Reflections on volunteerism and youth employment in Africa

Africa has the youngest population in the world, with 70 per cent of Sub-Saharan Africa under the age of 30, according to UN estimates. By 2050, one out of three young people in the world will be living in Sub-Saharan Africa. The burgeoning youth population is both an opportunity and a challenge for the continent. To harness this demographic opportunity, there are hurdles for the continent to overcome. One of the most significant hurdles is that of youth unemployment. While the continent's significant natural resources are vital, the creativity, skills and innovation of its youthful population will be the most important factor in the continent's economic transformation.

The African Development Bank reports that while 10 million to 12 million youth enter the workforce in Africa each year, only 3 million formal jobs are created annually. Consequently, one-third of African youth are unemployed, another third are vulnerably employed, and only one in six are in wage employment, with informal employment accounting for more than 80 per cent of total employment in the region.
Most youth therefore lack access to social safety nets and sustainable livelihoods. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation further. The situation is also complex for young girls who often face a multitude of related challenges including limited access to reproductive health services and education.

The frustration and hopelessness of an unemployed young African population can have severe consequences not only for the region, but across the world. Youth unemployment in Africa translates to poorer living conditions, fuels migration out of Africa, and contributes to conflicts and destabilization in the region.

“There is, therefore, an urgent need to create more opportunities for youth in Africa through multi-faceted and inclusive approaches, to help turn Africa’s demographic dividend into an economic one.

The good news is that Africa’s youth unemployment challenge is already being addressed by key African institutions and by African governments with great imagination, scale, and ambition. At the continental level, youth unemployment is at the heart of African Union’s Agenda 2063 that aims to realize an ‘integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena’.

In line with this continental vision, several African governments have put in place ambitious strategies to address the challenge. But African governments cannot act alone. Development partners, private foundations, and foreign institutions resident in Africa have a responsibility to provide support. The severity of the challenge varies between the different sub-regions, between countries and within individual countries over time. We can therefore not have one-size-fits-all solutions. However, some challenges remain common across most of sub-Saharan Africa and lessons from different countries could be useful in others.
Core to Ireland’s Africa Strategy is a focus on supporting African Governments build institutions and systems necessary to deliver for their citizens, including education, skills and job creation.

In Mozambique, eSwatini and Madagascar, where I have been privileged to represent the Irish people, the development of national capacities, particularly for women and youth, has always been a priority for the Irish government. More recently, government institutions in this sub-region are increasingly requesting Ireland to share more development experience and expertise, particularly in areas such as education and capacity building of youth to improve work-readiness and entrepreneurial skills; peace building and conflict prevention; rural development and agri-business; and trade and enterprise development.

One of the areas that the Government of Ireland has invested heavily is promoting volunteering for development of national capacities particularly for youth.

Ireland strongly supports volunteerism as a tool for development and was one of the co-sponsors of the 2018 UN General Assembly Resolution on Volunteering for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Volunteerism is relevant for people of all ages as a source of social capital and goodwill. In the context of most African countries, volunteerism is particularly an important tool for promoting youth development.

Research shows that volunteerism is an important pathway for enhancing youth employment and employability, particularly through impacting transferable soft skills that educational institutions often fail to address. By volunteering, young professionals can sharpen their professional value propositions and problem-solving skills.

A LinkedIn survey found that volunteer work experience was valued equally as paid work by hiring managers when evaluating candidates. Volunteering
also illustrates to potential employers that an individual has demonstrated a willingness to work and is committed to their own professional development. A caveat is that not all volunteer opportunities will have an equal effect on increasing employability and a critical lens should be used in assessing volunteering options.

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To promote volunteering globally, Ireland has been a long-standing partner of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme. As a common service to the United Nations, UN Volunteers are a symbol of global diversity and solidarity.

Over the last 10 years, Ireland has funded about 300 UN Volunteer assignment across the UN system. In 2021, 44 Irish nationals served as UN Volunteers, 39 of whom were funded by the Government of Ireland and 25 of whom served in Africa. The Irish Government also provides a contribution to UNV’s Special Voluntary Fund (SVF), a flexible resource to implement UNV’s Strategic Framework. Beyond funding Irish nationals to serve as UN Volunteers, Ireland is one of the few countries that directly funds nationals from developing countries to serve as national UN Volunteers in their respective countries.

In line with Ireland’s global commitment to youth development, the Embassy of Ireland in Mozambique has prioritized youth employment as a crosscutting and high priority issue and is tackling it within the framework of an interdisciplinary, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach, working across the education, health, social protection, governance, climate action and peace building sectors.

In addition to taking a mainstreaming approach, the Embassy has a number of youth focused programmes, including: a pilot programme that matches youth internships with employers and is complemented with systematic mentoring and coaching support; seed funding and business supports for youth start-ups with a climate focus; art, culture and sports projects for development; and girls’ empowerment programmes among others.

The Embassy is particularly proud to collaborate with the UNV office in Mozambique to support the UNESCO and UNOPS - administered Peace
Secretariat to deploy eight UN Volunteers across a number of cities in the country. The UN Volunteers are serving with great passion and grit, providing critical support in peace-building and community development. They demonstrate the significant potential of Mozambique’s young people, who when provided with opportunities and sufficient support structures, can drive the social and economic prosperity of the country.

“By creating and promoting volunteer opportunities for African youth, governments, development partners and institutions in Africa can help young Africans acquire skills and expertise required in the labour markets and address Africa’s youth employment challenge, turning Africa’s demographic dividend into an economic one. Ireland is committed to continue support to the national UN Volunteers programme in Mozambique. We will share our positive experience with development partners and advocate for other bilateral programmes to consider this approach.

https://www.dfa.ie/irish-embassy/mozambique/about-us/irelandsstrategyformozambique/

East and Southern Africa

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Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth SDG 10: Reduced inequalities SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals