

A DISCOURSE ON MIGRATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICA

**Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, Mike Boni Bazza
And Immaculata Olu, Omojola**

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of labour migration-mobility related provisions and unemployment as it affects the African continent and African Union rules on the free movement of workers. Considering the fact that the vision of a united Africa has been part and parcel of the pan-African narrative for decades, it systematically addresses Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to the Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment as contained in AU Free Movement Protocol adopted in 2018. The paper gives a particular focus on the youth of Africa and the unemployment question, social cohesion and political instability. The paper further poses the following two questions. First, does intra-African Union labour migration correlate with employment/unemployment rates in host or home member states during periods of unsettled growth? Second, how have member states reacted in terms of restricting or allowing access to their labour markets by African Union workers during the transitional periods? The discourse concludes on the premise that some groups, such as young immigrants, women or older immigrants have greater difficulties in finding jobs.

Keywords: Migration, Unemployment, Africa, Social Cohesion, Political Instability

Introduction

The history of insecurity in Africa is perhaps the reason for high youth unemployment which consequently account for the numerous situations of instability on the continent. This ranges from the conflicts that characterized Africa's security narrative especially since the 1990s. Examples are many: such as, mass killing in the Great Lake region and other parts of Africa in the same period; contemporary jihadist revivalism manifesting through the activities of AQIM in the Sahel, Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria, and Al-Sahbaab in the Horn of Africa. As a result, the fact that unemployed youth are not only victims but also active participants of political instability in Africa is not new. There is however, a fundamental challenge in adequately establishing the link between unemployment trends and the role of youth in political instability everywhere and in Africa in particular, with any certainty. Despite anecdotal evidence therefore, there are still questions as to why the same levels of unemployment in any two given contexts on the continent are not necessarily a determinant of instability, and if at all, of equal proportions and dynamics. Consequently, despite the popular involvement of unemployed

youth in political instability and the subsequent international commitment to find lasting solutions to the phenomenon, there is still inadequate appreciation of the fact that worsening unemployment trends among the youth of any African country represents as danger signal for political instability and insecurity. In appreciating the involvement of youth in conflicts and political instability, therefore, the youth unemployment question must be addressed and adequately prioritized as a key component of poverty alleviation efforts in national and global policy making. This commentary explores two questions in attempting to contribute to an understanding of the complex connections among the many intervening variables that determine unemployment in any given African context and the propensity for political instability. The first question touches on the relationship between unemployment in Africa and social cohesion. It also explores how worsening unemployment increases a country's predisposition to political instability.

Definition

Unemployment, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is when persons above a specified age are not in paid employment or self-employment and are currently available for work during the reference period. In accordance with the International Labour Organization (ILO) standards, unemployed persons consist of those persons who report that they are without work during the reference period, that they are available for work and that they have taken active steps to find work (OECD Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2015. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/factbook-2015-8-en>).

Youth Unemployment

Compared to other parts of the world, Africa remains a relatively young continent where the median age is about 19 years and is only expected to reach about 25 years in 2046. As such, young people will continue to constitute about half of the population of most countries on the continent in the next three to five decades. Notwithstanding, young people on the continent are the most adversely affected by unemployment. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) global employment trends report of 2014, for instance, the average youth unemployment is currently about 11.8% against a regional total of 7.7% and an average of 6.0% for adults. Despite projections of marginal improvements for young people, of up to 11.7% by 2018, youth unemployment in the country is still expected to be much higher than the projected total regional average of 7.5% and 6.0% for adults (ILO, 2014: Global Employment Trends).

Resource Distribution

Within the realities of Africa, these statistics represent an undercurrent of systematic marginalization and neglect of young people at many levels of governance and development policies. The rate of unemployment among young people therefore, points to the broader lack of equitable distribution of resources and marginalization within the context of complex horizontal and vertical inequalities in African countries.

Even where an appreciable number of employment opportunities exist, these are often outpaced by the youth population. Quality of employment among young people is usually as the employment rate in comparison with adult employment rates. High levels of poverty thus exist among young Africans even though most need to support their families and work for survival. Consequently, the percentage of working poor in sub-Saharan Africa is higher among people. According to ILO, "Given the high poverty levels and high share of vulnerable employment, youth employment in Sub-Saharan Africa is as much a qualitative as a quantitative problem" (ILO, 2013: Global Employment Trends for Youth).

