



# investing in Africa's youth: a 21st century opportunity

Writer: Lee Middleton

## CONTACT

Ntombini Marrengane  
African Centre for Cities  
Environmental & Geographical Science Building  
Upper Campus, University of Cape Town  
Pvt Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701,  
Cape Town, South Africa

Tel: +27 (0)21 650 2881

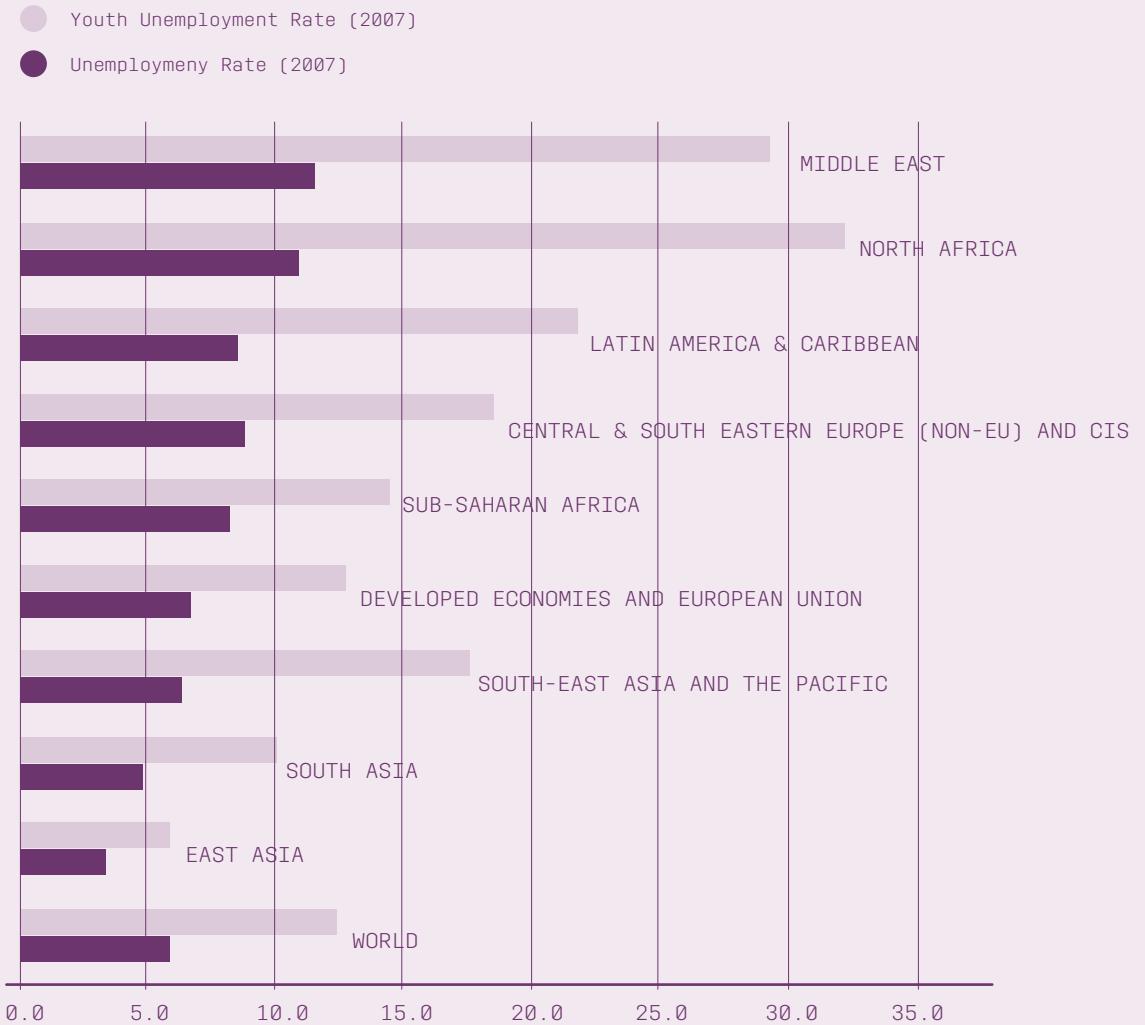
Email: ntombini.marrengane@uct.ac.za  
Web: www.urbanafrika.net/auri

