

The GLOCEPS

Policy Brief

Research and Analysis in Development Pillar

Harnessing youth potential to bridge the unemployment and public discontent gaps in Kenya

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Photo credit: The Star

Introduction

The challenges of youth unemployment and public disaffection in Kenya are intertwined with the country's demographic trends. With a predominantly youthful population, this presents a long-term challenge that requires regular policy and programmatic action. Kenya's youthful population, primarily consisting of Gen Z and millennials, is traditionally faced with the problem of unemployment. However, this has morphed over time manifesting itself in the breakdown of social fabric, unrest, and discontent with government. This situation represents a significant shift from political actors previously leveraging the unemployment conundrum for election to being demanded by the youth to provide actionable solutions.

Despite the stated difficulties, young Kenyans are developing innovative solutions for their well-being. Once they join the job market, they leverage technology and social media to launch and advance their entrepreneurial endeavors. The entrepreneurial trend is based on the unique perspectives held by the youth, who view traditional career paths of formal employment as restrictive and unrewarding. Policymakers should be cognizant of these realities when addressing the youth unemployment question, and the prevailing challenge of public discontent.

The advent of the June 2024 protests, which were largely led by the youth, indicate a critical junction on



how unemployment and displeasure with current economic and governance priorities are burdening the nation. Most of the protest participants included young educated professionals from diverse fields such as law, engineering, education, and medicine. While this demonstrated the high level of education and exposure among Kenyan youth, it is imperative to note that this youthful demographic was previously missing in front-line protests against legislation and undertakings of the state. They represent a significant departure from previous protest participants, who were predominantly from impoverished backgrounds and urban slums.

The protests have equally illustrated the technological sophistication and proficiency among a vast majority of Kenyan youth. They leveraged the technological skills that they typically use in their e-commerce and entrepreneurial endeavors to organize and mobilize movements and resources for the protests effectively. There is a marked departure from traditional reliance on intermediaries such as politicians and mainstream media. Social media platforms played a central role in supporting and coordinating action. This level of adaptation shows the transcending power of digital connectivity from entrepreneurship to public participation and agitation for public sector accountability.

Moreover, there is a growing recognition among Kenyan youth that digital platforms limit traditional



Photo Credit: Twitter

government responses to responses. Switching off the internet to curb unrest, is a double-edged sword as it inhibits commercial undertaking. Likewise, it inhibits tax and fee collection measures. Government platform like e-citizen, and the payment of public utilities like water, electricity, and government services are digitalized and thus dependent on a stable and secure internet system.

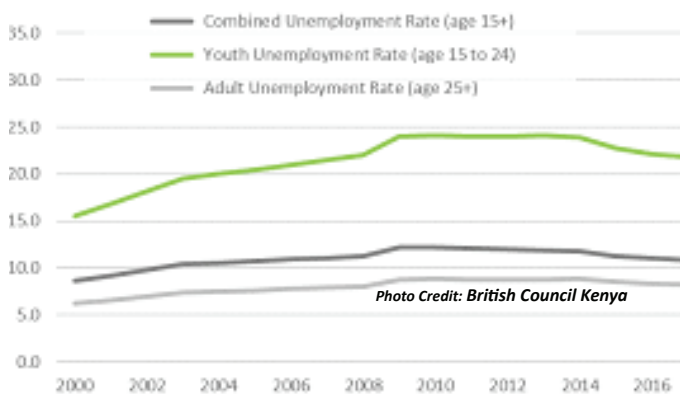
In this regard, policy measures to address youth unemployment and public discontent are intertwined with the smooth operation of the public sector and governance structures. Policymakers should leverage the youth's high level of literacy and technological proficiency to undertake policies and programs that mutually address the unemployment challenge while driving the country's social and economic development. While it is imperative to prioritize inclusive policies on the economic, entrepreneurial, and technological fronts, the voices and ideas of the youth should be mainstreamed in these processes. This will enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of government actions and programs. Equally, it will propel the youth to make meaningful and impactful economic contributions. Promoting a conducive environment for entrepreneurship will aid in mitigating the challenge of unemployment.

Moreover, policies and programs should promote social inclusion, address economic disparities, and prioritize environmental stability. Given their strong sense of environmental, social, and political responsibility, youth are likely to support and champion initiatives that are aligned with their values.

