

‘Disconnecting a Time Bomb’: Solutions to Youth Unemployment and their Struggle for Sustainable Livelihoods in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

Mathe Bakani¹, Mungure Abel², Ncube Siyema³

¹Department of Development Studies, Lupane State University, Zimbabwe; mathebakani93@gmail.com

²Department of Development Studies, Lupane State University, Zimbabwe; mungureabel@gmail.com

³Department of Development Studies, Lupane State University, Zimbabwe; sivema.ncube@gmail.com

Abstract. *This policy paper explores why current policies to address unemployment are failing, with a distinct emphasis on providing solutions to youth unemployment in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. The study brings to light that, before stressing on solutions to youth unemployment, highlighting why the current policies to address youth unemployment are failing is vital in bringing attention to the serious extent of the problem. The study argues that the age bracket of 26-30 years is mostly affected by unemployment as they constitute 36% of the total population, hence 30% of them indicated that they have spent at least 3 years in search of employment. The study also argues that the recurrence of failing programmes to address youth unemployment is caused by the current poor economic environment, lack of access to capital, lack of participation in making of the programmes and lack of policy or programme monitoring. The bottom up approach employed by the research reveals that, the provision of employment opportunities, promotion of self-employment through access to capital, promotion of merit-based recruitment and youth access to land are key in bringing up solutions to youth unemployment in Bulawayo.*

Key words: *Youth, Unemployment, Solutions, bottom up approach.*

I. Introduction

Odoh and Innocent (2014:165) state that, “one of the greatest challenges facing governments and policy makers in Africa today is how to make available employment opportunities for the continent’s more than 200 million youths so that they can have decent lives and contribute to the socio- economic development of their countries”. Youth unemployment has turned out to be a global challenge as the growth of any country hinges on how productive and inventive the youthful population is. The African Youth Charter (2006) argues that, Africa’s greatest resource is its youth population and that through their active and full participation in the economy, Africans can overcome its problems that lie ahead (cited in Ubi, 2007). ILO (2012:1) states that, “this global youth unemployment crisis imposes a heavy cost, both in terms of depletion of human and social capital and loss of opportunities for economic growth for present and future generations”.

Bhebhe, *et al.* (2016:96) state that, “Africa as a continent is the most affected region as it poses with high unemployment rates and Zimbabwe is amongst the most affected as it presents the highest unemployment rate in the world of 95%”. Youth unemployment in Zimbabwe dates back since independence and its levels has been on the rise. Cherisa and Muchini (2011:2) state that, “there has been a gradual turnaround of fortunes from the heydays soon after the country’s liberation from British colonial rule in 1980”. ZimStats (2012), cited in Bhebhe *et al.* (2016:92) brings to light that, “in 1986, 34% of unemployed youths had ordinary level qualifications, the percentage rose to 73% in 1994, 74.6 % in 2004 and to 85% in 2012”. The city of Bulawayo, which used to be known as Zimbabwe’s second industrial hub after Harare, has turn out to be more of a ghost town succeeding years of precipitous economic meltdown and none implementation of revitalization strategies by the government. Ndiweni *et al.* (2014), state that during the colonial days it was referred to as the ‘Manchester of Rhodesia’, due to heavy industrial sites. On 17 May 2014, Ndumiso Sibanda argues that “Bulawayo was a home to heavy industries and it’s gone. The larger employers are gone and the city is gradually turning into a dormitory town affected by labour migration to Harare and South Africa,” (Quoted in Chronicle, May 2014).

Odoh and Innocent (2014:165) state that, “the size, energy, enthusiasm, innovation and dynamism of youths are assets that can be harnessed for national development with appropriate policies that deal adequately with the issues that affect them”. The youth population should not be ignored or taken lightly as their action and inaction

can develop or destroy the hegemonies/ fabrics of their societies. Kahraman (2011:2) states that “the significance of the 15 to 35 years of age span cannot be overstated as it presents the developmental stage during which decisions that affect the rest of one’s life are made”. Nevertheless, youth remains the backbone of countries economic success and development thus unavailability of effective solutions to this spreading epidemic on youth unemployment continues to be a matter of concern to global and national policy makers and civil societies. Despite the elevated awareness of youth unemployment in Zimbabwe, the country do not seem to have developed comprehensive and effective policies to deal with this growing phenomenon or to have in place means to assess progress made. The purpose of this study is to advance the discussion to the views of unemployed youths on reasons why current youth unemployment policies are not working, are their current copying strategies sustainable and also possible ways to enhance the problem of youth unemployment in Zimbabwe. However, there is a realization that the levels of youth unemployment are not solely a mirror of the business cycle but a persistent structural issue that has distinct causes and requires distinct solutions that cut across fiscal, labor, social security and education policies.

Rusvingo (2014:4) postulates that, “all Zimbabweans of average intelligence should ask policy makers that; is the country not sitting on a ‘time bomb’ when every year, universities and other institutions of higher learning churn out graduates in their thousands who have slim chances of getting employment”? Unemployment among the youths is a rising social, economic and political catastrophe in Zimbabwe (Mudonzvo, 2015, cited in Bhebhe, *et al.* 2016). Nevertheless, the youths are the engine of growth and development as they can provide the labor force. However, this study refers to the youth as people (male and female) in the age bracket of 15 to 35 years, as stipulated in the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) and the AYC (2013).

II. Policy Problem and its Context

Rusvingo (2014:2) states that “youth unemployment on the African continent is a ticking time bomb if not tackled efficiently and effectively through appropriate policies and programmes”. In Zimbabwe, the youth specially those who have left school are in danger if they cannot find employment, hence this form of deprivation robs them of the benefits of work and signifies a dark era to personal and social development of their lives and to national development. However, Bhebhe et al. (2016) state that if an increasing part of the new generation starts its youth phase with the feeling of being redundant and having no chance to participate into the mainstream of society through formal employment, the future will be hampered with more and more inexperienced graduate youths, poor and idle human capital. In Zimbabwe’s urban areas (Bulawayo), most of the youths graduating from several colleges far outstrip the employment opportunities which are available on the market. Masocha (2016), states that every year the country produces thousands of graduates from the several tertiary institutions who race for limited jobs available on the market. However, if ignored, youth unemployment has the potential to have extensive serious social, economic and political ramifications at individual level and at national level. Therefore, youth unemployment is a national problem which requires urgent attention if the country is to achieve vision 2030 of becoming a middle- income economy and also to the achievement of SDGs.

III. Methodology

This study was a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative research technique was used to pursue the understanding of the subject matter at hand through interconnected informative processes from the perspective of a local population through interviews. The researcher conducted 25 interviews to unemployed youths. Nevertheless, this played a vital role in getting information on individual’s opinions, values and behaviors of a population under study. Quantitative research consisted of gathering data through administering a total of 100 questionnaires to unemployed youths. The methods however complemented each other, hence this increased the validity and reliability of the findings. Purposive sampling was used in targeting a total of 125 unemployed youths in Bulawayo which played a major role as it enabled the researcher to actively select the most productive elements from the research population to answer the questions. Data collected was captured in SPSS and descriptive statistics were used to analyze data. The analysis derived frequencies and cross tabulations. Pie charts, themes and categories which were categorized in different themes in accordance with the study’s objectives and were presented in a narrative form by the researcher.

IV. Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1 Number of Respondents by Gender

Table 1: Number of Respondents by Gender

Number of Respondents					
Gender		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	65	65.0	65.0	65.0
	Female	35	35.0	35.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Source: Survey

Table 1 shows the total number of respondents according to their gender. The questionnaires distributed managed to reach 65% male respondents and 35% female respondents, hence the study attained a 100% response rate. Key informant interviews reached a total of 14 males and 11 female respondents also attaining a 100% response rate. The disproportion of respondents between males and females emanated from the strategy used which favoured unemployed youths gathered in street corners, social places at townships where most of male respondents spend time at. However, it was a challenge to access female unemployed youths in such places which made their participation in the study to be lower.

4.2 Extent of Youth Unemployment in Bulawayo

Table 2: Extent of Youth Unemployment in Bulawayo

Cross –Tabulation (Age and Period of Unemployment)							
		Period					Total
		6 Months and below	1 Year	2 Years	3 Years	4 Years and above	
Age	15-20	3	2	4	6	0	15
	21-25	2	1	3	30	0	36
	26-30	0	0	0	29	10	39
	31-35	0	0	0	0	10	10
Total		5	3	7	65	20	100

Source: Survey

Table 2, brings to light the extent of youth unemployment in Bulawayo, highlighting the period (in years) spent by different age groups of youths while unemployed. The majority of the youth population (65%) indicated that they have been searching for employment for the past 3 years, with the most affected age groups being those between 21-25 years and 26-30 years. Also, 20% of the respondents highlighted that they have spent 4 years and above unemployed, and 3% of the respondents indicated that they have spent at least a year unemployed. However, it is vital to note that from the study, when asked on whether they have been employed in the past or not, 85% of the respondents indicated that they have never been employed in the past while only 15% highlighted they were once employed. During an interview session, one respondent voiced that;

“Youth unemployment is continuing to rise in Bulawayo, given that the high proportion of students graduating is not consistent with the current capacity of the industry to absorb them. (Interview 1, 2019)

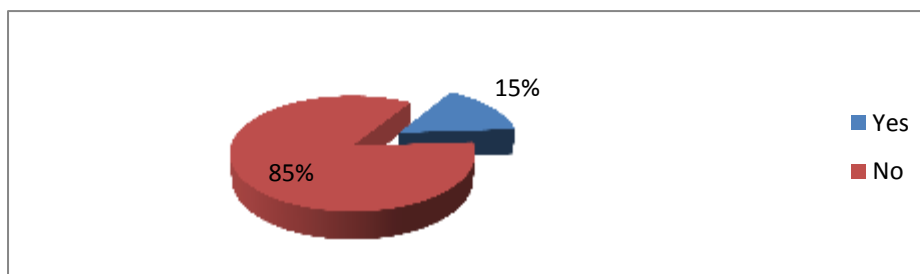
Nevertheless, the statistics and the comment above prove that unemployment amongst the youths in Bulawayo is a matter of concern and has prevailed over the past years. The education sector continues to produce labour but the industrial sector’s capacity to absorb it is low.

4.3 Why Current Government Policies to Address Youth Unemployment are not Working

4.3.1 Youth Awareness levels on Government Programs

The study established that only 15% of the respondents are aware of government programmes aimed at assisting the youth with employment opportunities while 85% are not aware of such programmes as shown on figure 1. However, this raises questions on why government programmes are not known by the intended beneficiaries. However, despite lack of awareness of these programmes, respondents were able to voice on ways in which the government can use to enhance employment opportunities for the youth.

Figure 1: Respondents aware of Government Programmes aimed at Addressing Youth Unemployment.



4.3.2 Poor Economic Environment.

The existence of the poor economic environment was voiced as one of the major limitation on why government policies to address youth unemployment are failing. The government policy on industrialization was voiced as being affected by the poor economic environment. Most respondents from key informant interviews voiced that companies are operating below capacity hence this is worsened by high inflation levels and shortage of currency (domestic and foreign), hence this is leading to retrenchments rather than employment as companies are facing challenges in paying workers. Some respondents highlighted that;

“... the government policies are implemented in an environment where companies are retrenching more than recruiting. The government policies that are established do not address the major causes of unemployment but rather addressing the effects, hence this having a negative impact on the effectiveness and sustainability of these policies” (Interview 14, 2019).

“The economic environment has to be conducive for businesses or entrepreneurs to thrive. The government should fix the economy first then their policies on addressing unemployment will be effective” (Interview 18, 2019).

From the above responses, the research established that, firstly, addressing the current poor economic environment is vital and has to be conducive for businesses and entrepreneurs to thrive; hence this creates a favourable foundation for government programmes to succeed. These findings concur with Alkatheri and Ghamdi (2019:4) who highlight that “the nature of employment policies is affected by a country’s economic growth, degree of economic transformation, and stability” Therefore, it can be noted that, if companies are retrenching more than recruiting, then government programmes become less effective in dealing with unemployment up until the economic environment becomes conducive for businesses to operate.

4.3.3 Lack of Access to Capital

Lack of access to capital was also one of the major issues highlighted as why government programmes to address youth unemployment are failing. Access to financial capital was voiced as a major issue which is crucial if the government programme/ policy to promoting entrepreneurship was to work effectively. Some respondents voiced that;

“We have no capital to start our own businesses and banks do not offer loans if you have no means of paying them back. If only we could access even small amounts to start our businesses that could help...” (Interview 17, 2019).

“In our days access to capital is vital if one wants to start on self- employment despite acquisition of skills. The government is equipping people with skills but access to capital makes entrepreneurship programmes to be effective and sustainable” (Interview 17, 2019).

Basing on the above responses, the study established that, government programs are failing as a result of youths failing to access loans from banks due to the fact that they do not have collateral to repay the loans. The findings concur with Chimhenga and Mpfu (2016:10), who argues that, “most financial institutions in Zimbabwe are not providing bank loans schemes to the youths mainly for the reason that they do not have collateral that is required by the banks”. However, in enhancing the effectiveness of programmes on entrepreneurship, youth voiced on the need for access to loans than just acquiring skills to run their businesses.

4.3.4 Lack of Participation/ Involvement in the Making of the Programmes.

The study established that lack of participation or involvement in the making of government programmes was one of the reasons why existing programmes are failing to address youth unemployment. With reference to figure 1, of the 15 (15%) of the respondents who indicated that they are aware of government programmes, 2 indicated that they are involved in the programmes aimed at addressing unemployment. However, during interview sessions, most respondents indicated that lack of participation is a cause of government programme failure. Some respondents indicated that;

“Government programmes on unemployment are not know by the youths and if not known, participation in them becomes hard as people cannot participate in something they are not aware of” (Interview 4, 2019).

However, a total of 15 respondents from the questionnaires indicated that these programmes are to a lesser extent effective in addressing youth unemployment, hence lack of youth participation in making these programmes limits them from airing their views on how best unemployment can be addressed. The above findings concur with Dialoke, *et al.* (2017), cited in Ajulor (2018: 1497) who argue that “one of the challenges of policy implementation is the inability to involve the target beneficiaries in policy processes”. Also, Ajulor (2018:1498) states that “there is no doubt that Africa has severe challenges in implementing policies and programmes aimed at sustainable development such as its inability to ensure participation”.

4.3.5 Lack of Policy/ Programme Monitoring.

Lack of programme monitoring was voiced as another factor contributing to the ineffectiveness of government programmes aimed at addressing youth unemployment. However, during interview sessions, some respondents voiced that;

“After people are trained especially on entrepreneurship, there is no continuous assessment on whether the trained individuals have implemented the skills or not...” (Interview 12, 2019).

“I was once trained on being an entrepreneur, but I failed to access loans at banks due to lack of means of repaying back. I think the government should do follow ups after training individuals to assess whether their programmes are effective or not” (Interview 8, 2019).

“I was once employed as a post graduate trainee by the government but now I’m unemployed. I think the government has to do follow ups on whether their programme has an impact or not since now I feel I’m back from where I was before”. (Interview 14, 2019).

From the above responses, the study found out that, the sustainability and effectiveness of government programmes aimed at addressing unemployment are affected due to lack of continuous monitoring on the trained individuals especially entrepreneurs and post graduate trainees.

