

Youth Employment and Skills Development in Africa: Lessons from Botswana's Experience.

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Abstract

The paper focuses on youth employment opportunities as well as issues around skills development in Botswana. The paper commences by providing a brief historical account of the country's political economy, before providing an account of employment trends as well as a brief account of skills training opportunities meant to empower the youth across the country. The paper argues that while Botswana's youth empowerment initiatives, which include the National Internship Programme, the National Youth Fund and the Young Farmers Fund may have had to grapple with a raft of challenges, these initiatives have certainly scored some commendable successes and therefore do possess rich and positive lessons for the rest of the African sub-region. The paper concludes that foresight, political will, socio-economic and political stability rank among the key object lessons to be learnt from Botswana's youth employment experience.

1. Introduction

One of the greatest challenges faced by the Africa continent is that of poverty, and this is largely associated with a number of related challenges which include unemployment and underemployment. While poverty on the African continent has always been pervasive, the situation was clearly exacerbated by the economic crisis of the last decade. The problem of unemployment on this continent does cut across all age groups, and yet youth are among the most affected (Siphambe, 2007). A number of countries in Africa have, as a consequence, identified youth unemployment as a matter of national security (Motlaleng and Narayana, 2014). Given that this challenge tends to threaten the social, economic and political stability of any given country on the continent, most governments are ceased with the question of how best to deal with the matter. The term youth according to the World Bank (2012) refers to persons aged between 15 and 24. Botswana. Youth unemployment on the other hand refers to the labour force ages 15 to 24 without work but available for seeking employment (Motlaleng

and Narayana, 2014). It should be noted, however that in the context of Botswana the age group 15 to 35 has at times been used to define youth for purposes of policy development. In terms of magnitude of the problem, within Africa, 60% of the continent's unemployed are youth, with youth unemployment in most countries often doubling that of adults. Thus youth unemployment in Africa is a major issue of concern. For instance, within the SADC region, of which Botswana is a part, two thirds of the population are below the age of 35 years, and a substantial segment of this figure is unemployed. This suggests that large segments of the youth population in Africa are thus affected. Motlaleng and Narayana (2014) note that while unemployment destroys the economic and personal welfare for all those affected by it regardless of age, the destruction is most pronounced when it comes to the youth. To this unfortunate dynamic must be added the gender dimension of youth unemployment, which shows that females are far less likely to be employed than males. Across Africa, youth unemployment has created so much discord that in some countries, youth have often ended up taking, the dangerous step of migrating from their countries, sometimes across dangerous seas, in search of greener pastures. Many have perished on the rough seas in search of the elusive goal of employment.

In the northern part of the continent in particular, some youth have perished while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea into Europe in search of economic opportunities. In the southern part of the continent equally large numbers of youth find their way especially into South Africa, the economic hub of the continent, hoping often against hope to find employment in that country. In the case of South Africa, the influxes into that country have at times irked the locals, triggering off xenophobic attacks as the unemployed youth of South Africa try to "defend" their turf from what they perceive to be "intruders" out to steal their jobs. Paradoxically, the out migration is happening despite the fact that many governments on the continent have drawn up sometimes elaborate, complex and advanced technical and vocational education training (TVET) programmes, as well as launch institutions that provide practical and theoretical training leading to occupational qualifications that are meant to benefit the youth.

A few examples of employment related initiatives that have been put in place within the Southern African region will suffice. In South Africa, for instance, initiatives in place have included the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) and Intel and these aim at equipping young people with entrepreneurial skills and motivation to facilitate business start-

ups and growth. In Kenya, the government inter alia, initiated Project Baobab, targeting the youth (especially females) who receive small start-up grants, while in Swaziland the government launched the Youth Entrepreneur Fund (YEF) for similar purposes (World Bank, 2013). In Malawi youth benefit from such initiatives as the Youth in Agriculture, meant to attract young people to work on the land (AfDB, 2014). Despite all these efforts, the reality on the ground is that these initiatives have not had the desired impact in terms of employment creation among the youth in Africa, and for that reason the unemployment spectre continues to loom large. Let us consider the situation of Botswana, beginning with an overview of the country's political economy.