This section highlights the key issues in bridging the gap between youth, unemployment, and public discontent. The paper identifies that this complex situation is influenced by Kenya's youthful dynamics,



, the unemployment-governance nexus, youthful entrepreneurship capabilities, and information dissemination realities. The understanding of these components remains integral in unmasking the extant situation and formulation of requisite policies and programs.



Demographic dynamics

In June 2024, Kenya faced unprecedented protests driven by Generation Z. The country's youthful populations are also central in policy discourses around unemployment, entrepreneurship, and job creation. In the ensuing protests, their roles have transitioned into policy, governance, and legislative conversations. An in-depth dissection of Kenya's demographics illustrates that this segment forms the core of the population. Kenyan youths include millennials (1981-1996), Generation Z (1997-2012), and Generation Alpha (2013-2025).

Save for Gen Alpha, Kenyan youth are predominantly of voting age but rarely feel compelled to exercise their electoral obligations. In 2021, it was estimated that over 8 million youth aged 18-24 years were eligible to vote in the 2022 general election. They represented the single largest voting bloc at 28%. However by May 2022 when the voter registration ended, the Independent Election and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) reported that under 2.3 million Kenya's aged 18-24 had registered to vote. In the August 2022 election, it was estimated less than 10% of votes were from this cohort.

However, the post-2022 political and economic environment has resulted in the younger generation exercising their considerable influence in economic, social, and political spaces. The young generation, particularly Gen Z, is leveraging their technological adeptness, open-mindedness, and pragmatism to strongly exercise their social and political responsibility. These occurrences are reinforced by the fact that Gen Z predominantly grew up in the age of rapid technological advancement, economic instability, and a global pandemic. Thus, they are aware and adaptable to pressing impediments, including climate change, political representation, and social justice.

Additionally, Gen Z is leveraging their capabilities to extend their cross-country influence, attracting endorsements and solidarity from fellow younger constituents and organizations. For instance, Ugandan opposition leader, Bobi Wine and South Africa's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) expressed support with their younger counterpart during the protests. Similar platforms are used to raise awareness on or communicate condemnation of police brutality, international media houses, human rights organizations and international organizations, and leaders in the Global North.

Gen Z is particularly skeptical of the political establishment, often viewing it as corrupt and self-serving. Moreover, they are distrustful of programs by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This is deeply rooted in the historical experiences of their parents with the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to reduced access to essential services and increased poverty. This historical awareness drives their demand for transparency and better governance. Overall, cross-border solidarity underscores the capabilities of Kenya's youth to inspire and connect with broader movements across



the continent, highlighting their role as catalysts for global economic and political change and development.

Likewise, the younger cohorts often transcend ethnic and tribal affiliations that have historically been exploited by the political class to divide the Kenyan populace. The youth often emphasize common goals and shared values over narrow and divisive identities, thus fostering a sense of unity and forward-thinking. This demographic focus on collective action and societal progress presents both opportunities and challenges for Kenya's political landscape.

According to 2024 UNFPA estimations, a significant proportion of the population falls within the younger age brackets. Specifically, individuals aged 0-14 years make up 37% of the population while adolescents constitute 33%. The reproductive age (15-64 years) represents 69% of the population. Collectively, this group portends not only current but also future economic, social, and political contests and prospects.

The 2024 protest mirrors unemployment dynamics encumbering the country. Notably, the active participation of young professionals from diverse fields highlights the high education and exposure levels of Kenyan youth. This marks a departure from customary political rally participants to a more diverse, tribe-less, and skilled protest demographic. Traditionally, most participants were drawn from poor backgrounds and urban informal settlements.

Policy action and programs to address the concerns of Kenya's youthful population should integrate their unique characteristics and needs. With high literacy rates and a tech-savvy nature, the youth possess significant potential and skills

that can be harnessed for economic and social development. Investing in inclusive technological policies and projects can empower this generation to contribute meaningfully to the economy. Additionally, creating conducive conditions and resources for entrepreneurship can help alleviate unemployment and underemployment among the youth.

Moreover, policies that promote social inclusion, address economic inequalities and impediments, and mainstream environmental sustainability are crucial. Given their strong sense and understanding of social and political responsibility, youth are likely to support and drive initiatives that align with these values. Engaging young people in the policymaking process and ensuring their voices are heard and included can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of government actions and programs.



