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The Implementation of Youth Employment Programs in Seven Nations in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Synthesis of Country Studies.



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Abstract

We analyse, in comparative perspective, the implementation of youth-employment programs (YEP) in several African countries. Three key findings emerge: (i) YEP are usually underfunded and under-implemented and tend to focus on labour supply alone; (ii) YEP tend to be inadequately targeted toward vulnerable youth; (iii) a complex political economy produces little in program targeting and evaluation.

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I. Introduction

Concerned with the negative consequences of high and rising youth unemployment and subsistence self-employment in Sub-Saharan African states, governments have put in place a number of Youth Employment Programs (hereafter, YEP), that attempt to improve labour-market outcomes for youth by fostering labour supply and labour demand. Researchers from seven countries (Ghana, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, and Uganda), conducted country studies during 2022 in which they comprehensively reviewed these YEP.

Two characteristics of the methods these studies pursued make them attractive to an academic audience. First, the description of YEP did not stop at the “letter of the legislation” but also explored how programs were implemented. This is an important issue because: (i) there is little knowledge about YEP in these and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa; and (ii) in low- and middle-income countries a large gap usually exists between regulations and their implementation. In the seven country studies, findings from desk reviews of official policy and legal documents, program reports, and a local and international literature review were complemented by the experiential knowledge of key informants and groups of young women and men as well as persons from vulnerable groups.

The country studies considered YEP, as well as other public policies, as the outcome of a complex political process wherein institutions (national and international, formal and informal) shaped the rules, and actors had varying preferences and resources (Bonoli, 2010; Mkandawire, 2004). That is, the country studies do not assume that all the problems with employment programs in the region are simply due to lack of technical capacity. The broader perspective undertaken in the country studies is a necessary step that allows endogenizing YEP, discussing their political economy, and exploring politically feasible reforms.

One of the major contributions of the seven country studies is that they provide at least some basic statistics obtained from interviews with key informants and from focus groups of program participants and non-participants. These statistics allow a rough estimate of (i) the extent of knowledge that youth have about employment

programs; (ii) the extent to which programs properly target vulnerable groups; and (iii) the extent of political clientelism, which can be defined as providing employment programs in return for electoral support, in which the patron's criterion of distribution is simply: did you/will you politically support me? (Stokes, 2011). Our objectives, then, were to summarize the findings of those seven country studies, to contextualize and integrate their contributions to research gaps in the broader fields of Development Economics and Public Policy, and to analyse the findings in a comparative perspective.

II. The Challenge: Youth-Labour Outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa

Table 1 presents some key indicators of the labour market using figures from the International Labour Organization's ILOSTAT data portal and the United Nations. Four generalizations can be made:

- 1) Countries in the region are experiencing a youth bulge with a median age of 17.7 years compared to 30.2 in the rest of the world.
- 2) Youth in Sub-Saharan African have significantly fewer opportunities to find fulfilling employment than do youth located in other regions. The figures are particularly alarming for Nigeria, where 36% of the youth are not in employment, education, or training (hereafter, NEET); and only 5% of those employed have formal jobs.
- 3) As in the rest of the world, youth in Sub-Saharan Africa are more likely to be unemployed compared to older cohorts; and youth who find a job are more likely to have informal employment, without labour benefits and social security protections. In Rwanda, Senegal, and Uganda, more than 95% of youth are in informal employment. Furthermore, youth with a tertiary education increasingly find it harder to secure employment, in large part due to skills mismatch (Rwanda and Uganda).

- 4) Women, along with other vulnerable groups, tend to experience more difficult conditions compared to men. Niger is the clearest example of the gender gap. All these facts are particularly important because Africa accounts for a significant share of the world's youth population, a figure that is expected to reach one-third in 2050.