Social Cohesion

The result is immense pressure on unemployed young people to survive by demonstrating relevance of social inclusion against a backdrop of dwindling opportunities, corruption and fast-pace trend towards modernization. Meanwhile, social inclusion is challenged and threatened by lavish materialization and the rising individualism of conservative African societies. Social constructs are thus altered in many ways as the relevance of social structures and the state are questioned in the desperate quest for survival in the midst of crushing dynamic demographic stresses, such as rapid urban population growth, increasing numbers of young people and diminishing resources, particularly land.

In some countries, this has led to high rate of disaffected youth whose perceptions of the future are bleak. In others, the associated strive for opportunities in urban areas has led to the ruralization of urban spaces through the rapid expansion of urban and sub-urban slums in places such as Babadogo/Korogocho, Kibera, and Mathare Valley in Nairobi; Sodom and Gomorrah in Accra; Makoko in Lagos, and the many other slums dotted around the cities of Africa. Apart from the challenge to governance, such settlements easily become a haven for social vices and no-go areas for law enforcement.

The Nexus between Unemployment and Political Instability

In this context, we would attempt to explain the intervening variables, this is because many African countries have had to grapple with double desperadoes, namely, unemployed young people who are both (a) desperate for

opportunities that promise a better life and so are (b) vulnerable to recruitment by individuals and groups who promise such deliverables. Together with other social realities, vulnerable youth populations have become easy recruits for crime, rebel militias, political gangs, and extremists' networks.

Two factors explain this: First, in their quest for access to the centre of the state where resources, power and privileges exist, many have fallen prey to patronizing networks that usually operate to support political elites and economic heavyweights. Many are easily swayed into becoming foot soldiers for the local activists who manipulate them into undermining political process, as became evident in 2007/8 post elections violence in Kenya and the 2011 post-elections crises in Nigeria.

The second factor is that for many double desperadoes, participation in any rebellion most generally emerges from the juxtaposition of what can be potentially lost and what is to be gained. Given the fact that such young people have nothing to lose, the cost of their recruitment into conflict is low (Collier, P. 2003), thereby increasing their propensity to contribute to political instability, collective violence, crime and conflict. In many African communities, double desperadoes will not lose any substantial material benefit should a civil unrest or conflict break out (Braungart, R. G., 1984). Rather, the breakdown of the rule of law and the chaos associated with conflict present criminal elements with an opportunity to support themselves by looting, robbing and even the excessive exploitation of natural resources in collusion with transnational organized criminals.

During the complex political emergencies that characterized West Africa in the 1990s (in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire) conflicts, the mix of these factors made it easy for warlords to exploit unemployed young people as soldiers in the theater of war. Young people promised about 95% of the fighting forces and were mostly recruited from the gang networks made up of young adult desperadoes in the many slum communities (Mastny, L., 2004).

In a 2005 Human Rights Watch interview of some sixty former West African Combatants, crippling poverty and hopelessness were identified as the fundamental factors which had made them vulnerable to participation in armed rebellion. Many of them recounted the extent to which they battled daily against abject poverty and the traumatic struggle for daily survival caused by lack of access to resources. Given the difficult present, unpredictable future and unlikely fulfillment of their dreams, many of them thought that going to war was their best option for survival (Mastny, L., 2004).

In recent times, the Arab Spring in North Africa has demonstrated that where young people feel or are politically excluded and economically marginalized, their proclivity to revolt cannot be contained by any measure of tough state response.

The two variables therefore, make the phenomenon of unemployed youth a red flag situation for political instability in Africa. Where these variables encounter popular mobilization through religious indoctrination, radicalization, political polarization or ethnic manipulation, then destabilization and political instability are sure to emerge. Such is the case of the Mungiki sect and other criminal groups in Kenya; the Al-Shabaab Islamist militants in the horn of Africa; Boko Haram in Nigeria; and Majao and Ansar Dine in Northern Mali. A similar situation made it lot easy for armed militias in Nigeria's Niger Delta region to recruit the many soldiers who wreaked havoc against government economic interests for many years.

The vision of a united Africa

The vision of a united Africa has been part and parcel of the pan-African narrative for decades. The political project of dismantling the borders drawn up arbitrarily by colonial powers and work to step up economic and political integration were a key task of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) founded in 1963 and are among the main tasks of its successor organization, the African Union (AU), which was established in 1999. Founded in 1991 as part of the Abuja Treaty, the African Economic Community (AEC) considers the liberalization of mobility, an essential part of a prerequisite for complying with the Treaty.

The AU's Agenda 2063 also views free movement as a key component in the vision of a politically unified Africa. January 2018 saw the Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment finally adopted. Significantly, the Protocol has been signed by roughly two thirds of AU member states to date.

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which was adopted in December 2018, affords even greater international relevance to the promotion of (regional) free movement. The non-binding pact intends to expand opportunities for regular migration around the world and also encourages regional cooperation agreements in this context. After all, most global migration flows take place within rather than between different regions of the world. This is especially true of the African context, where intraregional forms of migration (such as seasonal labour migration) are an everyday reality and elementary source of livelihoods for millions of people. A free movement regime in a regional context that promotes the positive effects of migration

(such as remittances, employment prospects and investment incentives) and minimizes its material and nonmaterial costs (e.g. bank transfer fees, legal uncertainty) is thus tremendously important from an economic and development perspective. The AU Protocol, adopted in 2018, states that the process of implementing free movement must begin with Africa's sub-regions. It envisages a special role for the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in this context. Given the smaller number of negotiating partners involved and an existing cooperation history, for instance in dismantling trade barriers and peace-building, REC's have greater influence at this level than at continental level.

Factors determining the implementation of free movement

The following factors are crucial for understanding these differences in the implementation of free movement as well as the weaknesses in the implementation processes of both RECs:

1. Institutional path dependencies

In the case of ECOWAS, efforts at government level to drive the promotion of free movement are built on a key component of the region's self-understanding and social identity. This is the idea of dismantling the linguistic and national borders resulting from colonial history, for example, by means of stepping up economic and trade cooperation.

2. Degree of legalization and institutional capacities

Due to the more supranational nature of ECOWAS, the free movement protocol adopted in 1979 has established a functioning free movement regime, despite weaknesses in implementation.

3. Resistance from powerful member states

While the free movement protocol has been repeatedly violated over the course of ECOWAS' existence (for example, through the mass expulsion of West African migrants from Nigeria in 1983), it enjoys widespread political recognition.

External focus on counteracting irregular migration

Ever since the 2015 refugee crisis in particular, many European Union (EU) measures in both regions have focused on the (short-term) reduction of irregular migration. As such, agreements have been concluded principally with transit nations and countries of origin (including Niger and Ethiopia) on more effective border and migration management.

Summary

The vision of a borderless continent remains virtually uncontested to this day in Africa. From a development policy perspective, support for (sub) regional

free movement in Africa is a practical component in the facilitation of “orderly, safe, and responsible migration” (SDG 10.7) and with respect to the expected positive effects at economic, employment and socio-political level. However, the RECs face a number of challenges in implementing free movement. Some of these challenges stem from within the sub-regions, while others can be attributed to the growing impact of EU migration policy.

Recommendations

Analysis of Africa’s ECOWAS and IGAD regions suggests the following approaches for providing development policy support to African free movement regimes:

a) Employ capacity development measures

In order to effectively fulfill their key role in formulating free movement standards and supporting their implementation at national level, regional organizations need to develop their technical and financial capacities.

b) Harmonize security and free-movement policies

European initiatives in the areas of border control and migration management must not inhibit intraregional migration. This could mean, for example, that migration policy initiatives with key countries of origin and transit nations (in particular, the Khartoum Process, migration partnerships) include more measures for promoting intraregional mobility than in the past.

c) Offer cross-sectoral incentives for free movement

The German Government and the European Union should integrate incentives for making progress on free movement regimes and/or agreements and integrating these in other sectors of development policy cooperation (such as economic and employment promotion, vocational training, and peace-building).

Conclusion

Among other things, worsening unemployment trends are an important measure of inept leadership and the general lack of good governance. Growing levels of unemployment are a precursor of an explosive red alert situation and explain the involvement of unemployed youth in the many conflicts and political instabilities on the continent. It is thus important that international and national responses to the phenomenon are adequately scrutinized in order to rally the necessary resources to address the phenomenon both in the effort to achieve political stabilization and as a response to the development needs of many African countries.

In order to implement these recommendations, it is ultimately also necessary to provide stronger support to regional free movement regimes at global level.

While such regimes are explicitly advocated in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, no mention is made of the role of regional organizations as their key formulating and implementing structures. It is here that a shift in consciousness is required.

Prof. KANU, Ikechukwu Anthony

Department of Philosophy and
Religious Studies
Tansian University, Umunya
Anambra State
ikee_mario@yahoo.com

Mike Boni Bazza, PhD
Department of History and
International Relations
Veritas University Abuja
danbazza68@gmail.com

OMOJOLA Immaculata Olu, (SSMA), PhD

Department of Business Administration and Management
Villanova Polytechnic
Imesi Ile
Osun State
omojolassma@yahoo.co.uk

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