Unemployment-Governance Nexus

Kenya's legislative and policy landscape is facing a reckoning driven by a politically awakened youthful population, particularly Gen Z. The rejection of the 2024 Finance Bill is a focal point for broader concerns over youth unemployment and governance. The emerging political consciousness illustrates the link of economic disenfranchisement with governance and legislative



legislative issues.

Historically, political participation among Kenyan youth has been low. This has been due to various factors like voting processes not aligning with their values, a lack of faith in electoral outcomes, underrepresentation in politics, a limited pool of recurring candidates, tribal-based politics, and a perception that their votes do not count. Collectively, these factors have contributed to the disengagement of Kenyan youth, which has often been interpreted as a limited interest or understanding of political processes and impacts. However, the protests indicate that a shift in future electoral and governance cycles is in the offing. Young people are increasingly recognizing that their current challenges are intertwined with political and governance dynamics. This reality is driving their current active involvement.

The 2024 occurrences are not only a protest against the Finance Bill but other punitive legislations in the pipeline that are deemed to encumber youth entrepreneurship and well-being. These include the proposed anti-people amendments in the Lands Act and the Data Protection Act. Additionally, conversations rooting for the withdrawal and amendment of the Seed and Plants Varieties Act Cap 326 of 2012, Livestock Bill of 2023, and Irish Potatoes Regulation of 2019 have emerged.

Moreover, the conversations around the Appropriations Act have been rife. The Act forms the basis for authorizing the expenditure of tax shillings. Government priorities as illustrated by budgetary allocation have raised stiff opposition. For instance, increased allocations to the Executive and the Legislative arms of government for travel, vehicles, and renovations, in addition to funds to unelected offices while

reducing or eliminating allocations to the provision of public goods and services are a consistent part of Gen Z conversations. Youth are cognizant that the proposed legislative changes, government revenue raising, and allocation measures will be detrimental to their future and economic well-being. As such, they are using the social media to disseminate this information and contestations.

Youth-led protests highlight their advocacy for fair dealing in the country's economic ecosystem. Centrally, youth are fronting for an equitable system that enables them to develop and transact their skills for meaningful financial and social compensation. This situation is not unique to Kenya but resonates with global undertakings like Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and the protests that led to the ousting of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in 2019. These parallels underscore a shared disillusionment with current economic and political systems which consistently fail to deliver public goods and economic opportunities at the pace expected by the young population.

Youth, particularly Gen Z are particularly skeptical of political power and Western influences in the budgeting process and delivery of public goods and services. They are increasingly opposed to political systems and legislation that are deemed



Photo Credit: Nairobi Leo



detrimental to their lives. For instance, they opine that dismantling the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) and replacing it with an expensive and complex Social Health Insurance Fund (SHIF) will impede access to healthcare. Similarly, increases in public university tuition fees are viewed as unfair, especially considering that the older generation benefited from heavily subsidized tertiary education.

Kenya's youth-led protests highlight the critical nexus between youth unemployment and governance. The rising political consciousness among Gen Z is a call for systemic change to address their economic and social disenfranchisement. By recognizing the interconnect-edness of their challenges and the reality of becoming active participants in the political process, Kenya's youth are appealing for a more equitable and accountable future.

Youth's entrepreneurial capabilities

Gen Z in Kenya, like their global counterparts, are unenthusiastic about traditional corporate jobs and are drawn to entrepreneurship. Their entrepreneurial spirit is driven by a desire for independence, self-expression, and the flexibility to work on their terms. This generation's adaptability and quick learning capabilities are essential traits in the dynamic world of free enterprise and self-employment. They are adept at leveraging digital platforms to create innovative solutions that address market gaps.

The dissatisfaction witnessed during the youth-led protests is rooted in Kenya's political and economic realities. High unemployment rates and economic instability have left many young people disillusioned with traditional career paths. Global research indicates that nearly 90% of Gen Z

believe that they cannot rely on old strategies to build their careers and well-being. In Kenya, the allure of entrepreneurship is further amplified by the failure of both the corporate and public sectors to provide adequate employment opportunities.

It is important to note that Gen Z are not only driven by financial motives but a desire to create meaningful change. They embrace sustainability and social impact and thus endeavor that their entrepreneurial ventures align with broader societal goals. Their engagement in the creator economy exemplifies their innovative approach. Moreover, an increasing number of Gen Z creators in Kenya earn revenue through creative content and social media. This highlights their ability to monetize their skills in non-traditional ways. Resultantly, this shift is reshaping how businesses operate, with many upcoming entrepreneurial endeavors moving away from corporate hierarchies to more fluid and dynamic business models.

