

## Virtual Africa youth policy consultation

### Theme: “Building back better with young Africans”

Tuesday, 9 June 2020, from 3.30 to 6 p.m. (GMT+3)

#### Concept note

---

##### I. Background

The outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has led to a severe human and economic crisis. As at 21 May 2020, the number of global cases was estimated at 5,047,377, with a death toll of 329,816. Africa has registered 96,829 cases and 3,031 deaths.<sup>1</sup>

While, to date, African countries may have registered fewer cases than the rest of the world, the continent is likely, because of its structural development challenges and already overstretched institutions, to be more affected by the human, social and economic impacts of the pandemic. Furthermore, the more vulnerable and marginalized segments of the population, including women and youth, are likely to be hardest hit by COVID-19.

The incidence of severe illness and mortality among young people is relatively low, compared to the elderly and those with comorbid conditions. Evidence suggest that young people and children under the age of 18 make up only about 2 per cent of total cases worldwide.<sup>2</sup> The large youthful population of the African continent (where children under 18 constitute 47 per cent of the population<sup>3</sup>) has been identified as one of the reasons for its low COVID-19 case prevalence compared to other regions. The pandemic does, however, threaten to reverse the continent’s hard-won economic and social gains.

The study by the Economic Commission for Africa “COVID-19 in Africa: protecting lives and economies”<sup>4</sup> suggests that, as a consequence of the pandemic, up to 29 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty (with increased poverty levels exacerbating existing income inequalities), 19 million jobs could be

---

<sup>1</sup> Johns Hopkins University Global tracker, available at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>, and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention Dashboard, available at <https://africacdc.org/covid-19/>.

<sup>2</sup> UK Research and Innovation, “COVID-19 in children”, 2020. Available at <https://coronavirusexplained.ukri.org/en/article/und0008/#ref1>.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Available at [www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/eca\\_covid\\_report\\_en\\_24apr\\_web1.pdf](http://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/eca_covid_report_en_24apr_web1.pdf).

lost as workers face full or partial workplace closures,<sup>5</sup> and vulnerable employment could go up by at least 10 per cent. Some 17 per cent of vulnerable households affected by COVID-19 face transient poverty. African women and young people are more likely to be affected by the impact of COVID-19 because of their already vulnerable social and economic status.

Youth employment (for those between the ages of 15 and 29) is estimated at 40.2 per cent in North Africa; 41.3 per cent in Southern Africa; 54.9 per cent in West Africa; 65.4 per cent in Central Africa; and 74.8 per cent in Eastern Africa. Youth unemployment levels are high, as are those of underemployment, which peaks at just over half of all young people in the labour force. While between 10 million and 12 million young people enter the workforce each year, only 3.1 million jobs are created.<sup>6</sup> Young women tend to be worse affected and this situation might be exacerbated by the economic downturn and its negative impact on the employment sector, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### Youth employment-to-population ratio in Africa, 2000

Subregion	Youth employment-to-population ratio
Central Africa	65.40%
East Africa	74.80%
North Africa	40.20%
Southern Africa	41.30%
West Africa	54.90%

Source: Authors' compilation, using data from ILOSTAT.<sup>7</sup>

Note: Employment-to-population ratio is the number of persons who are employed as a percentage of the total working age population.

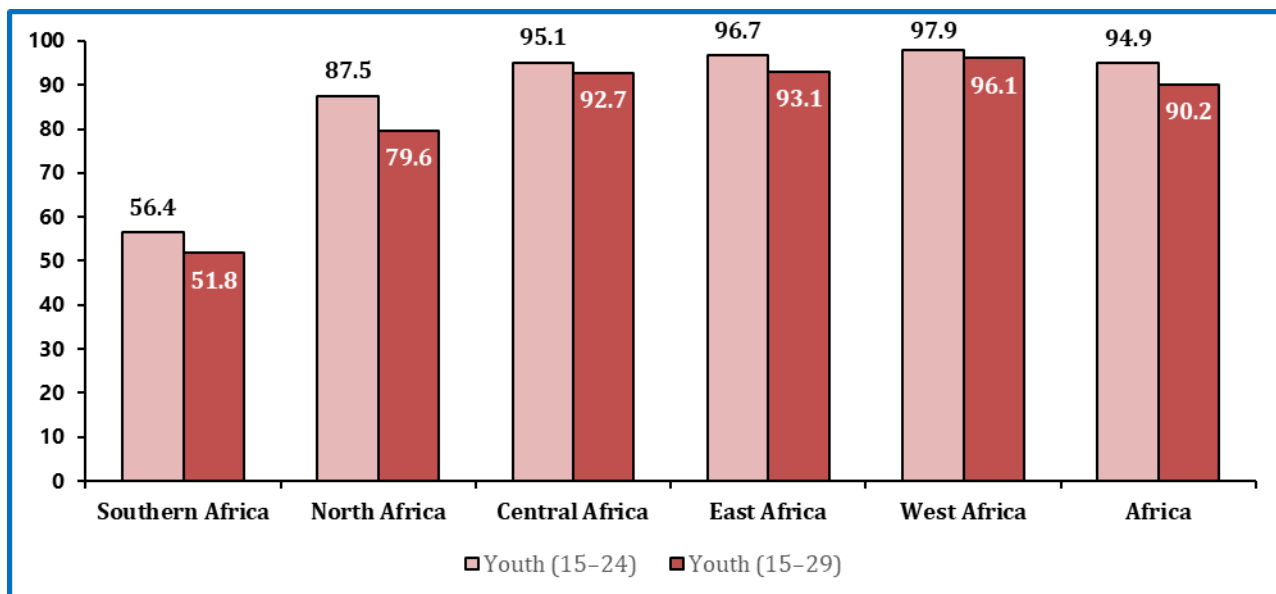
Yet, as shown by figure 1, high proportions of the continent's young people, across all five subregions, work in the informal sector, which is characterized by uncertainty and vulnerable working conditions.

<sup>5</sup> Estimates by the International Labour Organization.

<sup>6</sup> African Development Bank, Jobs for Youth in Africa, 2016. Available at <https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/initiatives-partnerships/jobs-for-youth-in-africa>.

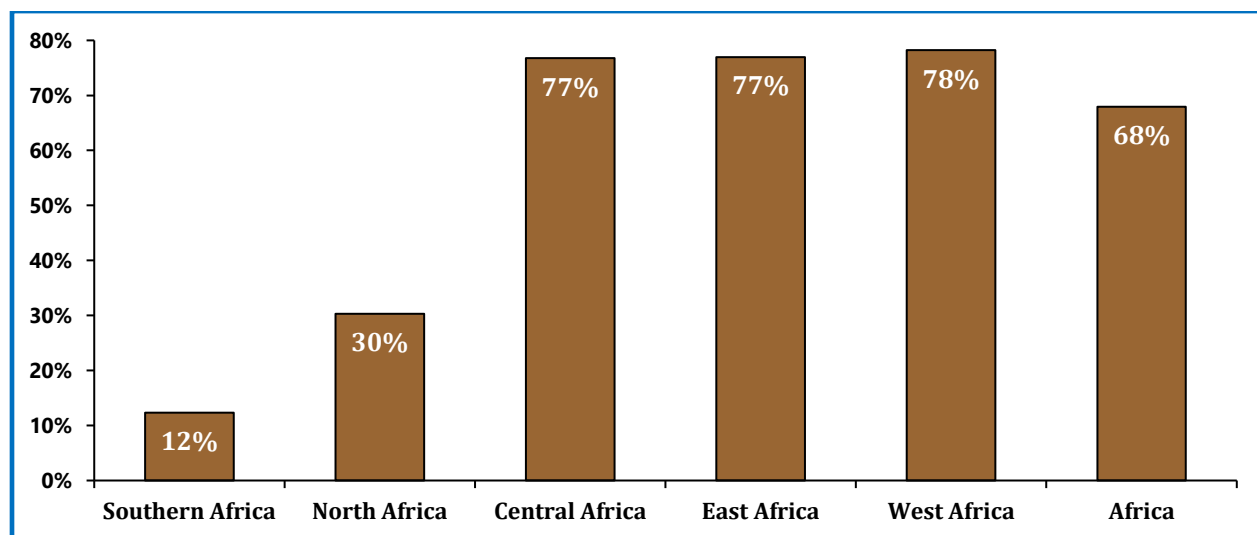
<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer18/?lang=en&segment=indicator&id=EMP\\_2WAP\\_SEX\\_AGE\\_RT\\_A](https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer18/?lang=en&segment=indicator&id=EMP_2WAP_SEX_AGE_RT_A).

Figure 1. Youth informal employment rate in Africa, 2016 (in percentages)



Source: Authors' compilation, based on data from International Labour Organization, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: a Statistical Picture* (Geneva, 2018).

Figure 2. Vulnerable jobs in Africa, 2020: youth aged 15-29



Source: Authors' compilation, based on data from ILOSTAT 2020.<sup>8</sup>

Note: Vulnerable Jobs are those carried out by self-employed workers and contributing family workers.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer58/?lang=en&segment=indicator&id=EMP\\_2EMP\\_AGE\\_STE\\_NB\\_A](https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer58/?lang=en&segment=indicator&id=EMP_2EMP_AGE_STE_NB_A).

The pandemic is also having an unprecedented impact on educational systems worldwide, with far-reaching impacts on the outcome and quality of education. Across the world, over 1.2 billion learners have been affected since school closures came into effect from mid-February 2020,<sup>9</sup> with over 120 million of these in West and Central Africa. Moreover, the length of the closures is uncertain. These closures are having a disproportionate impact on the disadvantaged and youth, who have fewer or no educational options outside the school and generally lack access to distance-learning tools and the Internet. African countries are facing enormous challenges in addressing the losses in, and impacts on, education due to poverty and inadequate technology and infrastructure.

COVID-19 might therefore impede countries' efforts to harness the so-called demographic dividend, namely, the economic growth potential that would result from the increase in the number of people in a country's workforce compared to the number of dependents. Ensuring that young women and men have access to quality health services, education and productive jobs and are able to contribute fully to COVID-19 responses, including during the reconstruction phases, is essential to building back better African economies and social fabrics.

Since 23 March 2020, the Office of the African Union Special Envoy on Youth,<sup>10</sup> in collaboration with the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC),<sup>11</sup> has convened a series of online youth consultations on COVID-19 for a collective youth response. The series has now completed its twenty-second round, with over 300 youth leaders from 40 African countries in focus groups and over 18,800 participants in public consultations, empowering youth with information and direct engagement with African leaders.

Following the outcomes of the consultations outlining the challenges facing young people and the need for their participation in the policy response to the pandemic, on 6 May 2020 the African Union launched the African Youth Front on Coronavirus,<sup>12</sup> an African Union framework that engages young people in decision-making to contribute to youth-led solutions and co-lead the continent's response to the pandemic, including by supporting the implementation of the African continental strategic plan for the COVID-19 pandemic. The Youth Front has 20 members from pan-African networks, activists and national youth councils, and submits monthly briefs to the Africa Task Force for Coronavirus through the Africa CDC.

## II. African countries' responses to COVID-19

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "Education: from disruption to recovery – COVID-19 impact on education", 2020. Available at <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://auyouthenvoy.org/vaucs/>.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://africacdc.org>.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20200511/african-youth-front-corona-virus-launched-ensure-youth-are-custodians-their>.

Governments have taken a wide range of measures to mitigate the spread of the virus, such as national lockdowns, self-distancing, mass testing and contact tracing, among others. Efforts have been made to expand health facilities, along with the implementation of countrywide social and humanitarian programmes. In addition, economic stimulus measures, including debt relief, have been adopted to ease countries' responses to the needs of the population, in particular the poor and other vulnerable groups.

Overall, African countries are implementing a two-pronged response articulated around immediate health and social measures, and economic stimulus. In addition, discussions are under way among policymakers on building back better African economies and social fabrics.

It is essential that these strategic discussions give their attention not only to the structural and emerging challenges facing young women and men across the continent, but also to their important potential to contribute to the continent's immediate and long-term responses to the pandemic. The voice and agency of young people and the contribution that they can make are critical to shaping the narrative for building back better African economic and social landscapes. A key element of this undertaking is the need to address such challenges as the pervasive fragility of countries' health and educational systems and their dependence on natural and mineral resources, macroeconomic instability, heightened public debt vulnerabilities, and others. The new narrative for building back better African economies should be underpinned by countries' renewed commitment and actions to accelerate the pace of innovation uptake and industrialization, with empowered young women and men as pivotal stakeholders and change-makers. A paradigm shift of this nature would enable Africa to unlock the immense potential of its youth and to harness its demographic dividend.

It is against this backdrop that the Economic Commission for Africa, in partnership with the African Union Commission and the Generation Unlimited (GenU) initiative launched by the United Nations Children's Fund, will organize a virtual youth policy dialogue on the theme "Building back better with African youth", on Tuesday 9 June 2020, from 3.30 to 6 p.m. Addis Ababa time (GMT+3).

### **III. Objectives and expected outcomes**

#### **Objectives**

The meeting will be held with the aim of capturing the voices of young people and conveying their views to the African Union Specialized Technical Committee of Ministers of Youth, Culture and Sport, which will be meeting on 17 June 2020. Its main objectives are

- To take stock of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for youth in Africa
- To consolidate the concerns, conversations and contributions of African youth in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and building back better Africa's economies
- To provide a platform for capturing youth voices, insights and narratives in the African Union youth sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

### **Methodology**

The meeting will be held online. It will use a variety of methods, including polls, chats, surveys, presentations, panel discussions and group work to engage the participation of young people. Participants will be drawn from youth networks across the continent.

### **Expected outcomes**

The meeting is hoped to achieve the following outcomes:

- Enhanced youth participation in the conversations and decision-making processes in building back better African economies, after the COVID-19 pandemic
- An outcome document outlining the concerns and contributions of African youth to the response by the African Union youth sector to COVID-19 and key demands submitted to the continent's ministers responsible for youth