## POLICY BRIEF

AFRICAN  
URBAN  
RESEARCH  
INITIATIVE

Initiative Africaine de Recherche Urbaine

**HOW CAN AFRICAN  
CITIES MAXIMISE  
THE USE OF  
THE CONTINENT'S  
MASSIVE AND RAPIDLY  
GROWING POPULATION  
OF YOUNG PEOPLE  
LIVING IN  
CITIES?**



### YOUTH AND UNEMPLOYMENT (WORLD & REGION)

FIGURES ARE PRELIMINARY ESTIMATES

SOURCE: ILO, Global Employment Trends Model, November 2007

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nearly one in three people in sub-Saharan Africa is between the ages of 10 and 24<sup>1</sup>, presenting an unprecedented opportunity for the continent's development. A lack of skills and formal job opportunities means that the overwhelming majority of this huge, mainly urban<sup>2</sup>, population will live and work in the informal sector, where they are excluded from many resources and opportunities.

Addressing the challenges of systemic inequity and unequal access to public services, including education, health and finance, is needed before Africa's youth can contribute to the continent's economic growth and social development.

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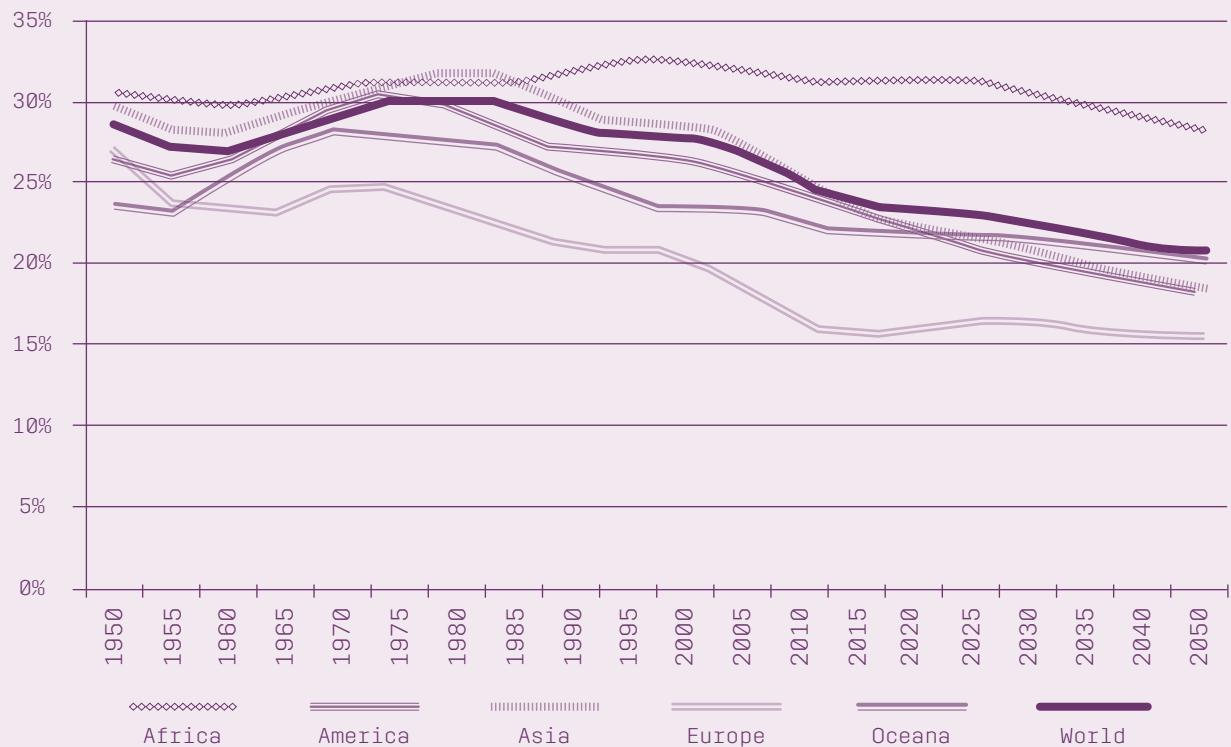
## RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy reform is needed in the following areas:

- Relevant and appropriate education, skills and training. Encouraging learners to complete school; providing lifetime learning, vocational skills training and “soft skills” to create livelihoods in real urban economies; developing apprenticeship or mentorship structures that provide training in real work environments; and ensuring young work seekers are aware of job opportunities.
- Equal access to urban prosperity so youth can realise citizenship. Ensuring that the building blocks of social inclusion are in place, such as good governance, accountability and systems that include rather than exclude youth. Equal access to the benefits of urban prosperity, including education, jobs and healthcare, is essential. Other requirements include access to finance, workspace, communications and mobility.
- Inclusion and participation in public life. Supporting civil society networks aimed at youth; developing programmes according to priorities identified by non-elite youth; involving youth directly in the city’s cultural and political life, including development planning; and advocating for youth empowerment.

<sup>1</sup> International Conference on Population and Development 2014

<sup>2</sup> UN-Habitat 2013: xii



**TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS IN THE PROPORTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE  
(10-24 YEARS), WORLDWIDE AND BY REGION,  
1950-2050 (MEDIUM FERTILITY VARIANT)**

<sup>3</sup> International Conference on Population and Development 2014

<sup>4</sup> Sommers 2010: 321

<sup>5</sup>UN-Habitat 2013: xii

<sup>6</sup>Sommers 2010: 318

<sup>7</sup>United Nations Population Fund 2007, cited by Sommers 2010: 319

<sup>8</sup> Sommers 2010: 323

<sup>9</sup> UN-Habitat 2013b: 12

<sup>10</sup> Sommers 2010: 322

<sup>11</sup> African Development Bank 2013; ILO 2002: 16

<sup>12</sup> Sommers 2010: 322

<sup>13</sup> Sommers 2010: 328-329

<sup>14</sup> UN-Habitat 2013: 1

# A MARGINALISED MAJORITY

Nearly one in three people in sub-Saharan Africa is between the ages of 10 and 24<sup>3</sup>, making the region home to the world's youngest and fastest-growing population – a trend that is only expected to peak in 2030<sup>4</sup>. This growing and untapped resource will have an unprecedented effect on Africa's development.

African youth are increasingly urbanised<sup>5</sup>. Like young people everywhere, they migrate to cities in search of opportunities<sup>6</sup>. For the majority, the reality is a life in the informal settlements that dominate urban growth in the developing world<sup>7</sup>. Between 7 million and 10 million young Africans enter the labour force each year, but the majority lack the qualifications or skills needed to find jobs in the formal sector and the sector<sup>8</sup> itself cannot begin to absorb their numbers. Young women in particular are marginalised in this market<sup>9</sup>.

The overwhelming majority of young people end up in the informal sector<sup>10</sup>, where 90% of new jobs in sub-Saharan Africa occur<sup>11</sup>. Such work is characterised by low productivity, low income and lack of labour protection<sup>12</sup>. Lacking full (and often legal) employment, young Africans are unable to support themselves<sup>13</sup>. This struggle is systemic, occurring in the context of extreme inequity and compounded by the lack of equal opportunity to access formal employment<sup>14</sup> – a circumstance that UN-Habitat calls “the greatest challenge faced by urban youth in the early 21st century”.



## AFRICA'S DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

Africa's large youth population and decreasing fertility and mortality rates may result in the continent's workforce becoming much larger than its dependent population. This can free up resources for economic development and increase per capita spending on higher-quality education and health services, increasing economic growth and expanding capabilities. East Asia's annual income per capita more than quadrupled between 1965 and 1995, and up to half of this increase was attributed to its youth dividend.

In the 1970s, East Asia and Africa's fertility rates were similar. But while Asia's rates plummeted, the decline has been slow in Africa. However, the demographic ratio has recently tipped, and Africa is on the cusp of realising its own dividend. If governments make the right human capital investments and adopt policies that expand opportunities for young people, the region's combined demographic dividend is estimated at about \$500 billion a year – or a third of the region's current GDP – for up to 30 years. The dividend could be even greater if fertility rates fall faster and governments increase their investment in young people.

Based on the East Asian experience, key investment areas include preventative public healthcare; universal access to primary education and high coverage of secondary schooling; vocational training; facilitation of school-to-work transitions; gender equality and promotion of reproductive rights; and generally improved employment and living standards for broad sections of the population<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> UN-Habitat 2013: 41

<sup>20</sup> UN-Habitat 2013: 41

<sup>21</sup> Sommers 2010: 329;  
United Nations Population Fund 2014

<sup>22</sup> UN-Habitat 2013: 38-41

<sup>23</sup> UN-Habitat 2013

<sup>24</sup> Sommers 2010: 329

<sup>25</sup> UN-Habitat 2013: 41

<sup>26</sup> UN-Habitat 2014: 39

<sup>27</sup> UN-Habitat 2013b: 26-28

<sup>28</sup> Sommers 2010: 324-325

<sup>29</sup> UN-Habitat 2013: 38

<sup>30</sup> Sommers 2010: 329

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> UN-Habitat 2014: 39

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Sommers 2010: 329

<sup>35</sup> UN-Habitat 2013: 42

<sup>36</sup> Sommers 2010

<sup>37</sup> UN-Habitat 2013: 41

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> UN-Habitat 2014: 39

## **EDUCATED, EQUAL AND INVOLVED: EMPOWERING AFRICA'S URBAN YOUTH**

To promote Africa's youth productivity and stability over the next two decades, the following three areas are crucial.

### **Education and skills**

Formal education is critical to ensuring equal opportunity and access to jobs<sup>16</sup>. In addition, African cities need to actively empower young people with the skills needed by local economies, including informal markets. Literacy, numeracy and vocational training, including entrepreneurial business skills, are all important<sup>17</sup>. “Soft skills” like communications, teamwork and adaptability are an important part of employment in the service sector, which is expanding in urban areas<sup>18</sup>.

To ensure that education leads to employment, the quality and content of education should prepare youth for the job market, and youth should have knowledge of opportunities in that market. Other possible solutions include connecting education with real work experience through apprenticeships and

mentoring, supporting tax incentives for vocational training schemes, and creating labour market regulations that ensure a more equitable market<sup>19</sup>. Developing programmes that support young informal entrepreneurs to expand in a more “formal” manner, and foster pride in such entrepreneurial activities, is also important. Many local authorities have limited involvement in education and training, but can support other spheres of government by providing incentives for the absorption of youth into urban economies. It is important that all efforts to address this challenge identify how different sectors can integrate and complement efforts<sup>20</sup>.

Improving education will have little effect without an improvement in health. Ensuring health and protection that addresses threats specific to this population’s productivity, especially preventative care, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, and sexual and domestic violence, is imperative for human development<sup>21</sup>.

## **Equal access to urban prosperity**

Creating opportunities for Africa's urban youth begins with establishing the building blocks of social inclusion: governance, accountability and systems that include urban youth. Although education and skills are essential, on their own they cannot overcome systemic inequalities such as unequal access to educational opportunities, jobs, transport, housing and medical care<sup>22</sup>.

To ensure Africa's youth have equal access to the fundamental benefits of urban prosperity, corruption must be eliminated and the transparency and accountability of government systems needs to improve<sup>23</sup>.

At the same time, policies that prevent young people from fully entering adulthood, such as criminalising informal economies and restricting access to land and housing, should be reformed<sup>24</sup>.

Skills and transparent systems alone will not create jobs - additional mechanisms such as access to credit, tools, markets, and workspace and/or land<sup>25</sup> are also important. Infrastructure must also be considered: urban youth need mobility to access opportunities beyond their immediate neighbourhoods. For example, reduced fares on public transport could be hugely beneficial<sup>26</sup>. Information and communication technology also improves mobility and provides access to social services and employment<sup>27</sup>.

## GIVING YOUTH A VOICE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media platforms are giving youth a voice and improving their sense of citizenship. For example, youth in Luanda, Angola, used their smartphones to launch a social media public-health campaign against garbage (see <http://cacuaco.forum.angonet.org/campanha-selfie-lixo/>). Another example of social media activism is the website [www.africanslumjournal.com](http://africanslumjournal.com), which produces video journalism by and about young slum dwellers concerning the issues they face.