Table 1: Selected Labor-Market Outcomes in Seven African Countries

Country	Median Age (years)	Unemployment Rate (%)			Informal Employment Rate (%)			NEET
		Total	Youth	Youth & Women	Total	Youth	Youth & Women	Total
Ghana	20.5	3.4	6.2	6.1	78.1	92.6	91.2	22.9
Kenya	19.4	5.0	12.9	13.8	86.5	93.5	93.9	20.1
Niger	14.5	7.8	16.6	17.5	73.6	77.3	87.5	23.9
Nigeria†	17.1	10.7	29.9	33.5	93.0	95.0	96.0	36.3
Rwanda	19.2	15.8	23.2	24.3	87.1	95.8	95.6	28.8
Senegal	17.9	2.9	4.1	6.7	90.2	98.6	98.3	34.2
Uganda	16.1	12.3	19.7	22.6	91.1	97.8	98.3	19.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	17.7	6.7	12.4	13.4	85.7	92.9	93.0	26.1
World	30.2	5.8	14.0	13.6	54.0	62.6	62.6	23.5

Notes: ILOSTAT, as of April 2023. NEET is the share of youth aged 15-24 not in employment, education, or training. †Estimates for informal employment rates for Nigeria are based on figures from the International Labour Organization (2018). Median age is from United Nations (2022).

Economists, as well as other social scientists, tend to agree that four main types of policy instruments help create decent and productive jobs: (i) macro-policies that produce robust and stable growth in gross domestic product (hereafter, GDP); (ii) high-levels of investment in education and health that increase human capital, particularly for the most disadvantage members of society; (iii) labour and social-security regulations that provide insurance and reduce power asymmetries between workers and employers without creating major distortions or rigidities; and (iv) active labour-market programs (defined below). The rest of this paper focuses on the last point, with particular regard to YEP, which have received relatively less attention in the literature.

We should point out, however, that the other three policy domains present major deficiencies in Sub-Saharan African. First, economic growth was poor or stagnant for the seven countries and for Sub-Saharan Africa in general between 2018 and 2021 (International Monetary Fund, 2022). Thus, the economies were already experiencing economic stagnation before the COVID-19 pandemic. The poor economic performance most likely contributed to the inability of the labour market to absorb youth who entered the labour market for the first time, leading to an increase in youth unemployment and in subsistence self-employment (African Development Bank, 2016; Fox, Senbet & Simbanegavi, 2016). Second, learning metrics indicate that Sub-Saharan African countries—despite recent improvements in years of schooling—lag behind all regions; and the gap in learning between Sub-Saharan African countries and other regions has not declined during the last two decades (Angrist et al., 2021). Third, formal employment-creation is tiny in the region and has been insufficient to absorb new labour-market entrants.

Some analysts blame overly stringent labour regulations for the lack of formal employment creation (Botero et al., 2004), but this can hardly be the main reason because regulations are generally not enforced (Kanbur & Ronconi, 2018). Other research emphasizes the structural transformation of these economies, which has resulted in low-productivity service sectors becoming the biggest contributor to GDP (between 30% and 55%) in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda, and Senegal. Together with agriculture, which is the main employer, including of youth in these countries, informality dominates the services sectors. The widespread informality of work and poor social policies leaves most African youth vulnerable and reduce their prospects for dignified and fulfilling work.¹

¹ The Mastercard Foundation uses four markers to identify dignified and fulfilling work 1) Reliable Income, which refers to income that meets the needs of youth and their dependents or an increase in income compared to existing/previous work (over a consistent time period); 2) Reputable, which refers to work that is viewed as honest and is well-regarded by society at large; 3) Respect in the Workplace, which indicates whether workers are treated with appreciation and dignity at work; and 4) Sense of Purpose, which reflects workers' sense of satisfaction, purpose, and accomplishment.

III. Youth Employment Programs in Comparative Perspective

The country studies define a youth-employment program as any public or mixed public/private program that is focused on youth,² including temporary public works, wage subsidies and/or payroll-tax exemptions to firms, training and/or job search assistance for the unemployed/inactive, or starting capital for the self-employed. In the Labor Economics literature these approaches are usually referred to as “active labour-market policies” for youth.

In presenting and discussing the seven country studies, we focus on three key findings related to YEP—underfunding/implementation and focus on labour supply, inadequate targeting, and complex political economies—attempting to substantiate and contextualize the studies’ findings. We highlight the contributions that these studies make towards reducing research gaps in the literature.

