	50.3	17.8	35.39%
2025	57.0	19.8	34.74%
2030	63.9	22.3	34.90%

Source: Computed from 1969, 1979, 1989, & 1999 Censuses and population projections

Figure 1: Kenya's Total Population and Youth 15-34 years Growth, 1969-2030



Source: Computed from 1969, 1979, 1989, & 1999 Censuses and population projections

When compared to the total population, the proportion of the youth population (15-34 years) has been increasing from about 30 percent in 1969 to about 35 percent in 2015, and forms the part of the potential and working population.

These young adults will be transitioning from schooling to the job market. Young people (aged between 15 and 34 years) constitute more than a third of the entire population. The youth bulge will continue for unforeseeable future as nearly 80 percent of Kenyans are less than 35 years old⁷. This youth population presents great economic and social opportunities, but also enormous challenges. With investments in education, skills and job creation the youth will result in an economic dividend.

Vision 2030 and National Youth Vision:
A dynamic and empowered youth in leadership and entrepreneurship for a globally competitive and prosperous Kenya.

Why Should Bulge be a Priority

Youth who form 35 percent of the Kenyan population, have the highest unemployment rate of 67 percent⁸. Over one million young people enter into the labour market annually without any skills, some having either dropped out of school or completed school and not enrolled in any college.

High unemployment and high inflation rates are some of the reasons behind low saving, in particular by households. The falling youth dependency ratio, that is, declining fertility, should have promoted saving, however, this has not been the case because a large share of youth have been jobless and thus continue to be dependent although the youth are of working age.

When youth are unemployed for long periods they are likely to engage in anti-social behaviour including

drug and alcohol abuse, unsafe sex, criminal activities including terrorism. Youth unemployment in Kenya is compounded by substantial levels of underemployment and poor quality jobs in the informal sector.

The Government of Kenya has put in place measures to create jobs for youth. In the long-term the Government is putting massive investment in infrastructure development to lower cost of business, attract investors, grow the economy and create jobs in the formal sector.

Initiatives to Empower Youth in Kenya

The Government in collaboration with the private sector and development partners have developed a number of policies, institutional, legal and programmatic measures to respond to the challenges facing the youth. The interventions have variously targeted promotion of youth development and empowerment through building of entrepreneurial and leadership capacities of the youth, enhancement of employable skills, and promotion of creativity and innovation amongst the youth⁹.

Kenya embraced the 8-4-4 system of education with the first cohort of students completing secondary school in 1988. It was envisaged that the education would equip students with skills that were required in the labour market. In 2003, to boost the enrolment rates, the government stated the Free Primary Education (FPE) and later subsidized secondary education.

The government has undertaken education reforms to address the skills mismatch with the available jobs requirement. The education curriculum is undergoing reforms to make it competency based. As part of education reforms the Government of Kenya established the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TVETA) a State Corporation established under the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Act, 2013. The role of TVETA is to register, regulate assess and ensure standards and compliance by the Technical and Vocational institutions.

The Technical and Vocational institutions will address gaps in employability by developing and training skill-based human capital for the purpose of employment. TVETA guides the curriculum of the courses offered in the technical and vocational schools. Technical and Vocational schools are a realistic and attainable educational outlet for many youth, but often fall into the same trap as the formal educational system. For many years technical and vocational training has been perceived as a career path for those with low academic qualifications and limited prospects for further education and professional development in

formal education¹⁰. This has affected the uptake of the technical and vocational training.

In 2006, the Government of Kenya developed the first Kenya National Youth Policy (KNYP). The KNYP defined the youth as persons resident in Kenya in the age bracket of 15-35 years. The objective of the policy was to give youth equal opportunity as other citizens, to realise their fullest potential and productively participate in economic, social, political, cultural and religious life without fear or favour¹¹.

Most youth interventions are based on the assumption that entrepreneurship will cure the unemployment challenge in Kenya. As an intervention the country is implementing Youth Employment and Opportunities Project funded by World Bank. The project aims at improving youth employability addresses the skills mismatch of youth by engaging training providers and private sector employers to offer training and work experience for both the formal and informal sector. It will also assist in job creation initiatives to help start new businesses, improve the productivity and job creation potential of existing microenterprises and among self-employed youth, and support innovative approaches to improve job and earning opportunities among the hard-to-serve youth¹². The project is implemented by both the government through Small and Micro Enterprises Authority (MSEA) and Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA)¹³.

In 2016 the government through the National Employment Authority act established an Authority to provide a framework to facilitate increased employment of Kenyans in the national government, county government, State organs, and private sector. This Authority is to facilitate the employment of the youth by providing information on existing opportunities. The Authority will develop and provide the job seekers with employable skills and knowledge through guidance and counselling for the ever increasing labour force and stimulate economic growth and development with a view to reducing the incidence of unemployment and poverty among the populations and to improve the standards of living in both rural and urban areas.

Young people are able to make significant contributions to their communities at national and county levels. To ensure they fully participate in community work, the National Youth Service (NYS) was restructured in 2013 to enable the youth participate actively in the country's development goals. To achieve this, the NYS has the following goals; to facilitate the provision of work experience for young persons with a view to employment, to encourage participants to develop a sense of responsibility and of service to the country and self-respect and respect for authority, to promote

among participants, values of discipline, democracy, citizenship and cooperation¹⁴. However the NYS programme has not been rolled in all the 47 counties. The NYS offers technical and vocational training in its various campuses. The courses at NYS are aimed at preparing the youth to suit the job market.

Turning the Youth Bulge into a Blessing

The country envisages turning the youth into dynamic and empowered citizens in leadership and entrepreneurship for a globally competitive and prosperous country.

Kenya has established several youth focused initiatives to reduce youth unemployment. Some of these initiatives are the Uwezo and the Youth Development Fund. The youth fund credit specifically targets young entrepreneurs who cannot access credit at market rates to grow their business and hence create employment. Skills development programmes and training are the most common type of intervention to support youth employment in the Kenya. The quality of these programmes is often a concern, though rigorous evaluations are scarce. International evidence highlights the importance of the private sector working with government in determining skill needs and how they can best be met. Given the low level of education attained by many young people, remedial education and second-chance programmes are also important¹⁵.

While young job seekers are certainly constrained by information gaps and a lack of effective matching between labour supply and demand, employment services tend to be more useful to skilled young people seeking work in the formal wage sector¹⁶.

There cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution to this challenge, hence the Demographic Dividend (DD) Roadmap which comes with a four pronged approach to address the youth challenge, that is, the four pillars of the DD, as the areas for investment to empower the youths and these reinforced by the SDGs—3 health; 4 education; 8 productive employment and decent work; and 16 promote peaceful and inclusive societies. Another area that can create entrepreneurship in the youth is exploiting cultural talents development in performing arts and drama, and sports to earn livelihoods for the youth. With increasing literacy in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and countywide internet connectivity youths can be engaged in the digital jobs online—this is a possibility the ICT authority has been exploring. ICT and globalization may present new ways of addressing the need for better information and intermediation in labour markets.

NCPD is a semi-autonomous government agency that formulates and promotes population policy and coordinates related activities for sustainable development in Kenya.

NCPD

National Council for Population and Development

PO Box 48994 - GPO,
Nairobi 00100, Kenya

Tel: 254-20-271-1600/01

Fax: 254-20-271-6508

Email: info@ncpd.go.ke

www.ncpd.go.ke

Will the Youth Bulge be a Curse?

When youth are unemployed for long periods, they are likely to engage in anti-social behaviour including drug and alcohol abuse, violent extremism and radicalization, unsafe sex and criminal activities including terrorism¹⁷. Drug and alcohol abuse is mutating among the youth as they experiment with a cocktail of drugs which change names hence may not be easily identifiable by the law enforcers¹⁸. Creating awareness on the harmful side effect should start early to ensure abuse does not impact on future productivity of the youth and affect their future employment prospects.

Youth unemployment in Kenya is compounded by substantial levels of underemployment and poor quality jobs in the informal sector. High youth unemployment has to do with the scarcity of formal job openings and the incapacity of young people to create an attractive job in the informal market for themselves¹⁹. Promoting informal employment should be an important component of employment policies.

Recommendations

What needs to happen?

1. National and County governments need to mainstream the SDGs and the DD Roadmap in Medium Term Plan III and the County Integrated Development Plans.
2. The government and the private sector need to increase investment for both formal and informal sectors in the rural areas to encourage job creation.
3. Expand the youth empowerment programmes countrywide by mainstreaming youth issues in all the Ministries and Agencies.
4. The Youth Enterprise Development fund, Uwezo and Women funds need to create awareness on their availability and requirements especially to the rural youth.

Conclusion

A well trained and empowered youth population is a valuable asset for national development and presents an investment potential for social, political and economic growth. Achieving the demographic dividend for Kenya comes with the 'youth bulge' and depends on the ability of the economy to absorb and employ the youth, thereby reducing the dependency ratio. Hence for Kenya to turn the youth bulge to a blessing, investment in the youth should be a priority of the government and the private sector.

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