2. Botswana: Brief Overview of Political Economy

Botswana is a relatively small country situated in southern Africa, with a population of 2,1 million. When Botswana attained political independence from Britain in 1966, the country was ranked among the poorest nations on the African continent. Economically the country depended on agriculture and cattle rearing. In the 1970s, the country's fortunes turned for the better following the discovery of diamonds. Wise leadership, appetite for and commitment to prudent macroeconomic management as well as stable governance ensured that over time, the country moved from being one of the poorest on the continent to attaining upper middle income status, which it carries today (Mafela, Maundeni & Mookodi, 2011).

With a GDP of \$16, 4 billion, Botswana made significant strides in addressing various issues pertaining to social development, including infrastructure, social protection, education, access to clean water, primary health care, the fight against poverty in general (Mupedziswa, 2017). According to AfDB (2014) the country's GDP growth rate stood at 5.4% - quite impressive by most standards. In regard to the fight against poverty, the country made considerable strides, with the number of poor people below the PDL having declined from 30.6 percent of the population in 2002/2003 to 20.7 percent in 2009/10. This of course did not mean poverty and unemployment suddenly disappeared from the screen. On the contrary, the unemployment challenge has stubbornly remained like a thorn in the flesh. Let us briefly consider the unemployment picture in the country.

3. Unemployment Trends: Botswana

According to Statistics Botswana (2011) in the 1990s, and early 2000s, unemployment was estimated at between 20 and 23%, and by 2005 it fell to 17.6%. In 2011 the unemployment

rate averaged 17.8%, which translated to 126, 349 unemployed persons, in a country with a labour force of 710 600. Predictably, female unemployment was higher (at 21.4%) than male unemployment (14.5%). As can be imagined, unemployment rates have been higher in rural areas than in urban. Tellingly, Statistics Botswana (2011:5) lamented that, “The age group distribution indicates the highest unemployment rate of 41,4% is among the 15-19 years age group followed by the 20-24 year age group of 34.0 percent”. The age groups mentioned above both fall under the label of youth. Additionally, it emerged that the labour force which attained some secondary education had the highest unemployment rate at 24.4 percent. Statistics Botswana (2011) also pointed out that this group constituted 46 percent of the overall figure of 126, 349 of the unemployed persons across the country. These figures suggest that youth with some education are among the most unemployed in Botswana. According to figures released at a Youth Employment Summit held in 2016, nationally the unemployment rate stood at 20% in 2013, while poverty levels stood at 19%. In that scenario, youth unemployment was said to account for 20% of total unemployed labour force (World Bank, 2015). Two thirds of the unemployed youth in Botswana were said to be under the age of 30 years.

Thus despite high levels of economic growth (alluded to above), unemployment levels in Botswana have remained unacceptably high. According to Siphambe (2007), the reason for the seemingly contradictory scenario (of high economic growth rate and yet equally high rates of unemployment) is that Botswana’s high economic growth rate was mainly driven by one commodity - diamond mining - that was not matched by significant employment creation, due to the capital intensive production structure and absence of beneficiation from diamonds. This has been so because (until recently) apparently no industries had been set up to process the diamonds further before being exported. Thus the absence of beneficiation had meant virtually no additional jobs were created in the market.

As noted, the situation changed only recently as much of the diamond processing work has since been localised. Still only a limited number of jobs have been created as a result of this positive development so far. Additionally, the lack of diversification of Botswana’s economy has meant the economic base has remained small. Apart from the limited job opportunities, apparently the youth in Botswana tend to lack employment opportunities essentially because they have lower on-the-job skills (CSO, 2008). This is something the government has taken

steps to address with seriousness of purpose, as will be noted below. Thus, in Botswana, youth unemployment is quite high at a staggering 45.9% (Statistics Botswana, 2014).