Harnessing the potential of Kenya's entrepreneurial youth necessitates that policies should focus on creating enabling environments for startups and small businesses. This includes the reduction in bureaucratic hurdles, providing access to affordable credit, and offering training and mentorship programs that are tailored to the needs and realities of young entrepreneurs.



Photo Credit: Kenya News Agency



Additionally, integrating digital literacy and entrepreneurial skills into the education system can prepare the next generation to thrive in a rapidly changing local and global economic landscape.

The youth unemployment and public dissatisfaction nexus in Kenya necessitates a comprehensive policy and program response that supports the entrepreneurial ambitions of Gen Z. By fostering an environment conducive to innovation and addressing the broader economic and governance challenges, Kenya will be better positioned to harness the potential of its youth to drive economic development and social progress. The 2024 protests highlight this urgency, thus the call for immediate and sustained action that incorporates the aspirations and realities of Kenyan youth.



Photo Credit: globalgiving.org

Information Dissemination

The information dissemination dynamics among Kenyan youth are crucial in understanding the intersection between youth unemployment and public dissatisfaction. They are reshaping how information is consumed and shared.

Unlike the preceding generations, Gen Z does not rely on mainstream media for information. They are digital citizens and are accustomed to real-time updates and interactions on social media platforms like Twitter (X), TikTok, and Instagram.

This shift has transformed them into both consumers and creators of digital content, allowing them to set agendas and drive public discourses. They equally leverage the power of social media to mobilize youth and amplify their dissatisfaction with governance and economic policies. The youth's reliance on social media for information dissemination has democratized the flow of information, making it more participatory and speedy.

The economic realities facing Kenyan youth are a significant driver of their public dissatisfaction. High formal unemployment rates and underemployment are persistent issues, exacerbated by a lack of opportunities in the formal job market. While the informal sector employs a significant portion of the youth, it is often overlooked in employment statistics. The sector is characterized by low wages, job insecurity, and poor working conditions, contributing to the overall economic discontent among the youth.

Likewise, Kenyan youth are acutely aware of the long-term impact of political decisions on their future. Legislations and policies have been scrutinized heavily on social media, reflecting the youth's demand for accountability and better governance. Digital engagements ensure that political leaders cannot easily ignore the



Photo Credit: Rappler



voices of the youth, and thus address their concerns transparently and effectively. As the youthful generation continues to influence public discourse and policy, their impact on Kenya's future will be profound and transformative.

Conclusion

Addressing Kenya's youth unemployment and public dissatisfaction concerns requires a long-term and participatory approach that integrates their unique characteristics and capabilities. Kenya's youthful demographics coupled with their technological adeptness and a strong sense of social and political responsibility, remain a key driver in the country's socio-economic landscape. The high unemployment rates will continually fuel social unrest. This underscores the need for proactive and adaptive policies that promote meaningful engagement, including entrepreneurship and innovation. Leveraging their digital proficiency, young Kenyans are not only creating new economic opportunities, they are holding public servants

accountable while challenging traditional narratives. The Gen Z-led protests highlighted the power of digital connectivity in governance, emphasizing the importance of inclusive and forward-thinking policies for the predominantly youthful Kenya. By fostering an environment conducive to entrepreneurship and mainstreaming the active participation of youth in policy-making processes, Kenya can harness the potential of its young population to drive economic growth and public sector accountability. Addressing their concerns transparently and effectively will be central to advancing a more equitable and inclusive future for the country.



Recommendations

1. The National Treasury and National Assembly to revise and update policy frameworks including the Finance Bill and other economic policies like the National Tax Policy to support predictable taxation, and promote entrepreneurship and investment in gig and creator economy jobs.
2. The Ministry of Youth Affairs, Creative Economy and Sports to strengthen public-private collaborations to create job opportunities, including the establishment of entrepreneurship mentorship and training hubs.
3. Encourage government ministries, departments, and agencies to engage youth on social media platforms like X Spaces for transparency and feedback.
4. Ministry of Information, Communication, and Digital Economy to invest in digital literacy programs and inclusive legislation for comprehensive digital skills training in schools and tertiary institutions.
5. Mainstream youth involvement in policymaking and legislative processes through the establishment of platforms for meaningful youth participation.





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