3.1. YEP Are on the Policy Agenda in the Seven Countries, but They Are Usually Underfunded and Under-Implemented and Tend to Focus on Labour Supply Alone

All the seven countries have formally introduced YEP, and many of these programs were developed with technical and financial support from the International Labour Organization or other international organizations. YEP are, however, a relatively recent policy development in the region. Most countries implemented their first YEP less than a decade ago, and few had a youth-employment program before the twenty-first century.³ This fact is an important consideration, particularly when public policies follow a learning-

² The African Union definition of youth is people between 15 and 35 years of age. That age range is in general usage, but some countries use 18-30 or 15-34.

³ Active Labour Market Programs were first developed in Scandinavian countries in the post-war period and have become popular in the USA and across European and Latin American countries since the 1990s (Bonoli, 2010).

by-doing process that takes time to materialize.⁴

YEP in the seven African countries have generally targeted labour supply by providing either training or entrepreneurship funding. Some examples are SURE-P, Jubilee Fellowship, and N-power programs in Nigeria, all of which focus on the development of employability skills; Hanga-Umurimo in Rwanda, which provides subsidized loans to youth entrepreneurs; or the Youth Livelihood Programme in Uganda, which provides interest-free revolving funds and training to unemployed and low-income youth. Local experts have anecdotally suggested that the same pattern occurred in most countries in the region, that is, and contrary to what happens in other continents, very little support is provided to labour demand (wage subsidies and payroll-tax exemptions for employers, e.g.). We present data supporting this point below.

An important question is why YEP focus so little on providing support for labour demand, especially among private firms. The concern is particularly relevant because authoritative sources suggest that, in Africa, “insufficient youth wage employment is primarily a demand-side problem” (African Development Bank, 2016, 114). We speculate that this is in part because too few formally registered private firms and employees can be found in the region, implying that the usual demand-side interventions, such as reductions in payroll taxes, only affect a small share of the workforce. We also speculate, however, that this is in part because targeting labour supply is electorally convenient for incumbents as a function of political clientelism. We return to this issue below.

Local informants have mentioned that, in some cases, YEP exist solely in a legislative or regulatory sense because governments do not always allocate funds (or allocate very little) for these interventions, impeding their effective implementation. While major data limitations make precise estimates difficult (we discuss these in the notes to Table 2 and in Footnote 5), our “back-of-the-envelope” calculation showed that the funding allocated to YEP in the region is very low, representing approximately 0.1% to 0.2% of GDP (Table 2).

⁴ See Moyson, Scholten, and Weible (2017) for a recent review of the literature on policy learning. This literature, however, is usually focused on developed countries which makes its applicability to other institutional contexts questionable.

Table 2 - Expenditure on Active Labour-Market Programs (as a Percentage of GDP)

Type of Program	Sub Saharan Africa	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Countries
Supply—Training	0.04	0.25
Supply—Entrepreneurship	0.05	0.01
Demand—Private Employment incentives	0.01	0.64
Demand—Temporary public works	0.04	0.05
Total	0.14	0.95

Notes: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development figures cover all age groups, refer to 2020, and were extracted from OECD.Stat (<https://stats.oecd.org>) in April 2023. The category “Training” includes Lines 10 to 20; “Private Employment Incentives” includes Lines 40 and 50; “Temporary Public Works” includes Line 60; and “Entrepreneurship” includes line 70. Figures for Sub Saharan Africa only cover YEP, are mostly from country reports, and involve several assumptions that we explain in Appendix 1.

Total funding allocated in Sub-Saharan African is smaller compared to estimates of funding in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (hereafter, OECD) countries, where approximately 1% of GDP goes to active labour-market programs.⁵ The main difference is that OECD countries devote more resources to induce private firms to hire workers through wage compensation or payroll-tax exemptions. On the contrary, in Sub-Saharan Africa, spending goes mostly to programs that affect labour supply, such as training, entrepreneurship, and startup funding.