Apart from unemployment, there has been concern over underemployment, there is also concern around high levels of underemployment and poor quality jobs in the informal sector (World Bank 2015). As Kuhlmann (2018a: 24) has observed, *“Then there are hundreds of graduate prudes who are waiting tables, scrubbing floors, tending gardens – doing anything just to earn a living. Hundreds more are just sitting at home waiting for that telephone call inviting them for a job interview. The call hardly ever comes”*. The author further quotes another piece of research whose findings established that young people in Botswana face significant challenges in terms of finding decent work, many of them end up in poor quality jobs and get paid poorly because they settle for any kind of employment as they are desperate for any means to feed their families” (Kuhlmann (2018a: 24). Thus graduate underemployment and blatant exploitation have emerged as issues of particular concern.

Sadly high rates of unemployment tend to be associated with poverty, which in turn might be associated with a plethora of social ills (Mafela, Maundeni & Mookodi, 2011). For instance, there tends to be increasing deviance and crime among youth which phenomenon, among other factors, is attributable partly to high levels of youth unemployment (Balogi, 2004). To these concerns must be added other challenges faced by the youth including HIV and AIDS, drug and substance abuse, violence, pre-marital sex, teenage pregnancies and crime (Statistics Botswana 2014; Mafela et al, 2011). In regard to HIV and AIDS, research findings suggest that unemployment may lead to risky sexual behaviours when young people search for alternative means to survive the harsh economic circumstances (BIAS 1V 2013 cited by Kuhlmann (2018b:24). Underemployment and low wages have forced some youth, especially females, to supplement their meagre wages through commercial sex work. It is for these and related reasons that the unemployment problem, among associated challenges like underemployment and low wages, could not be ignored. The Government of Botswana took the bull by the horns and came up with a raft of mitigating initiatives.

The Government of Botswana has, over the years, made deliberate efforts to create economic opportunities for a considerable fraction of the country’s youth. The initiatives in place have included skills development as well as access to start-up capital for income generating projects. These are considered in considerable detail in the paragraphs that follow.

4. Government Initiatives to Stave off Youth Unemployment

As, noted, the Government of Botswana did not simply fold its arms in the face of this time bomb that is the extremely high rate of youth unemployment. The authorities set out to ensure that the youth received opportunities to realise their potential. As way back as 1996 parliament passed the National Youth Policy and this fell under the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs. The policy was revised in 2010 under the new Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture (GoB, 2010). This Ministry was subsequently (2016) renamed the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sports and Cultural Development. According to the GoB (2010) the National Youth Policy is guided by an Action Plan whose brief, inter alia, includes addressing issues around the thorny issue of youth unemployment. The actual initiatives are discussed below.

The authorities appreciated that youth unemployment posed a major development challenge to Botswana despite the impressive economic growth rates being posted by the country (Orukut, 2013) The Government of Botswana has over the last few decades designed a number of specific interventions that these targeted the youth. These included the National Internship Programme, the Youth Development Fund (YDF) and the Young Farmers Fund (YFF).

The *National Internship Programme* (NIP) is an initiative that sought to address the issue of skills development of the youth of the country. The NIP involves placement of unemployed graduates in government and private sector organisations to enable them to acquire skills to enhance their chances of getting permanent employment. In particular there is emphasis on institutional financing to provide young people with access to finance to facilitate self-employment activities and entrepreneurial skills development (GoB 2009). Degree and Diploma holders are placed for a period of 24 months to gain on-the-job skills, and during the placement period interns receive a monthly allowance (MLHA, 2011).

