

Editorial: Youth, Education, and Work

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On the Global Agenda

While youth, education, and work have long been recognized as important issues for the education system and human resource development policy more broadly, only in recent years have they (re)assumed a prominent place on the educational development agenda. Kenneth King, in calling for informed perspectives on these developments for *Norrag News*, cites a spate of recent reports, including UNESCO's *Global Monitoring Report* (2012a), the *World Development Report 2013: Jobs, the Long-Awaited EFA* (World Bank 2012), OECD's *Better Jobs, Better Lives* (2012), etc.¹. One could speculate about the reasons for the recent highlighting of education's role in youth's transition to work—the large numbers of youth in countries experiencing the “youth bulge”; increased awareness of the political implications of large numbers of un-employed or under-employed youth, not only in North Africa, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, but also in Europe; the rapid urbanization and “youthification” of cities in sub-Saharan Africa; slow economic growth and the realization of youth as a drag or an engine for economic development; the re-envisioning of shared development and education goals with the approach of 2015 deadlines for the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All. However, it cannot be denied that global policymakers have youth and employment on the mind.

This special issue of the *Journal of International Cooperation in Education*² looks at these issues from diverse geographical and theoretical perspectives. We attempt not to duplicate existing reports, which have thoroughly documented the issues they examine from their particular organizational perspectives, but to comment, question, and perhaps deepen the conversation around these issues by looking at national and grassroots cases; comparative studies of countries; empirical research; and perspectives from organizations

¹ Other reports King cites include: the ILO's *Global Employment Trends 2012* (2012) and its *World of Work Report 2012* (2012); UNESCO's *Transforming TVET: Building Skills for Work and Life* (2012c) and the *Shanghai Consensus from UNESCO's Third International Congress on TVET* (2012b); The McKinsey Global Institute's *The World at Work: Jobs, Pay and Skills for 3.5 Billion People* (2012); *Skills for Employability in Africa and Asia by Innovative Secondary Education for Skills Enhancement* (ISESE 2012). In addition, UNESCO's *World TVET Report* (WTR) is expected to be published in early 2013 along with the Asian Development Bank's *Skills Development for Inclusive and Sustainable Growth in Developing Asia-Pacific* in December (2012).

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that design and implement programs linking youth, education, and work. We begin by attempting a summary of what is known about the problems (and promise) of youth, education, and work; what needs to be done; and what we know and do not know about how to do what we know needs to be done. We then provide an overview of the contributions making up this issue.

Demographic change has led to the largest number of young people in history, with unprecedentedly high proportions of young people as proportions of the total population. This “youth bulge” means, in the words of the GMR:

Around one in six young people in the world are aged 15-25. They are disproportionately concentrated in some of the poorest countries. The youth population is particularly large and fast-growing in sub-Saharan Africa. About two-thirds of Africans are under 25, as compared with about less than one-third in rich countries such as France, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. By 2030, there will be three and a half times more young people in sub-Saharan Africa as there were in 1980. There are also large numbers of young people living in the Arab States and in West Asia, where around half are under 25.

To accommodate the growing youth population in the Arab States, South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, an additional 57 million jobs need to be created just to prevent unemployment rates from rising above current levels (UNESCO 2012b, p. 25).

Important to remember is that “current levels” refers to a normal state in which unemployment rates are often much higher among young people than among the working population as a whole. Contributors to this special issue alone find unemployment of around 25% for youth in Arab Mediterranean countries as compared with 10-15% overall (Rosso et al., this issue). In Kenya, nearly 40% of young people are neither in school nor working (Balwanz, this issue).

Youth bulges are often seen as a threat, and, indeed, dramatic shifts in the demographic make-up of society can be profoundly destabilizing. Research has found that large youth cohorts, or ‘youth bulges’ are associated statistically with increased risk of internal armed conflict and civil war (Cincotta et al. 2003; Urdal 2006; Urdal 2008). This is especially so when male secondary school attainment is low (Barakat & Urdal 2009). Indeed, policy attention can be mobilized most readily, it might be argued, when youth are seen as a threat (see Ignatowski 2007; Williams 2007). And much of the programming aimed at youth is predicated on what might be termed the “youth as problem” paradigm (Sommers 2007).