3.2. Targeting of YEP Is Deficient Because Vulnerable Groups Tend to be Excluded

Little official descriptive data exists regarding the socioeconomic characteristics of YEP participants, and without data it is impossible to conduct a scientifically rigorous

⁵ The figures are not strictly comparable because the OECD data is for active labour market programs for all age groups, while the figures for Sub-Saharan Africa are only for programs that target the youth. Regrettably, there are no easily available figures about total expenditure on active labour market programs in Sub-Saharan Africa. Back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that it could be around 0.2% of GDP because the largest programs in the region include youth, who represent a disproportionately high share of the adult population. That is, the conclusion remains that OECD programs devote a substantially larger share of their GDP to active labour market programs compared to African countries.

impact evaluation. Qualitative data gathered in the seven countries, on the other hand, indicate that most youth are not aware of the existence of employment programs and confirm that most beneficiaries of YEP appear to be comparatively well-off. Some YEP require participants to have completed secondary or tertiary school, and programs tend to focus on urban areas, excluding low-skilled youths residing in rural areas.

These qualitative findings complement, and are consistent with, the few quantitative metrics available. Table 3 presents figures produced by the Atlas of Social Protection: Indicators of Resilience and Equity (ASPIRE), the World Bank's premier compilation of Social Protection and Labour indicators gathered from officially recognized international household surveys.

While we acknowledge that both the qualitative and the quantitative data have shortcomings,⁶ we speculate that they capture a reality reasonably well: Active labour-market programs (including those focused on youth) are not well-targeted towards the poorest quintile in Sub-Saharan African. The data in Table 3 indicate that 4.5% of the population in Sub-Saharan African participates in labour-market programs (which includes YEP). In the poorest quintile, however, the figure declines to only 3.3%. We would, of course, argue that these programs should target a higher share of the poorer population which is most in need of support. A similar situation occurs in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and North Africa, where less than 5% of people in the poorest quintile participate in employment programs, a figure that is lower than in the population as a whole. Conversely, in Eastern Europe and in Asia, the share of people in the poorest quintile who benefit from labour programs is above 10%, higher than in the overall population, indicating better targeting (defined as reaching the poorest quintiles).

⁶ The ASPIRE figures in Table 3 have some limitations. For example, the figures for Sub-Saharan Africa are based on information covering only eighteen countries. Furthermore, the figures for all countries are self-reported, which could differ from reality in cases of corruption or political clientelism.

Table 3:- Targeting of Active Labour-Market Programs, Coverage (%)

Region	Total population	Poorest quintile
Sub Saharan Africa	4.54	3.31
Middle East and North Africa	3.59	3.57
Latin America	6.83	4.74
Asia	7.84	10.40
Eastern Europe	10.53	19.72

Notes: The figures were compiled from the Atlas of Social Protection: Indicators of Resilience and Equity in April 2023 (World Bank, n.d.).

The factors that might explain why YEP in Sub-Saharan African are so challenged in reaching the poorest quintile include non-participants' lack of access to information and social networks and the reasons behind young people's personal decisions not to participate (do they opt-out or are they excluded, for example). Very little data existed to answer these basic and important questions before this project, but elements of responses, in terms of the complex political economy underlying YEP, can be found in the seven studies.

3.3. The Complex Political Economy of YEP

Based on the findings from the seven country studies, a conclusion can be reached that lack of official data and poor targeting of YEP exists, in part, because national governments lack personnel with technical capacities and thus undertake little monitoring and evaluation. Based on information obtained from interviews with key informants and our own assessments, however, we think that the (dis)incentives that face powerful policymakers play a major role. Such individuals have no incentive to produce transparent data, to invest in capacity-building, or to be evaluated (the absence of such incentives is a fruitful area for future study). Many young people who report knowing about the existence of YEP believe that political connections are necessary to receive benefits. This is particularly the case in Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Uganda. To what extent these concerns are or are not well-grounded is unclear, but the distrust of youth in government officials is concerning.

