



REPORT SUMMARY

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT: YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON THE PURSUIT OF DECENT WORK IN CHANGING TIMES

GROWING GAPS IN DECENT WORK FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The latest World Youth Report explores the transition of young people from schools and training institutions into the labour market, a phase marking a critical period in the life cycle. The current employment scenario for young people, worsened by the global economic crisis, poses an urgent challenge with long-term implications for both young people and society as a whole. Young people themselves are crucial stakeholders in the pursuit of decent and productive work for all. Yet, too frequently, their voices go unheard and their positive and negative experiences and viewpoints unshared, particularly with decision-makers. Therefore, the World Youth Report is intended above all to explore youth employment issues mainly through the words of young people themselves around the world.

With less experience and fewer skills than many adults, young people often encounter particular difficulty accessing work. The global youth unemployment rate, which has long exceeded that of other age groups, saw its largest annual increase on record in 2009; at its peak, 75.8 million young people were unemployed. During economic downturns, young people are often the “last in” and the “first out” — last to be hired, first to be dismissed. In 2010, the global youth unemployment rate was 12.6 per cent, dramatically overshadowing the global adult unemployment rate of 4.8 per cent. Even after finding work, young workers continue to confront job instability, few opportunities for skills development and advancement, and joblessness. They are more likely to be in vulnerable jobs, which can further adversely affect their future livelihood and income prospects. In fact, young people make up a disproportionate number of the world’s working poor. Data on the working poor, many of whom work in the informal economy, is limited. However, where data is available, youth represent 23.5 per cent of the total working poor, compared with just 18.6 per cent of non-poor workers.

There is no doubt that one of the contributing factors to the recent Arab Spring uprisings is the disturbingly high levels of youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa region. The total youth unemployment rate in 2010 was 25.5 per cent in the Middle East and 23.8 per cent in North Africa. Female youth unemployment in these regions was particularly striking, at 39.4 per cent in the Middle East and 34.1 per cent in North Africa.

Despite important gains in education among young women, their employment outcomes continue to lag behind those of young men. Globally, in 2010, 56.3 per cent of young males participated in the labour force, against 40.8 per cent of young females. Where young women do participate in the labour market, they generally confront greater challenges in accessing jobs, i.e. they face higher unemployment compared to their male counterparts. When employed, they are also more likely to be in traditionally female occupations and unstable, part-time and lower-paid jobs.

TRENDS AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS

During the e-discussion on youth employment, many young participants shared common key employment concerns. Young people questioned the quality of education they and their peers receive: whether or not it is relevant to available jobs, how their knowledge and skills will serve them in the long-term, and the extent to which decision-makers are committed to needed investment in the potential of young people. They are significantly frustrated by high rates of unemployment. Young women in particular are confronting barriers to employment, including job segregation and salary discrimination. When young people do obtain jobs, they often involve poor wages as well as working conditions, including long hours, insecurity and a lack of health and other benefits, which do not allow them to be independent and provide for family. Moreover, although some young people shared positive views of accessing job opportunities through migration, many reported growing concern that in order to secure even low-level jobs, they would have to leave their homes and families. Participants expressed hopelessness regarding what they perceive as their countries' lack of prioritization of their concerns as well as institutional capacity to address them. Youth shared the sense that they have been left to fend for themselves.

“My academic training did not prepare me for employment”

Young people view many higher educational systems and institutions as inadequately tailored to the actual dynamic needs of the labour market. They reported that formal education curricula are often overly theoretical, leaving students feeling ill-prepared and lacking the necessary practical skills for the labour force. Some students consequently delay their entry into the job market to continue their studies or seek out low-level jobs. More and better linkages are therefore needed between learning institutions and employers. Young people further pointed out a gap in quality between private and public educational institutions that provides graduates of private schools with a competitive advantage in the labour market. More positive views were shared of non-formal education, which youth believe can both complement formal education with important distinct skills and also serve as an important resource for youth without access to formal education. Participants further attached value to vocational education as a means for job preparedness, though found inadequate opportunities to access it and expressed concern about how likely it is to lead to decent work. On the whole, young people additionally felt that internships and volunteerism can offer opportunities to develop life skills and improve employment prospects, including in entrepreneurship.

“There is an excessive obsession for qualifications and certifications”

Youth are finding and making use of a range of tools, where available, to help them find jobs, with formal and informal business and social network proving to be the most valuable sources of career information and guidance. A point that emerged strongly from the e-discussion was that young people prefer to be active rather than to “sit around”; they bear the conditions of underemployment in the belief that their perseverance, experience and enthusiasm will be rewarded in the future. Participants identified emerging opportunities for youth employment in new types of jobs in the fields of information and communication technologies (ICTs), social networking and environmental sustainability (“green jobs”). There was broad agreement that self-motivation, dedication, patience and a positive outlook are key elements of successful job searching.

“My job is somehow not secure at all”

Participants expressed worries related to job insecurity, citing the prevalence of short-term contracts; low wages, amidst rising costs of living; difficulties in obtaining adequate practical work experience, with some youth calling for such requirements in educational institutions; few opportunities for workplace advancement; debts, including student loans; and family well-being. They identified the creation of small and medium-sized enterprises as one important and effective means to overcome high unemployment rates and poor working conditions, though also noted that practical information and guidance on entrepreneurial initiatives as well as financing opportunities are often difficult to access.

“We want a chance to work, we want to prove ourselves”

Decent jobs not only contribute to young people’s lifetime employment success, they have a proven multiplier effect on family well-being, the health of national economies and societies at large. Societies cannot expect young people to study hard and work hard as the traditional means to decent work and success, amidst diminishing evidence of its effectiveness. Due to the global economic crisis, a growing number of Governments are implementing austerity measures to reduce public spending, including in social sectors such as employment and education. Yet, evidence demonstrates that austerity programmes themselves can lead to increased unemployment. Young people require financial and social investments to fulfil their potential, to transition into adulthood and to be active and engaged citizens. Although many youth conveyed a lack of confidence in their futures, there remains — nonetheless — some hope.

The World Youth Report is available at UNWorldYouthReport.org