The events associated with the Arab Spring highlight the transformative role youth can play. However, with opportunities for education, livelihood and constructive civic

engagement, youth bulges can also be understood—theoretically at least—as a potential resource, or “youth dividend” and an engine of economic growth. Whether youth become a drag (even threat) to the social order or a driver of economic and social development depends in substantial part on: 1) the “skills” that youth acquire as they make the transition to adulthood, and 2) their commitment and the engagement they develop in the communities and societies in which they live.

Definitions of youth vary widely. The U.N. defines youth as persons of ages 15 to 25. While an age-based definition is necessary for coordination and programming purposes, youth are often defined locally in very different ways. The African Union defines youth as persons aged 15-34. In other than official circles, youth are generally understood as those in the transitional period from childhood to adulthood. Regardless of external and official definitions, youthness is defined by the cultural communities in which young people live. These definitions shift, in practice if not name, in line with economic, social, cultural, and educational conditions. The onset of adulthood is understood quite differently now as compared with 50 years ago. In many contexts, the passage to adulthood is related less to physical age than to achievement of certain milestones (Sommer 2012). Until those milestones are achieved—for example building a house in Sommer’s study of rural Rwanda—youth remain in what he describes as “youth in waitness” a state of “endless liminality”, regardless of physical age. At the same time, other milestones, such as marriage for women in many societies, mean an effective end to childhood and youth, with little connection beyond the onset of menarche to physical or developmental age.

A critical transition, and the focus of this special issue, is the transition young people make to work³. Education systems, in general terms, do a poor job of equipping the majority of young people with the skills needed for productive and engaged work lives. First of all, schools rarely serve all young people equally well. In fact, many of their policies are implicitly anti-poor. Despite great progress in improving participation and completion at the primary level, few developing country school systems have places for all young people at post-primary levels of education, and some of the poorest do not have places enough in primary school. Few school systems offer a systematic and comprehensive array of second-chance programs for those who fall in their progression through schooling. There simply are not opportunities for all children and young people to acquire needed skills.

Additionally, in many cases, the quality of schooling has failed to keep pace with expansion of access. As a result, as recent early grades research has found (see for example, Gove & Cevilich 2011), children in many school systems do not acquire the basic reading and mathematics skills sufficient to enable them to continue formal learning. Beyond these “foundational skills” (UNESCO 2012a), even among students who

³ In addition to work, researchers define other critical transitions, such as Lloyd’s characterization of transitions to citizenship, to marriage, and to parenthood (2005).

successfully gain admission to and complete higher levels of education, many complete their schooling without the technical skills needed by employers or what UNESCO terms “transferrable skills” (also known as “soft skills”) including the ability to be punctual and a team player, to think critically, act entrepreneurially, communicate effectively, work in teams, persist, use technology and speak foreign languages (UNESCO 2012a; Muskin, this issue). Mismatches between training received in school and the skills needed in the workplace are common. In some regions, unemployment is higher among more educated young people than among the less educated (Rosso et al., this issue). Even in cases where secondary education is accessible and of high quality, the curriculum is often academic, preparing students for university and formal or public sector work, when in fact there may not be sufficient places for students to continue their education, and wage employment may be impossible for many to come by. As a result, there may be too many well-educated graduates in fields with little demand, and too few in areas of great demand. School systems do not have a good record in predicting labor demand. Yet expanding the current model of schooling beyond the economy’s “carrying capacity” is likely to produce many individual “failures,” higher expectations than can be met by the job market, and insufficient skills relevant for available opportunities. This is not a recipe for success. Finally, globalization and economic change mean that competition for skills is increasing, even as employment opportunities flatten (see Okada, this issue).

The demands on schools are clear. Schools need to enroll students, keep them in school, and ensure that students learn the foundational skills on which future formal learning is based. Additionally, schools are called to ensure that students acquire a range of transferrable or soft as well as (constantly-evolving) technical skills (UNESCO 2012). Schools need to reach and teach increasingly large numbers and diverse kinds of students and to teach them with curriculum relevant to their likely opportunities yet not so basic or applied as to consign them to permanent poverty. These demands are an understandable, necessary, and likely near impossible order for many countries.

Still the question remains: What good is schooling if graduates cannot, at a minimum, use the knowledge gained to gain gainful employment to provide for themselves and their families?

Among the challenges: Most poor countries remain solidly agricultural, even as they urbanize. Agricultural labor accounts for a large proportion of opportunity for work, and a low proportion of young people’s aspirations. Balwanz (this issue) reports that only 5% of Kenya’s youth surveyed were interested in life on the farm. Yet Africa is still primarily rural; 61% of Kenya’s youth live in rural areas. And skill enhancement training programs are often set in the city.

The informal sector in poor countries is often much more vibrant economically than formal or government sectors. In Kenya, Balwanz reports in this issue, the informal sector represents 80% of all jobs. In Ghana, 80% of skills training takes place through apprenticeships in the informal sector (Sonnenberg, this issue), yet the informal sector jobs are often poorly-paid, insecure, and lack both protection and permanence. Some

governments have taken steps to attempt to reform and upgrade traditional apprenticeship arrangements (see Sonnenberg in this issue for cases of policy initiatives by Senegal and Ghana and Balwanz, also this issue, on programs in Kenya). However, the effectiveness and impact of such policies and programs in Ghana and Senegal have not been demonstrated, and existing programs appear to reach the better-off poor as opposed to the truly marginalized. Kenya may be more successful in its youth polytechnics, though youth surveys suggest a clear preference for formal or public sector work when those choices are available.

Programmatically, the provision of skills to disadvantaged young people is quite challenging (Butler & Taggart, this issue; Williams 2007; Sommers 2007). First of all, teaching the most disadvantaged is generally not a priority of national elites, who make policy and develop programs; the social distance between truly marginalized young people and even their better-off peers is great (Sommers 2007). Even when there is the will to serve the most marginal young people, it is difficult. Marginal children and youth live on the margin. They are often difficult to find. Once found they are difficult to enroll, once enrolled they are difficult to retain; if retained, they can be difficult to teach. Their needs for services and support generally extend far beyond the scope of conventional education and training programs. And often, immediate survival trumps education and training. Outcomes of the type envisioned by youth programmers are difficult to define, and even more difficult to measure. As a result, program impact is difficult to assess, infrequently carried out, and policymakers and practitioners have little cumulative sense of what works and does not.

Program goals are similarly complicated. Youth's needs for income and livelihood are basic and undeniable. Yet income, while critical, is not all that young people need to thrive as self-reliant, economically productive adults. A sense of connection, belonging, and social value (Muskin; Vinall & Murphy-Graham, this issue) and a sense of efficacy and contribution are also critical and may be necessary to ensure livelihood (Vinall & Murphy-Graham; Butler & Taggart, this issue).

Yet even limiting the focus to income, provisioning individuals with skills is often insufficient to address the problems of youth unemployment (in this issue, see Balwanz for Kenya; Vinall & Murphy-Graham for Honduras; and Kusakabe for in rural Bangladesh). Larger "structural issues" and social barriers may prevent young people from utilizing their skills. However entrepreneurial an individual may be, lack of access to credit represents a substantial barrier for poor youth starting a business. Innovations in farming have little impact on individuals who lack access to land. "Supply-side" interventions often require "demand-side" changes to be effective.

So while the need for skills—foundational, transferrable, and technical—is undeniable, sole reliance on what Balwanz calls "skills for jobs" thinking may "blame the victims" for not having the right skills, when in fact, they (also) lacked a mediating context that would permit them to use such skills. Moreover an exclusive focus on the skills young people lack makes it more difficult for programmers, youth, policymakers,

their teachers, trainers, families and community members to see the skills they do possess.

Provision and acquisition of skills tends to be an individualistic sort of arrangement. Yet as Vinall & Murphy-Graham and Kusakabe remind us (all, this issue), the fate of young people in rural communities is often inextricably tied to the communities where young people live and their roles in their communities. Even so, the possibilities for work and community life are conditioned by external factors, i.e., conflict and structural violence in Honduras, or in the case of Bangladesh, proximity to internationally-financed development or ability to wangle a work visa for the Middle East.

Just as provision of skills is a necessary but not sufficient condition for young people to gain gainful employment, provision of necessary skills is not a simple classroom task. At the individual level, attitudinal and behavioral changes are necessary along with the necessary academic learning. Young people, especially those on the margins, need support, coaching, and active guidance to successfully transition to work. As a field, we are just learning how to program these services effectively, consistently and to scale. Beyond the programs implemented, one of the important contributions of the EQUIP3 project (Butler & Taggart, this issue) was the learning of how to develop and carry out programs targeting transitions to employment for marginalized youth. Effectiveness in working with disadvantaged out-of-school youth may be less about filling their gaps in skills than in working with them holistically to manage the transition to work. Of course, this includes the provision of skills. Working with youth to manage the transition involves recognizing and building on youth's assets as well as filling their deficits⁴. Youth are able to contribute to service provision, and to learn while doing so, though with more careful planning, training, scaffolding, and supervision than is necessary when programs are implemented solely by adult professionals.

In thinking about youth, education, and work, it is important to consider the particulars of gender, ethnicity, location, class, and disadvantage as relevant to the young people being targeted. Particularly at adolescence, opportunities and life trajectories often diverge for females and males. Programs for boys may not work for girls. Targeting the most marginalized is difficult, and prone to unanticipated outcomes, yet failure to do so often means the well- or better-off capture the benefits.

Yet youth often fall through the cracks. Responsibility for youth tends to fall on several ministries, which may mean no ministry takes responsibility, or that youth programming is uncoordinated, fragmented, and incomplete. Okada notes that skills development is more difficult than most education sector work, cutting as it does across organizational boundaries, serving diverse clients, with multiple delivery mechanisms, and shifting market characteristics (this issue). Youth often lack the national and international constituencies of children or adults; they are largely invisible in policy terms until they become problematic. For these reasons, coordination of policies and programs assumes

⁴ See for example the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets, [<http://www.search-institute.org/content/40-developmental-assets-adolescents-ages-12-18>] (accessed 15 January 2013.)

great importance. Yet governments and international funding agencies are only recently beginning to do this⁵.

Youth are more difficult than children to deal with: They are more mobile, more aware, more dangerous. They have political ideas and ideals, and they are often ready to act on them. They are sexually if not psychologically mature. Their judgment is emergent, their choices consequential—for themselves, their families, communities, and societies. Their desire for affiliation and purpose are real. Often they get the most attention from anti-social elements—criminals, drug rings, fighters. Often religious organizations pay most attention, be they liberal, conservative, or fanatic. Work is a necessary but insufficient requirement for productive adult participation in society. The skills to get, keep, and thrive at work are the necessary (though insufficient) lessons owed our young people.

The Articles

Arguably the most youth-related news story over the past two years is the Arab Spring. Rosso, Bardak, & Zelloth begin with an overview of school-to-work transitions in the Arab Mediterranean countries. They begin with a sobering statistical overview of youth employment in the region, where education levels are not so very low, yet the numbers of young people out of work (and also out of school and training) are quite high. Unemployment is particularly high among more educated youth. The authors analyze the problems accounting for the poor school-to-work transitions that characterize the region, provide a comprehensive list of programmatic solutions, examine available evidence of program effects, and detail a series of recommendations in four main categories: 1) improving the qualifications of the workforce, 2) improving government programs aiming at smoothing the school-to-work transition, 3) improving the framework of transition support, and 4) including youth voices in program planning and implementation. Their detailed analysis provides a rich portrait of youth, education, and work in a region of the world where frustration with these problems has taken political form. The challenges mirror those of other poor regions, along with the programmatic recommendations for smoothing the transition.

Vinall and Murphy-Graham report on a segment of their longitudinal qualitative study of education in four Honduran villages. Organized around the relationship between work and social capital, the authors analyze the language young people use to describe life in their villages, their aspirations for the future—personal as well as for the community—and the role they see themselves playing in improving their lives and those of those around them. The research was carried out as part of a larger impact evaluation of an innovative secondary education program, SAT (*Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial*), developed to offer

⁵ USAID for example rolled out a new youth policy on 1 November 2012. See http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/Youth_in_Development_Policy.pdf

alternative secondary education equivalents to youth who would otherwise lack access to secondary education. In addition to core academic skills, SAT includes a substantial community service and student empowerment component. The authors watch as their participants mobilize their quite “thick” social capital to make improvements in their situation and those of their communities. But the contributions they can make are limited. “Without work, I can’t solve anything,” one sums up. Drawing on Bourdieu, the authors conclude that social capital can only be divorced from economic capital to a limited extent. Rich in social connections, the village youth were highly constrained in what they could actually achieve, by structural conditions beyond their control. Social capital could only mobilize the resources actually in the village and under its control, resources which were limited by these same structural conditions—poverty, lack of political power, marginality.