In all countries, a major challenge is lack of coordination among YEP. In fact, there are many cases in which similar, even almost identical, programs are created and implemented by different public offices that are part of the same administration. We speculate that so many “almost identical” programs exist in part because of competition among policymakers for whom control of employment programs is a source of political power.

The shortcomings described above are not unique to the seven analysed countries or to Sub-Saharan Africa. Several extensive literature reviews of active labour-market programs in Latin America and the Caribbean have found qualitatively similar findings (Finan & Schechter, 2012; Gans-Morse, Mazzuca & Nichter, 2014; Oliveros, 2016; Ronconi, 2009). Many of the shortcomings are a consequence of such deep structural factors as low trust, a segmented economy, weak institutional capacity, foreign interference, inadequate governance structures, and lack of political incentives. Reform of these structural aspects would require an active political coalition involving youth/labour groups, business groups, and local and international development-experts. A major question is how to build political coalitions to foster effective and inclusive youth-employment policies.

IV. Research Gaps and Approaches to Address Them

The literature provides little solid empirical evidence about the effective implementation of YEP in Sub-Saharan Africa. Future studies should focus on data collection and analysis through more in-depth diagnostics and monitoring of the youth-employment problem, including, for example, internationally recognized diagnostic benchmark criteria designed to evaluate the root causes of countrywide youth unemployment (whether emanating from the demand or supply side). Monitoring would, in particular, involve designing and implementing tracking systems and tracker studies that build on efforts to work more effectively with administrative data across government departments and spheres within a unified information architecture.

The studies and, indeed, the broader literature, do not provide clear answers for even basic questions on the nature and magnitude of YEP (how much funding is provided, for example, and how many people participate in YEP in Sub-Saharan Africa). The latter opens a promising avenue to a wide variety of empirical descriptive research that could better characterize the youth-labour force. Such investigations would be important in their own right and could inform and clarify the assumptions that underlie more structured quantitative studies.

Regarding YEP funding, a more extended budget analysis could help in determining funding allocations and growth rates, while descriptive statistics could be used to evaluate access to YEP in relation to geographical location (that is, rural vs. urban). Outputs and outcomes could be assessed against programme targets to comment on the relative effectiveness of delivery models for YEP. The data underpinning such analysis could be obtained from various sources, notably the annual Labour Force Surveys, Estimates of National Expenditure, and YEP evaluation reports, amongst others. Respective national statistical agencies could explore how young people perceive the effects of YEP on their lives as well as survey their views regarding program effectiveness.

This kind of analysis could be accomplished in at least three ways. First, through generating completely new data sources designed from questions such as those raised above. A second option could be to add these specific questions to surveys already conducted by various government departments, augmenting the existing data pool. Third, relevant questions could be included in household and labour-force surveys currently in use.

The resulting data could be used to standardise and regularise collection of output (volume) data to assess issues such as the adequacy and effectiveness of funding to YEP. These data are not routinely available and are often impossible to compare across countries. Not only would such an approach increase the accuracy and relevance of the data collected, but it could also save money by providing an evidence base for decision makers as they consider where to target resources for the greatest possible return from YEP.

Third, important questions exist regarding the coverage and targeting of YEP. The

available data do not even allow us to answer questions as basic as Are YEP in Sub-Saharan African pro-poor or are they allocated to relatively well-off youth? How are beneficiaries selected? We know little about the extent of political clientelism in the allocation of benefits and how that varies across subnational units with different state capacities. While the findings from the seven countries shed some light on these matters, wider country coverage and validation through repeated studies—both qualitative and quantitative—are still needed.

Fourth, why do YEP mostly target labour supply? Both qualitative (i.e., structured interviews with policy/program designers/implementers) and quantitative methods could be used, perhaps emphasizing perceptions amongst policy makers and their advisers, analysing the influence of donors, and delving into the psychosociological factors that play a part in determining preferences for supply-side over demand-side interventions. As a related matter, the small formal sector in some Sub-Saharan African countries might explain the lack of demand policies, which suggests an important area for research regarding the effectiveness of labour-demand policies in the context of small formal sectors and weak institutions.

