

# Youth empowerment and sustainable development: Why is it important to address youth unemployment in the New Urban Agenda?

*Sandra Kundeya*

*University of Sheffield*

## **Executive summary**

Youth unemployment is one of the pressing development challenges resulting from urbanisation. As more people, economic and social activities are increasingly concentrated in cities, challenges in terms of lack of access to sustainable livelihoods, decent jobs and poverty are emerging. Unemployment is common amongst the youth who despite of being most of the urban dwellers, are excluded in decision making processes, are underestimated and suffer from poverty. In light of these challenges, the New Urban Agenda<sup>1</sup> (NUA) was approved by more than 160 nations at the UN-Habitat III meeting in 2016 held in Quito to establish a global policy framework for a more sustainable and inclusive urban development.

This brief discusses the actionable solutions identified at the World Urban Forum 9 held in

Kuala Lumpur in February 2018 - the first major gathering to discuss NUA since Quito - to unlock employment opportunities for young people in cities. Central to the discussions was the need to foster an entrepreneurial culture among the youth and ensure their participation in all stages of the decision-making process. Finally, this brief will provide recommendations for the effective implementation of NUA.

## **Why is it important to address youth unemployment?**

In several cities in developing countries the majority of urban dwellers are young people and most of them are unemployed. Evidence shows a sharp increase in the population of young people that the world has ever seen, with a record of 1,8 billion youths between the ages 10-24<sup>2</sup>. An expected figure of 1 billion youth in need of jobs is expected to

enter the job market by 2020 and only 40% of these will be able to get employment from the current jobs<sup>3</sup>. With these high figures of youths residing in the city, not addressing the issue of unemployment, means that the promises of the 2030 agenda to reduce poverty and creating safe cities as stipulated in the SDG 11 will never be a reality. In order to make cities sources of solutions rather than problems, tackling youth unemployment should be prioritised.

Global data shows that 76,46 million youth were unemployed during the economic crisis in 2009, while this figure fell to 73,67 million in 2014<sup>4</sup>. In 2018 the number of unemployed youth is expected to rise to 73,71 and fall slightly to 73,31 million in 2019<sup>4</sup>. At the same time the global youth unemployment rate increased from 12,9% in 2009 to 13% in 2014 and settled at 13,2% from 2015 onwards and it is projected to remain stable up to 2019<sup>5</sup>. These disturbing figures show why it is even more important to prioritise youth employment in implementing sustainable urbanisation.

In many developing countries prolonged unemployment is conducive to higher levels of poverty and can lead to social unrest. For example, in countries like Zimbabwe with the

unemployment rate at 95% and Burkina Faso with 77%<sup>6</sup> unemployed young people often find comfort in alcohol and drug abuse. During the night they engage in prostitution, theft, robbery and team up to form violent gangs. In Somalia, youth driven by poverty and joblessness turned to piracy, something that was estimated to have cost the global economy some US\$ 6 billion<sup>7</sup>. With all these adverse situations created by joblessness, it is time to place the youth at the forefront in development initiatives. The magnitude of the current youth unemployment crisis calls for urgent action.

### **WUF9: Strategies to challenge and overcome youth unemployment**

The sessions related to the urban youth at WUF9 focused on the actions to reduce the global challenge of youth unemployment in cities. The following strategies were identified as essential to tackle youth unemployment.

#### *1. Youth engagement in economic development*

The voices of the youth are important in building sustainable cities and should be engaged in policy making. Young people should be consulted because they are able to

provide useful advice. In this light effective youth inclusion requires us to go down to the grassroots to change cultures that promote the exclusion of youth in decision making. This process should involve community engagement and education to change attitudes and discrimination against the youth.

Local pathways programmes emphasised the need for young people to be regarded as partners and provide them with support systems to contribute to build better cities. The system should provide young people with tools, a platform and a guiding framework for action and connecting them with leading urban development experts and practitioners.

Education was identified as an essential tool in empowering youth to be productive and to be conscious of their environment. Representatives from the Green Growth Asia shared best practices to engage and empower young people to come up with sustainable projects for a greener urban city. For example, they established eco-schools in Malaysia that empowers young people to drive change and to beware of their environment.

## *2. Entrepreneurship and skills development*

Participants emphasised the need to cover the skills gap through training programmes. They maintained that empowered youth can create their own opportunities thereby easing the demand for jobs on the labour market. Creating spaces for youth to develop their skills and innovations is critical in creating sustainable cities. Groups encouraged youth to mobilise themselves create social enterprises and undertake projects to transform their cities. However, this can only be achieved under an environment that supports innovations, fairness and inclusive prosperity.

### **Policy recommendations**

Based on the debates from the Habitat III meeting in 2016 that defined NUA and responses from WUF9 conference on the youth agenda, this policy brief proposes the following recommendations.

- UN-Habitat and other international organisations should support youth-led projects in the Global South. Developing countries lack financial resources to implement NUA. Some sessions suggested

that young people could significantly improve their livelihoods through owning a small business. However, it was not clear how youth in chronic poverty in the Global South could make their livelihoods sustainable. It is important for the international community to channel funds to youth empowerment projects in developing countries.

- Country progress reports on the implementation of NUA should be subject to external review. It is possible that some countries may paint a good picture than the reality on the ground to protect their economic and political image. This method is helpful to other member states as they can share lessons and good practises.
- Governments and NGOs should take it upon themselves to motivate the youth and inspire them to pursue their dreams. There is a need to go beyond formal education and skills development to mind transformation strategies. Most of the youth have lost hope due to prolonged periods of unemployment and poverty. Promoting a positive mind of the youths is key in the implementation of NUA at local level.

- Communities should be educated on the true meaning of inclusiveness. Most of the inequality challenges have its roots in communities. Therefore, teaching people the meaning of inclusiveness helps in changing negative cultures and attitudes towards youth. This is crucial in addressing some of the social factors that hinder youth participation in development activities.

### **Conclusion**

Youth unemployment is on the rise and projections indicate that it will continue to rise to unprecedented levels. Key solutions identified to solve this challenge during the WUF9 conference include creating supporting environments for young people to start their own businesses and enhancing youth participation in all stages of the decision-making process. Within the context of the 1,8 billion youth facing unemployment challenges, youth empowerment can only be achieved when local institutions and structures respect youth, integrate them and see them as partner in planning and policy making processes. It is time to move beyond words to create a bright future for the leaders of tomorrow.

## References

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