

Youth
experiences of
the decent work
deficit



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Sustainable Development Goal 8, set to be achieved by 2030. It is an immense challenge to secure decent work for all within the next decade, given that at present much of the work available to young people is poorly paid, dangerous, insecure, or in short supply. Drawing from a survey of young people in lower and middle income countries, we offer insight into young people's lived experiences of what the International Labour Organisation calls the 'decent work deficit'. We document the struggle of getting by on low wages, and the resulting tendency towards multiple overlapping forms of 'portfolio' employment. We report insufficient demand for young people's labour and the insecurity of the work that is available. Furthermore, we share young people's reports of having too little money to start their education or business ventures, and their lack of connections to people who could help them secure work. This article offers insights into young people's lived experiences of the decent work deficit, complementing a wealth of international statistical data. We highlight the rich insights offered by young people who are struggling to make a life for themselves and their families; these are some of the lived realities of insufficient decent work. We argue that young people's accounts of their working lives are critical to designing effective interventions to deliver decent work for all.

ABSTRACT: The global population is extraordinarily youthful. This creates great opportunities, and significant challenges. While an estimated 1 billion young people will enter the labour market between 2015 and 2025, only 40% are likely to find jobs under present conditions. Ensuring decent work for all is of pressing importance, so much so that it forms a major part of the United Nations

Alusine is an entrepreneur and graduate of Restless Development's Business Development School in Sierra Leone. Alusine describes his business as an electronics shop and uses a playlist of Nigerian, American and Sierra Leonean music to entice his customers. Photo courtesy of Restless Development.



Introduction

It is no exaggeration to state that we live in an era defined by youth. Staggeringly, more than half of the world's 7 billion strong population is under 30 years old – nine-tenths of whom are from 'developing' and 'emerging' economies (UNESCO, 2013). Most developing countries today have a population pyramid dominated by children and young adults (Figure 1; Eguavoen, cited in Sommers, 2011). 'Never before,' the United Nations (UN) Population Fund notes, 'have there been so many young people' (UNFPA, 2014). The future, too, looks youthful with the global total of 15–24 year olds expected to peak in the late 2060s; according to the medium variant projection, the number of young people living in low-income

countries (as defined by the World Bank, 2020) will probably peak after the year 2100 (UNPD, 2019). Whether this youthful demographic profile offers a 'demographic dividend or a demographic bomb' (Lin, 2012, n.p.) is open to debate – a debate to which decent work is central. Fairly paid, decent work for working age youth populations offers a possible route out of poverty for both individuals and countries alike.

For over two decades geographers have researched the distinctive life stage of youth, focusing on themes including politics, migration, and work (Smith and Mills, 2019). The growing body of research into geographies of youth and work, however, has been criticised for paying insufficient

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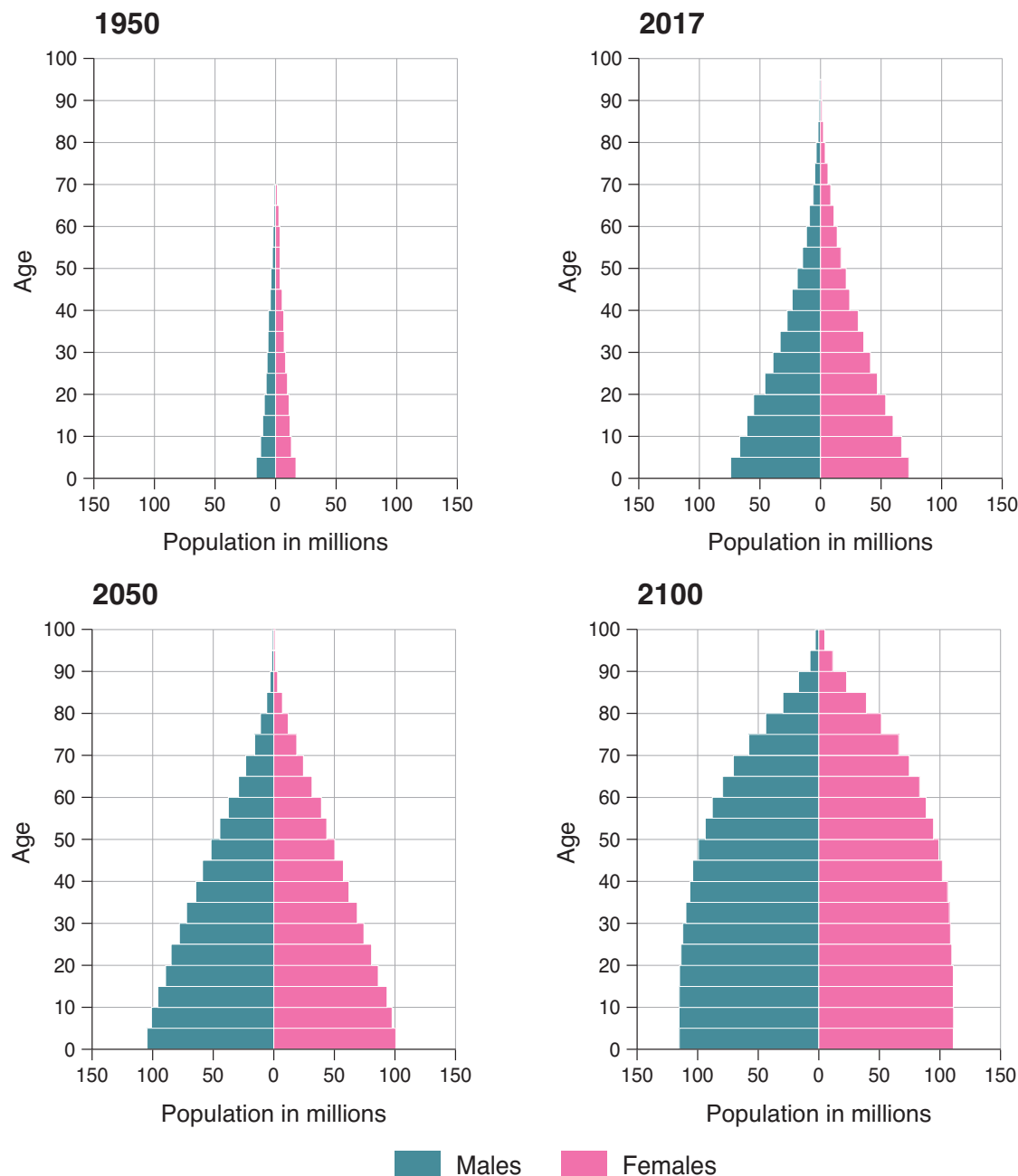


Figure 1: Population change in the least developed countries, in millions. Notes: This series of population pyramids shows past, current and future population age and gender structures in what the World Bank currently classifies as the 47 least developed countries. The population size is given by age group and gender in millions. After: UNPD (2017b).

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attention to the voices of young people and their own experiences of work (Dyson, 2008). In 2019, geographer Lorraine van Blerk published a short article asking ‘where in the world are youth geographies going?’ (2019, p. 1), adding to calls for greater engagement with young people. Van Blerk emphasises the need to learn from young people – in particular, a growing population of young Africans – who face enormous challenges,

What is ‘work’?

‘Work’ is commonly understood as an activity that is paid (e.g. Reid, cited in Charmes, 2019). However, broader definitions of work encompass both paid and unpaid work activities, allowing us to recognise diverse forms of labour. In particular, unpaid care and domestic work are highly gendered and sometimes overlooked forms of work, with women spending on average 3.2 times longer than men on these tasks globally (ILO, 2018). Self-employment, meaning that one works for oneself, is also part of work; this could take the form of entrepreneurship, co-operative work, or unpaid family work (OECD, 2018; Sehnbruch et al., 2015). Here we adopt a broad definition of work, inclusive of these varied arrangements.

What is ‘decent work’?

‘Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men’ (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2019).

Who are ‘young people’?

‘Youth’ defies easy definition because it differs with social context (Leavy and Smith, 2010). Traditionally, it marks a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, indicated by events such as marriage or becoming financially independent. It is increasingly recognised that in times of economic uncertainty, the ability of young people to transition to adulthood can be delayed (for example, if they cannot find a job). Broad definitions, from 16 up to 35 years of age, are now commonly used (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2008). The young people included in this study were aged 18–35 years old.

including underemployment, climate change, poverty and inequality. It is young people themselves, van Blerk (2019) argues, who will help generate understandings of, and solutions to, the structural reproduction of inequality.

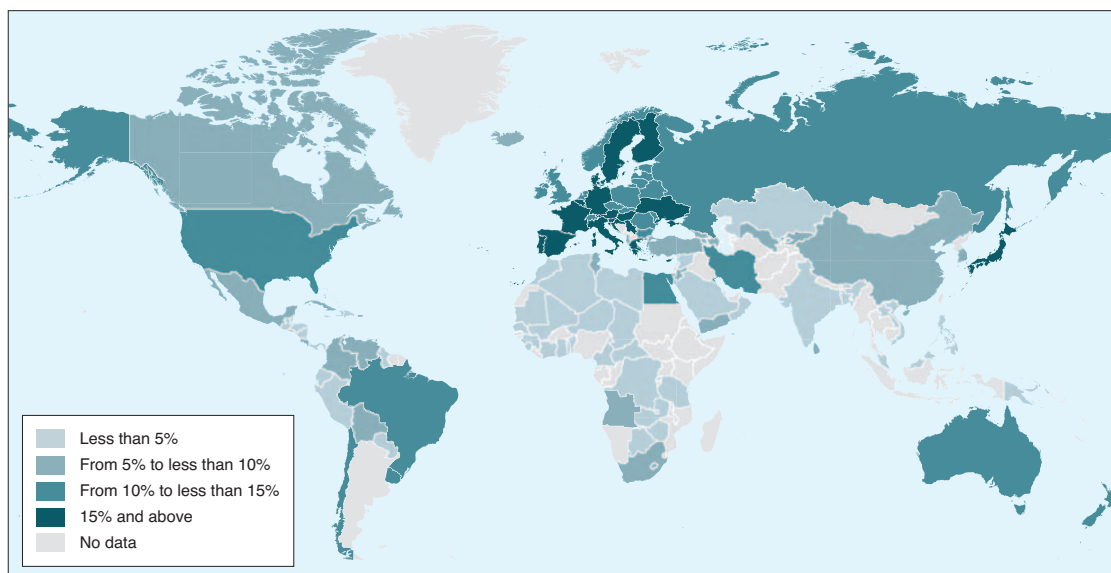
This article contributes to the youth geographies literature: first, by outlining the youth employment challenge in lower income countries as described in international datasets, and, second, by using an international survey of young people from lower and middle income countries (LMICs classified by the OECD, 2020), run by the youth organisation Restless Development and university researchers, to reflect on how these large-scale patterns are experienced in practice. We follow van Blerk (2019) in emphasising the benefit of including the voices of young people themselves.

Youth employment is a pressing global challenge with grave implications if it is not addressed (O’Higgins, 2017). The world economic system, in which young people’s aspirations are formed and in which they must attempt to find work, is structurally uneven and socially inequitable. We argue that rather than individualising responsibility for securing decent work by requiring young people to work hard and aim high (which is the standard response), we need to better understand youth experiences of work and address the barriers that prevent young people from accessing decent work (see Figure 2 for key definitions).

A youth employment crisis

A ‘crisis of unemployment’ is frequently presented in the media, and some policy circles, as the biggest employment challenge facing young people across the globe today. In reality, the picture is rather complex. The term ‘unemployed’ captures people who are actively looking for work, and are ready to start, but are unable to find work.

Unemployment differs from both excluded young people who have given up trying to find work, and underemployed young people who cannot find enough fairly paid work, and so depend upon part-time, intermittent, and/or poorly paid work (Jeffrey, 2008). Certainly, unemployment is a problem, and global youth unemployment¹ is on the rise, having previously peaked amid the 2009 global recession (ILO, 2017). In 2015, just over half of the youth population were unemployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Kingdom of Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), and South Africa. Greece, Saint Lucia and Spain also had high levels of youth unemployment, ranging from 48.5% to 49.9% (UNDP, 2019). Yet it is fair to say that



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Figure 3: Public social protection expenditure as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product. Notes: Latest available data by 2017; health spending is not included. After: ILO (2017).

unemployment is 'only the tip of the iceberg' (O'Higgins, 2017, p. 1).

Taken at face value, unemployment figures can obscure the employment challenges facing developing countries. Indeed, unemployment in developing countries is markedly lower (9.4%) than in developed countries (14%) (ILO, 2017). This is because social protection 'safety nets' such as welfare benefits, pensions and healthcare provision are often limited in developing countries (Figure 3). A strong welfare state or family wealth can cushion young people who are out of work, meaning they are not forced by circumstance into poorly paid, dangerous or undesirable work (e.g. Jeffrey, 2009). The opposite applies where forms of social protection are minimal. Here, unemployment tends to be low because people cannot rely on safety nets for support. Unemployment therefore becomes almost a 'luxury' that few in the very poorest countries can afford to choose (Fox *et al.*, 2016). Thus, social

protection is an important part of the UN's definition of 'decent work' (see Figure 2). In this context, the greatest challenges for young people in developing countries relate to the quality and quantity of their work.

'Decent work for all' (UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8) is especially relevant to young people who are even more burdened by insecure work and working poverty than older adults (see Figures 2 and 4). In developing countries, 96.8% of employed young people work informally, compared to only 90% of employed adults (ILO, 2017). Informal work describes work not covered by formal legal arrangements. How to best handle informality is the subject of debate: one option is to promote formalisation, which offers legal and social protection as well as generating tax revenue; on the other hand, the vast majority of people in developing countries currently rely on the immense informal sector for work, and its scale and embeddedness make it hard to change. However,

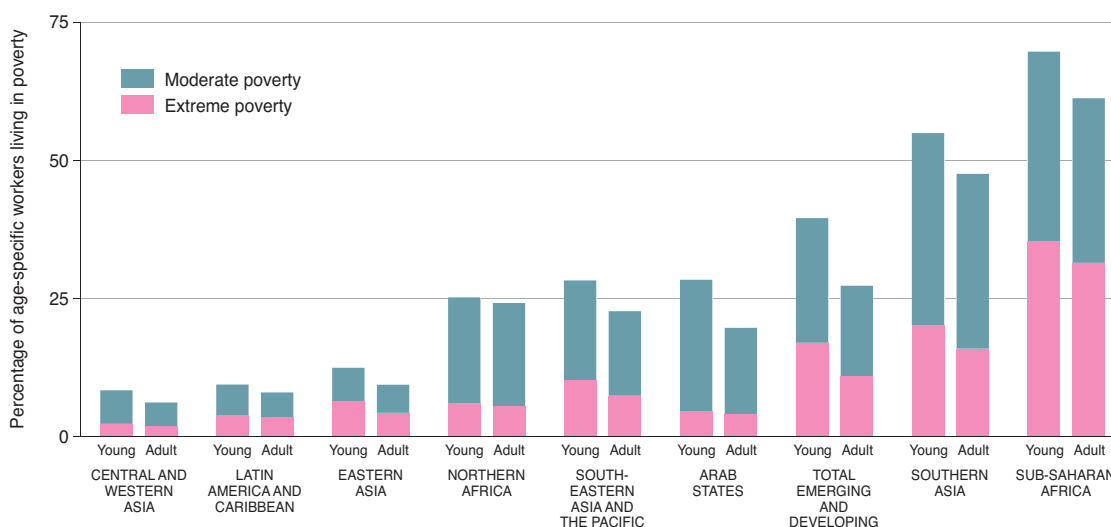


Figure 4: Extreme and moderate working poverty, in 2017. Notes: 'extreme poverty' means earning less than US\$1.90 per day; 'moderate poverty' means earning US\$1.90–3.10 per day; 'youth' means people aged 15–24 years old; 'adult' includes ages 25–64. After: ILO (2017).

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informal work is often associated with low pay, which leads to poverty because it offers lower average wages than formal sector work, and a lack of workers' rights (ILO, 2017; Heintz et al., 2006). Some 70% of young people in developing countries are in working poverty (ILO, 2017) and over 50% of youth in low income countries are underemployed (Ayele et al., 2018).

Yet, informal and poorly paid work has not always been so widespread. Following the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes and other neoliberal reforms in many lower income countries from the late 1980s, public spending cuts extensively reduced government jobs (historically a major formal employer) and overall formal sector employment (Jeffrey, 2008). The private sector has, to date, not been able to fill the void in formal work left by this retreat of the state (Jeffrey, 2009). In its place, informality and casual employment have expanded (Boampong, 2010), bringing greater insecurity, with the private sector employers in LMICs paying lower wages than the public sector (Heintz et al., 2006). Thus, history assures us that greater equity is possible.

Methods

In autumn 2018 we launched an international survey of young people from LMICs, aged 18–35 years old.² The age range of respondents includes young adults only (18 years and over), due to the additional ethical responsibilities involved with recruiting and working with children. The upper age limit of 35 acknowledges how the life stage of 'youth' is extended in the context of economic uncertainty (see Figure 2). The survey generated new insights into young people's experiences of, and aspirations for, work. The survey was administered online and only in English, which we acknowledge limited responses to young people who speak English, and have IT skills and internet access.

Our survey allows us to reflect upon how labour market trends of high youth underemployment, and demographic trends of peak youth/progression towards peak youth, are playing out in diverse national and local contexts. The survey was distributed by Restless Development, a youth-focused international non-governmental organisation (NGO), to young people via their hubs in India, Nepal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, as well as their Youth Power and Youth Think Tank networks. The Youth Power network has 204 partners in 45 countries and was originally established as part of a campaign to achieve the

UN's SDGs. The Youth Think Tank is a network of four cohorts of research alumni in seven sub-Saharan African countries (Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and Ghana) brought together to conduct youth-led research on youth economic opportunities through a partnership between Restless Development and Mastercard Foundation. Therefore, most survey respondents had some connection to Restless Development.

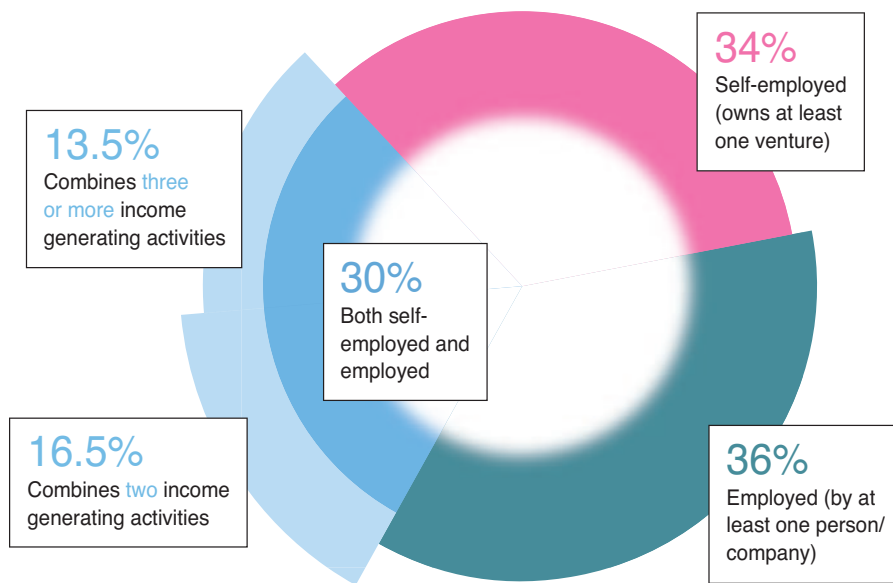
Collectively, these factors mean that the 263 young people who replied to our survey were relatively privileged, educated and well-connected within their home countries. All respondents were aged 18–35, and at least 60% were aged 20–29. Sixty percent of respondents were male, 39% female and 1% transgender/non-binary. All were born in LMICs, with 77% originating from sub-Saharan Africa. Tanzania (12%), Zambia (12%), Uganda (10%), and Zimbabwe (8%) returned the most responses. Fifty-two percent of respondents lived in urban areas, 31% in suburban or peri-urban areas and 17% in rural areas. This survey is not statistically generalisable to the broader youth population. Instead, it offers detailed insight into working patterns, experiences and aspirations that help us to reflect on the broader trends shown in international datasets.

Findings

The nature of the challenge

Most of the young people we surveyed took part in a broad portfolio of work activities, for instance by taking on multiple paid and/or unpaid roles in order to meet their financial and familial responsibilities. In fact, 56% of respondents were engaged in unpaid work activities that do not fit conventional definitions of work but are nevertheless critical to maintaining a household and community, including domestic work, childcare, supporting others' livelihoods, and volunteering. Almost one-third of respondents had no income-generating activities at the time they were surveyed. For those with paid work, nearly a third generated an income by combining self-employment with employment for another person/company, while over a quarter of young people who were self-employed ran two or more businesses, and one-fifth of those who were employed by another person/company held down more than two jobs (Figure 5). A highly qualified 26-year-old Indonesian woman explained how she engages in several activities to earn a living and support her family:

'I'm working as a lecturer in a university ... to earn money for my family. Yet, I make food and



snacks to be sold. I sell them online to my friends, colleagues and others to support our family's income too.'

As this testimony highlights, the young people we surveyed at times undertook a portfolio of different jobs as a direct response to underemployment. Portfolio working can therefore be understood as a coping mechanism adopted to deal with challenging economic circumstances. This finding is perhaps unsurprising given the employment trends explored earlier, where the vast majority of young people in developing countries work informally and are poorly paid. Yet, given that the young people reached by our survey are likely to have been relatively well-off within their home countries, the fact that many of them needed to combine multiple income streams in order to 'get by' underlines quite how widespread the challenges of poor quality informal work, underemployment and working poverty are in LMICs.

Beyond defining insufficient work, 'underemployment' has a second meaning – the underutilisation of a person's skills or qualifications in their work (Jeffrey *et al.*, 2007). Several young people in our survey spoke of the lack of skilled jobs on offer, which resulted in them taking on work for which they were overqualified. For example, a 28-year-old Master's degree graduate from Cameroon describes her dissatisfaction with her underemployment:

'I am not satisfied with the work I do now because it's not my field of work ... but after school, after having applied for jobs for over a year, being an administrative assistant was the best offer I got.'

Most survey respondents worked in the informal sector and many of their testimonies identified a prevailing challenge that poor-quality work impaired their efforts to make a living. Among the respondents, 36% highlighted 'security and stability' as one of the most desired characteristics of a job for them. Most respondents (76%) reported that the income they received was insufficient to meet their needs and responsibilities. The importance of sufficient income and financial stability – both key components of decent work (see Figure 2) – are described by this 27-year-old man who works as an informal trader in Zambia, and spoke of the financial insecurity he faces:

'The uncertainty of when and where a client will come from is too much stress ... when it's time to pay bills. The income is not consistent ... I have rentals to pay and a small house to run, normally these are the most prominent things that takes me into debt which means I have to work extra hard to pay off the debt the following month.'

Here we offer two contrasting experiences of underemployment, and both point to a lack of well-paid work opportunities despite these respondents being well-qualified. These examples hint at a structural economic obstacle to decent work for all to which we now turn: the lack of labour market demand.

The root of the problem

Geographers are trained to see connections and think relationally (Jackson, 2006; Barford, 2014), and so it is crucial that we acknowledge how the youth decent work challenge does not exist in isolation.

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Figure 5: Mixing and matching of income-generating activities. Notes: The percentage shows the proportion of respondents doing these activities who were in work (n=163). Source: Barford and Coombe, 2019; designed by Georgia King.