A concerning trend is rising unemployment rates. even among those with higher education and technical and vocational education and training. This is particularly germane to Uganda and Rwanda, though it is likely applicable to other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. These increases suggest the possibility that insufficient demand exists for individuals with higher education and technical and vocational education and training in Sub-Saharan African economies or that the education and training that young people do receive is not aligned with employers' needs. We know very little about the distribution of occupational shortages among youth in Sub-Saharan African countries, including whether they vary across occupational groups, whether they are the result of lack of skills, etc.

Occupational shortages among youth and the intensity of such shortages could be analysed using something akin to the OECD Skills for Job Database or construction of an African equivalent.⁷ One way to understand this more comprehensively is through

⁷ The OECD's occupational shortage index is constructed by making use of weighted measures of change in variety of sources of pressure—wage, employment/unemployment, talent, etc.

computable general equilibrium modelling. We found no studies that have done so convincingly, although several papers have considered how to introduce rich labour-market dynamics into CGE modelling (Annabi, Cockburn & Decaluwé, 2006; Go et al, 2010). The very same logic could be used to develop youth-based CGE models. Such models—which could be static, dynamic, single-country or multi-country depending on the nature of the youth employment problem under examination—could explore the dimensions of youth employment and test various hypotheses regarding labour-market composition by sector as well as simulate a range of labour-policy configurations for young people.

Currently, assessment of the ways in which YEP and youth-employment-related non-YEP policies and programs have affected youth employment is lacking. Impact-evaluation techniques could use Random Control Trials/Fixed Effects (RCTs/FEs), quasi-experimental approaches, and CGE-microsimulation modelling. For example:

RCTs/FEs: A growing literature in labour/development economics estimates the causal effects of interventions affecting labour-market outcomes for youth in Africa. The results of RCTs and FEs in which the treatment is designed and implemented by a researcher have been published in top journals. In the context of research on youth employment and YEP in Sub-Saharan African countries, such studies should be led by local researchers in close collaboration with local policy makers to ensure that they capture policy priorities and sociopolitical and economic contexts—contrary to common practice. Where RCTs are not feasible but comprehensive and recent household survey data exist, quasi-experimental methods are an alternative for the analysis of impacts.

CGE models, particularly those linked to youth-specific outcomes via microsimulations, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the broad spillover effects triggered by large, economy-wide YEP and other employment programmes.

Finally, much research is needed to understand the political economy of YEP. We know little about coordination across programs, program effectiveness, and political institutions. This line of enquiry should focus on such questions as:

- Is a professional and independent civil service in charge of designing and

implementing YEP?

- Are YEP influenced by donors/international organizations or by special-interest groups?
- Is gender-, ethnic-, or disability-based bias in youth employment the result of policy neglect?
- To what extent is the performance of programs influenced by electoral cycles, ideology, or social divisions? Is the extensive use of YEP (e.g., job incentives) linked to the political economy of the country and non-transparent practices?
- Did the government seek to build coalitions to implement YEP and, if not, what would be needed to generate consensus regarding YEP?
- Do the policies identify the roles played by different stakeholders and use their power relations to improve equity across gender, ethnic groups, and disability?
- To what extent are the private sector and civil society involved in policy making?
- Are youth organized with a political voice or are vulnerable groups (young women, young people with disabilities, refugees, those from poor backgrounds, residents of remote or rural areas) less organized and lacking a political voice? What stakeholders representing vulnerable groups are engaged?
- Are women's groups involved in issues relevant to youth and to the employment of young women? Do women have a voice in the policymaking process?
- Does the government have an agency or ministry whose mandate is youth issues, and does coordination exist among these agencies? Do Ministries of Women's Affairs (or similar) exist that can focus on young women's issues?
- Is a professional and independent civil service in charge of enforcing labour and OSH regulations?

Finding the answers to such questions would require qualitative and quantitative

approaches, which should be developed in an inclusive manner, embedded into existing youth-employment policies, and owned both by policymakers and by those likely to be affected by the interventions. If they are not, integration and political buy-in may not occur. Thus, strong political support throughout the research-development process should be an overriding priority.

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