4.4 Solutions to Youth Unemployment

4.4.1 Establishment of Employment Opportunities.

The creation and promotion of employment opportunities was one of the solutions voiced by most respondents during the interview sessions. The study established that there should be the creation of new industries, investment in reviving the existing ones, development of the informal sector and the review of the retirement age. However, the above areas were considered to be crucial and to be taken seriously by the government if youth unemployment is going to be addressed. Some respondents argued that,

“...The government should first create an enabling policy environment which will be the base for the creation of new industries in the city. The government should invest in reviving companies such as National Railways of Zimbabwe, Dunlop and Zimbabwe Power Company which if revived have the capacity to employ a number of youths” (Interview 9, 2019)

“Ungakhangela abantu abasebenzela uHulumende, kugcwele abantu abadala bodwa, eminye imsebenzi ifuna thina abatsha esisalamandla. Kumele uhulumende eqhatshe abantu abatsha babe banengi ukuze sibe lekusasa elihle” (Interview 12, 2019). (If you look at people who work for the government, most of them are of old age, other jobs need us young people who still have the energy. The government must employ a number of young people so that they have a better tomorrow.)

From the above statements, it is clear that the government should create an environment which provides opportunities for employment. The resuscitation of big firms such as the (NRZ) which have the capacity to employ many people will create employment opportunities for the local youths. The creation of institutional structures vital in an economy, influence the accessibility of employment opportunities, and that government policy is vital in influencing the institutional structures in an economy (World Bank, 2013). Therefore, by investing in reviving big companies and employing more youths in the government institutions were options mostly voiced by respondents as enabling in the establishment of employment opportunities for the youth.

4.4.2 Promotion of Self- Employment

The need for promoting self- employment by the government through the acquisition of entrepreneurship skills and access to loans were also voiced as options to solving youth unemployment. However, respondents voiced that,

“.....The government should change the education system where entrepreneurship training is made mandatory even at university level. Also provide small loans to individuals who want to start businesses” (Interview 5, 2019)

“I’m sure the programmes have been there in Zimbabwe, but the problem is that the youth are not aware of them maybe because the government is not marketing them effectively to reach the wider population” (Interview 13, 2019)

“One of the major challenges we face as youths is failure to secure finance if we decide to start our own business ventures. Most financial institutions in Zimbabwe are not providing bank loans schemes to the youths mainly because the youths do not have collateral that is required by the banks” (Interview 2, 2019).

The above findings give an indication that promotion of self-employment through policy instruments such as a review on the education system, extensive marketing of loans and easy access of youth friendly micro-financing government loans can help address youth unemployment in the city of Bulawayo. However, this also involves government in financing youth businesses and enterprises, hence their engagement with microfinance institutions in providing loans and credit services at repayable rates affordable to the youths. The study established that of the 15% respondents who indicated that they are aware of government programmes, all of them stated that they were to a lesser extent effective in addressing youth unemployment. The World Bank (2013:18) also argue that, “in cases of a growing youth labour force, and the limited growth rate in the labour market, investments to expand the informal sector and inculcation of entrepreneurship spirit and skills in the youth labour force can be possible alternatives for expansion of labour demand”.

Therefore, the challenge identified in the study is failure to access finance by unemployed youths if they choose to start their personal business ventures. These findings concur with Chimhenga and Mpofu (2016:11), who argues that, “most financial institutions in Zimbabwe are not providing bank loans schemes to the youths mainly for the reason that they do not have collateral that is required by the banks”.

4.4.3 Ensuring Youth Access to Land

Access to agricultural land was also voiced by numerous youths as an alternative to addressing youth unemployment. Respondents highlighted that land should be easily accessed to the most productive and efficient young farmers. Through key interviews, respondents voiced that,

“...if I’m given land, it means I can have access to formal credit so that I can invest in it. Also, ownership of land is more sustainable than being given a formal job, thus, I can end up being an employer if I own land than seeking to be employed in the formal sector” (Interview 3, 2019)

“...the problem is that land is bought, and we do not have money and means to access loans. The government should make ease access to land for us by creating youth friendly financing schemes. With access to land we do not need to wait to be employed rather we employ ourselves and even employ others” (Interview 6, 2019).

From the above responses, the study established that, given agricultural land, youths will have no reason to wait to be employed, but rather they become self-employed and even go further in creating employment opportunities for others. Also, the respondents indicated the key aspect of sustainability of land than being employed. However, what is vital is that the government should make agriculture to be more attractive to the youths as some stated that;

“...the problem is that a number of female youths may not be attracted to agriculture, hence they still wait for formal employment which is not available at the moment” (Interview 8, 2019).

However, the above findings are in line with the argument raised by Bhebhe *et al.* (2015:5), stating that “local governments and farmers’ organizations should work on providing financial support programmes specifically directed to young farmers and to promote the work, creativity and innovative spirit of young people; for instance, organizing contests and rewarding best projects with funding”. Therefore, access to land was voiced as vital in employment creation by most of the respondents in the study

4.4.4 Promotion of Merit Based Recruitment.

Lack of social connections/ networks has been widely voiced by youths as being the reason why they are not searching for employment. However, the study established that, as part of solutions to youth unemployment, there is need for merit-based recruitment in the formal sector. Some respondents voiced that;

“There should be review of qualifications by external agencies. Many people who are employed I know do not have the required qualifications, hence the issue of nepotism is now on the rise given our current situation in the country” (Interview 15, 2019).

“It is painful to see an uneducated individual occupying the post which you should be in. Nepotism and corruption is a norm especially in government institutions, hence there is need to advocate for justice if we are to be employed” (Interview 17, 2019).

“The government should have a skills audit department and a database which consist of all unemployed youths, their qualifications and contact details which might help deploy unemployed youths according to their skills to correct economic zones if the opportunity arises” (Interview 12, 2019).

From the above responses, the reason for more unemployed educated youths emanates from lack of promotion of merit -based recruitment. However, most participants in the study indicated that if nepotism and corruption persist, the value of education in the country will diminish. Also, the need for the government to have a database of qualifications and contact details was considered as vital in that it helps to deploy people according to their skills to relevant economic zones, hence promoting merit-based recruitment. The above findings concur with Chimhenga and Mpofu (2016), who highlight that “lack of social capital or social networks has the potential to influence youth graduate’s inability to access the available jobs on the labour market”. Therefore, the promotion of merit- based recruitment was pointed out to be another solution to enhance youth employment.

V. Recommendations and Conclusion

- Ensure effective implementation of youth employment policies. This requires that sufficient financial resources be made available especially youth access to micro credit or loans after having acquired skills through government entrepreneurship programmes.
- Policy or programme monitoring can be effective if there is the establishment of one focal ministry responsible for youth issues rather than dividing youth issues across ministries.
- Design specific youth programs for particular vulnerable groups instead of a common standard policy targeting all youth groups.
- Reduce the cost of doing business for youths who run Medium and Small Enterprises (MSMEs) mainly for startups, by lowering borrowing interest rates and free start-up registration until the company cash flow is stable and the business is up and running.
- Increase investments in the resuscitation of high labour absorption sectors or companies such as (NRZ) in the transport sector, Dunlop in the manufacturing sector, Zimbabwe Power Company (ZPC) in the power sector.
- Effective implementation of policies which will create an economic environment which is conducive for businesses to thrive, employ more than retrench.
- Government should sensitize the youths on programmes aimed at addressing youth unemployment and promote access to such programmes.

- The government must establish an audit department of skills to increase equitable access to employment opportunities in all sectors of the economy by ensuring that employment in the country is based on merit rather than on nepotism and corruption.

VI. Conclusion

What clearly emerged in the study was that the situation of youth/ graduate unemployment is a 'ticking time bomb' which needs to be addressed before it is too late. However, the nation is still on the path of losing out from the energy, zeal and innovation skills which youths can contribute to the economy if they are given employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the study revealed that youth unemployment does not only affect the individual but the consequences trickle down to the nation as well. Therefore, in an attempt to deal with such consequences, the research managed to establish solutions or options from the unemployed youths on possible ways which the government can adopt in addressing the current crisis of youth unemployment. The views from the youths gathered from this study, however, can be used in making changes or additions to existing government policies or programmes which have not been effective, efficient and responsive in addressing youth/ graduate unemployment in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

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