The NIP was set up to offer unemployed citizen-graduates an opportunity to develop work skills and experience that will support them in the transition from school life to the world of work. This would be realised through attachments to various agencies. The NIP has not been without its fair share of criticisms. Some critics have referred to it as the “failed internship programme”(Sunday Standard, 2018), while others have alleged the setting up of the

programme was politically motivated hence it was doomed. This accusation relates to the fact that the programme was launched ahead of crucial national elections that occurred in 2009 (Diraditsile (2017)). Certain critics have stated that the programme only succeeded in providing temporary exploitative employment for very few young people. Some have peddled claims that most young people who are involved in the programme have not gained sufficient professional training and skills due to weak monitoring and job shadowing arrangements (Nthomang and Diraditsile, 2016). There have also been concerns that the programme is too expensive at P1400 per month per individual. The feeling is its not sustainable. However individuals who advance such arguments fail to appreciate the bigger picture. The fact of the matter is scores of youth have enormously benefitted from this initiative. On balance its positives far out-weigh its negatives.

The Youth Development Fund (YDF) is a youth empowerment scheme that supports the launching of youth enterprises. Activities involved include assisting youth who have dropped out of school with funds to start self-employment income generating projects. The YDF is managed by officers from the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sport and Cultural Development (MYSC, 2006). The fund accords priority to projects aimed at promoting such ventures as agriculture, tourism, services, and the manufacturing sector (Min of Youth, Sport and Culture, 2014). There are two categories of enterprises through which the funds for the facility are availed. One category is funding in the region of P50 000 to P 100 000 per project for Micro and Small Scale Enterprises. Another category is for Medium Scale Enterprises, with funding ranging from P101 000 to P450 000 per project (Min of Youth, Sport and Culture, 2014). According to the AfDB (2012) disbursement to the fund has progressively risen from P 3 million in 2005 to P60 million2010; doubling to P120 million in 2011. Also of particular note is the fact that the fund has been expanded to include youth aged 15 – 35 years. This development is consistent with the provisions of the country’s Economic Diversification Drive which calls for the creation of an entrepreneurial culture among the country’s youth.

One key challenge faced by the YDF is that resources are never sufficient (despite the country’s upper middle income status), meaning not everyone requiring the fund will get access. Some youth have expressed concern that ideas that they had floated may have ended up in wrong hands, allegedly, violating intellectual property rights in the process. There have also been concerns expressed to the effect that the turnaround time from submission of

application to receiving the funds could improve. The feeling among some is that there also tends to be too much red tape in some instances, resulting in implementation delays. Although the youth receive some training, concern has been expressed to the effect that the orientation period is rather too short and also that often the youth end up being thrown to the deep end with limited skills before they are ready to swim. Other commentators have expressed concern that at times, there is lack of proper ownership of the 'letter and spirit' of particular projects given that some youth use consultants to draw up 'bankable' project proposals on their behalf even if their (the youth's) own hearts may not be in the particular projects. Lack of ownership in that sense results in half-hearted attempts at project implementation, resulting at times in project failure. But these concerns are clearly an exception rather than the rule. Numerous success stories have been noted or documented.

The *Young Farmers Fund* (YFF) involves providing graduates of agricultural colleges with funds to start sustainable self-employment projects in the agricultural sector. The fund targets Degree, Diploma and Certificate holders and provides agricultural loans to start sustainable agricultural projects in an effort to tackle youth unemployment in the country (MFDP, 2006). The YFF is managed by officers from the Citizen Entrepreneurial Development Agency (CEDA) which agency was established by the Government of Botswana to provide financial and technical support for business development with a view to promoting viable and sustainable citizen owned business enterprises. CEDA, which was incorporated as a company limited by guarantee, is a financial assistance initiative which can also be accessed by the youth (CEDA, 2012). CEDA's mandate is to promote viable and sustainable citizen owned business enterprises; hence it is for this reason that this agency manages the YFF. The two agencies have worked well together for the common goal of youth employment in the country.

Other than that, youth can also benefit from capacity building in entrepreneurship through access to an organisation called the Local Enterprise Authority (LEA) which helps individuals start and manage sustainable projects to provide both income and self-employment opportunities. LEA's (2004) mandate is to service the general populace (and not specifically the youth) although they (youth) too can access its services. The capacity building initiative is meant to enhance beneficiaries' capacity to grow their enterprise in a sustainable manner.

A remarkable point to note about the various initiatives discussed above is that, unlike in many other countries in Africa, the programmes are rolled out on a non-partisan basis. In other words, youth from all walks of life and political persuasions, have equal access to funds from these schemes. This is unlike the situation in other African countries. In countries such as Zimbabwe (at least during the time of the Mugabe regime), many initiatives were rolled out on partisan lines, with youth from the ruling Zanu Pf party receiving greater attention. This proved to be a recipe for disaster, as the youth would squander project money but receive little more than a verbal reprimand.

As implementation of the various strategies discussed above has progressed, the authorities managed to identify and isolate a number of implementation bottle-necks, and it took steps to address them. In 2015, the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture came up with a document on affirmative action in favour of the youth (GOB 2015). The document set out to remove perceived bottlenecks for youth empowerment and it did this by identifying and extending a number of business-related exemptions to the youth. These initiatives included directives to Land Boards in the various districts across the country to grant to youth businesses a 5-year grace period without paying lease fees, instructions to the effect that youth who bid and won tenders for commercial plots be allowed to pay-off the price in instalments instead of a one off lump sum; that youth companies should acquire tender documents at a charge of 50% of selling price to accord them the opportunity to bid for a wide spectrum of products and services. These directives have gone a long way towards promoting youth employment projects across the country.

5. Lessons from Botswana's Experience

Botswana has done relatively well in terms of putting in place measures to fight youth unemployment across the country. The response from the youth of Botswana to the various initiatives put in place by the Government has been overwhelming. A number of lessons can be drawn from the country's experience.

5.1 Political will is key: One key lesson that can be drawn is that political will on the part of the government is a key factor for positive outcomes where youth employment initiatives are concerned. The Government of Botswana does not simply engage in rhetoric; it "walks the talk". In some Africa countries, often there is lack of commitment on the part of the

government. In some countries the authorities make false promises and such shenanigans do not augur well for national development, hence they ought to be discouraged.

5.2 *Catch them young* – There is need to provide entrepreneurial skills to young people at an early age. In the case of Botswana, the broadening of the base of potential beneficiaries of initiatives such as the Youth Development Fund, for instance, has meant young people, some barely out of secondary school, can benefit from the fund, providing they come up with ‘bankable’ ideas. This is clearly a plus in the sense that this has given young people the opportunity to develop entrepreneurial skills from an early age.

5.3 *Disabuse people about diploma disease mentality* – Many parents in Africa have tended to educate their children essentially for white collar employment; they send them to school so the children can become efficient employees, but not at all potential employers. There is need to disabuse parents of such a mentality, and the novel idea of allowing even 15 year old school leavers (as shown in the narrative) to access funding for small businesses is one that appeals as it will go a long way in fighting this kind of thinking.

5.4 *Create conducive environment* - Botswana has demonstrated that it is possible to make the (national) environment sufficiently attractive to obviate the urge by the youth to migrate to other countries en-mass in search of greener pastures, as is happening elsewhere in the sub-region. While youth in many African countries flock to other regions of the world in search of greener pastures, in Botswana, the government goes out of its way to make the local environment as attractive as possible. Hence there is no mass migration of youth to other countries.

5.5 *Ploughshares and not swords*: Another object lesson is that national political stability has the potential to pay handsome dividends where youth employment issues are concerned. This is a feature that is perennially missing in many African countries. In Botswana instead of swords playing a prominent role, it is ploughshares that rule the roost. Peace and stability are key to youth empowerment.

6. Conclusion

Botswana has made commendable strides in the area of youth employment. Clearly the rest of the African continent can take a leaf from the manner in which the Government of Botswana has handled youth unemployment issues. True the rate of unemployment in the country remains high, but the bold steps taken by the Government of Botswana to empower the country's youth ought not only to be applauded but emulated by many countries in the sub-region. With time, the initiatives will certainly begin to bear fruit.

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