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Scholars critical of dominant development ideas, such as Selwyn (2017), point to how the uneven distribution of global wealth and income is rarely presented as being causally related to youth underemployment in developing countries. Selwyn describes ‘a social system of exploitation’ in which ‘super-exploited’ workers are paid below subsistence levels and wealth is accumulated elsewhere in the chain (2017, p. 35). This critique highlights both the importance of thinking structurally in order to understand the obstacles to securing decent work for all and at the same time of engaging with young people to understand how these structural trends are experienced in practice. Policy efforts designed to foster youth employment currently focus predominantly on supply-side interventions (designed to help young people enter the labour market through programmes such as skills training), with far less attention paid to creating new jobs for young people (demand-side interventions) (Barford and Coombe, 2019). Such interventions, whether intentionally or not, individualise responsibility to the young person themselves, suggesting that if they work hard and aim high they can find decent work. Despite holding high aspirations for the future, many of the respondents to our survey found that structural, demand-side barriers held them back. Five years into the future they hoped to own businesses (32%), pursue higher education (16%) and become political leaders (14%). Yet, they held these aspirations in an environment of constrained economic opportunity. According to our survey, by far the top barrier faced by young people looking for work was a lack of available opportunities (Figure 6), which points to a lack of labour market

demand for young workers. This shortfall in job opportunities is compounded by other challenges, such as a lack of money and nepotistic recruitment practices, meaning that the few opportunities that do arise tend to go to better-off and better-connected young people. A lack of money was often cited as the reason for not continuing to higher levels of education, or conversely being able to afford more education was an incentive for income generation.³ In this context, as elsewhere, the potentially potent combination of hard work and high aspirations is usually not enough to redress structural inequalities. Poverty and a lack of connections combine to form a barrier to finding work, as described below by a 21-year-old Zambian woman, followed by a 31-year-old Ugandan woman:

‘There are few opportunities out there and the ones that are there are secured for the relatives of those that are already in employment.’

‘The poor like me who have ... nobody known to them to give them jobs, are many. We even don’t have what to bribe with.’

As these testimonies highlight, in practice there are considerable obstacles (social, cultural and economic) that prevent the idealised linear pathway from high aspiring and hardworking young person into full and decent employment. Put simply, without increasing labour market demand and confronting social barriers such as nepotism, supply-side interventions such as skills training can be expected only to redistribute existing jobs and not to alter absolute employment levels (Fox and Kaul, 2017). Our documentation of young

Figure 6: Barriers faced by young people in work or in seeking work. Notes: The percentage shows the proportion of respondents who selected that factor from a list of pre-given statements (n=249). Source: Barford and Coombe, 2019; designed by Georgia King.



people's experiences of searching for work has identified a stark disconnect between low labour market need and a large number of young people who are seeking work. This mismatch between supply and demand leads us to propose that, despite the prevalence of supply-side interventions that aim to increase employability among young women and men, what is really needed are demand-side interventions that create jobs and stimulate labour market demand.

Conclusion

The era of youth presents both great challenges and opportunities. Our research collaboration between NGO and university researchers has given us exceptional access to networks of young people in LMICs who have shared their experiences, frustrations and ideas about work. In this article, we have shared new insights into the working lives of young people in some of the world's lowest income countries to explore what the decent work deficit means to them in practice and the nature of the obstacles they face in gaining decent work. Our findings complement international datasets that depict the employment challenges between and within countries, highlighting in particular just how widespread the experience of poor-quality work actually is and enabling us to think about the large-scale structural inequalities behind the youth employment crisis. If we are to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the era of youth, we concur with van Blerk (2019) that it is critical to work with young people to generate solutions. Among these solutions, there is a clear need to formulate youth-centred policies that challenge the structural reproduction of underemployment (Barford and Cieslik, 2019). As we have argued, young people's input is key to understanding and then challenging the 'decent work deficit'.

Notes

1. This figure relates to the global youth population aged 15–24, and it reports the count of unemployed young people (which peaked 2001–05, dipped in 2007, peaked again in 2009, then declined until 2014, when the number of unemployed young people slowly began to rise again). The youth unemployment rate shows a similar pattern.
2. Further details on our methods are available in Barford and Coombe (2019).
3. Examples of how education and income are connected include:
'My income is not sufficient. Personally, I feel the need to advance my studies, but I can't. I also have a 6-year-old daughter who needs taking care of and also my business needs some financial boost to set off.' (27-year-old woman, Zimbabwe)

'I have a dream to build my own house and go for further studies. And the work I do cannot support

me to achieve these dreams.' (33-year-old man, Uganda)

'I would like to expand in my poultry business, so go back to school to pursue a postgraduate [qualification and] gain financial freedom.' (25-year-old man, Uganda)

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