## Inclusion In Civil Society

The disconnect between the vast proportion of urban youth on the margins of society and the “mainstream” of educated and employed elites is growing dangerously wide, with potentially devastating consequences for young people’s access to services, jobs and social acceptance<sup>28</sup>. Urban youth who

are marginalised politically, economically and socially need representation in the mainstream through urban development agencies<sup>29</sup> or civil society leaders<sup>30</sup>.

Marginalised youth need to feel invested in and responsible for the cities in which they live<sup>31</sup>. This sense of belonging and ownership can be fostered through civil society organisations involved in urban development planning<sup>32</sup>, extracurricular activities, sport and creative programmes that encourage dialogue<sup>33</sup>. Using feedback from such platforms, urban policymakers can design programmes according to youth-identified priorities<sup>34</sup>.

Developing youth citizenship is an important part of including young people in African cities, but government cannot do this alone. The scale and scope of the task requires all urban players to work together, with government acting as a catalysing, coordinating and regulating force<sup>35</sup>.

## WHY REVERSE MIGRATION IS NOT THE ANSWER



Until very recently, Africa’s development policy has focused overwhelmingly on rural areas. Even now, solutions to problems associated with urbanisation continue to focus on rural areas to prevent urban migration or reverse migration policies that push urbanites back to the countryside. However, these policies generally fail to stop or reverse urban migration. Despite the lack of formal opportunities in cities, few of the young people who move to Africa’s cities will ever return to their rural homes. Efforts should instead focus on capturing the optimism and energy of the African youth who migrate to cities<sup>36</sup>.

# CONCLUSION

Africa's growing youth population can contribute to the continent's development, but only if the benefits of prosperity are shared with them. Due to the vast youth population, isolated programmes will not be effective. Instead, policy reform is needed to drive the principles of equitable access to urban resources and opportunities for meaningful participation in city life. This includes employment and health services, as well as inclusion in the processes and institutions that direct urban development<sup>37</sup>.

Excluding young people from broader society and affecting their ability to meet their basic needs carry serious risks of social destabilisation. The youth-driven protests of the Arab Spring, for example, were catalysed by the tragic suicide of desperate and frustrated 26-year-old informal trader Mohamed Bouazizi in 2010<sup>38</sup>.

Educated, employed, invested and included African youth could drive sustainable long-term development, while providing an emerging urban consumer market with both regional and global relevance<sup>40</sup>.

## SUPPORTING INFORMAL ENTREPRENEURS

Daniel Mutua, 26, is founder and CEO of Next Level Events, an informal events business in Nairobi, Kenya. Although

Mutua sometimes operates in formal spaces such as corporate parties, the fact that his business is not subject to formal regulations and bureaucracy has helped it flourish.

A thriving informal sector is key to young people's livelihoods in Nairobi. About 800 000 young Kenyans are coming of age every year, but only 50 000 new formal sector jobs are created. The proportion of Kenyan workers employed formally has dropped from 13% in the early 1970s to 9% today – a trend that will continue to require more young Kenyans to make their own way.→

## REFERENCES

→ But not everyone is a natural entrepreneur. Young informal business owners need help to succeed. The Youth Enterprise Development Fund is a government programme offering training, seed funding and low-interest loans to young people launching their own small and medium-sized businesses. Mutua has received several loans from the fund since it started in 2006.

However, Mutua secured his first loan from a bank, which indicates that he may have prospered without the help of the Youth Enterprise Development Fund. This points to the major criticism of programmes like this one, which often engage youth who already have the confidence and skills (fluent in English and with the ability to apply for a bank loan) to succeed.

Programmes such as Youth Employment for Sustainable Development are trying to fill this gap. The programme trains unskilled young people to build roads. It provides jobs while upgrading infrastructure, but it also goes beyond skills transfer and temporary employment. Youth Employment for Sustainable Development also provides entrepreneurship training to ensure that it creates contractors, not just casual labourers.

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