Kusakabe carried out another longitudinal study, a household study in two villages in Bangladesh. One, an isolated rural village, had few economic ties to the outside world. The other—a suburban town near the major city of Chittagong—was much more engaged in the national and global economy, despite its still rural character. Kusakabe visited the villages, once each in 1999 and 2001 and then again 10 years later. He visited the same householders and inquired about the academic and employment fate of young people who had been students during the earlier visit. In the first visit, Kusakabe asked parents about their aspirations for their children, and was thus able to gauge the extent to which parental aspirations were realized in the two villages over the intervening ten years. He found that while educational opportunities had expanded greatly, there appeared to be little relationship between educational attainment, employment, and improvements in overall well-being. Indeed, educational expansion had not led to a corresponding expansion of employment opportunities in the wage sector, and the wages that employment provided were overshadowed by rising prices and increased borrowing “for daily life”. A few individuals got jobs they might not have gotten otherwise, but most either remained in school, ended up pretty much as expected according to social class and available work, or got jobs overseas or through connections. Certainly, economic opportunities were greater in the suburban village, and schooling had a long history there, but the expansion of educational opportunity accompanying Education for All-inspired policies had not led to a substantial improvement in prosperity for villagers.

Balwanz looks at new programs the Kenyan government has developed to help unemployed youth acquire skills for work. Beginning with a statistical overview of education and youth employment in Kenya, Balwanz locates the Kenyan government’s efforts to develop youth training programs within the social, political and economic history of the country and in the global “skills for jobs” discourse. He details the programs and the conditions they were designed to address along with the issues in the larger context that “mediate” (and often prevent) the translation of skills into employment. These mediating conditions, he finds, are not addressed by increased provision of skills to individuals. Thus while necessary and useful, skills alone are unlikely to solve the

problems Kenya's youth face. The programs established represent useful moves toward education for skills for work. But they cannot address larger problems that keep youth out of work.

Sonnenberg details programs put in place by governments in Ghana and Senegal to address problems of youth, education, and work, especially in the informal sector. The informal sector is by far the major source of work in both Senegal and Ghana. Apprenticeships are the primary form of skills training, accounting for an estimated 80-90% of skills training in Ghana and 98% of skills training in Senegal. Apprenticeship training, while sustainable and relatively effective, is poorly paid, sometimes exploitative, and rarely leads to formal qualifications or the ability to move beyond the specific skill acquired. Both governments have put an impressive array of policies and programs in place to increase access and the quality of non-formal apprenticeship training. However, the impact of these programs is difficult to see. Often data are not collected in a systematic and comprehensive fashion. Most programs have not been evaluated for effectiveness or impact. Coordination and coverage remain challenges. Government-supported training programs have had some success, she finds, but existing training programs tend to enroll students from (relatively) better off families in urban areas, and not the most marginalized youth, who are the intended program targets.

Muskin draws on his experience as project leader of the USAID/ALEF (Advancing Learning and Employability for a Better Future) Project to reflect on the Entrepreneurial Spirit Development Program (PDEE) implemented in secondary schools in four of Morocco's 16 regions from 2005-2009. The project developed an after-school curriculum to imbue participants with an "entrepreneurial spirit," helping them acquire the confidence and experience necessary to plan projects to improve their schools and communities. Muskin thinks hard about the qualities required to be entrepreneurial, regardless of whether one starts a business or not, and identifies ways in which schools can foster, or at least not stifle, the kind of learning required by employers and the larger society. These qualities—referred to by UNESCO as "transferable skills" and by others as "soft skills," etc—are widely recognized as important and yet poorly fostered by formal schooling offered in the traditional modes of teacher- and content-dominated instruction, examinations, recall of abstract information, individual achievement, and dissociation from the applied world. The project model was quite successful in enhancing participants' "vocational maturity," suggesting the real possibility of developing and running programs at schools and staffed by teachers to enhance students' soft skills.

Butler and Taggart review the lessons learned from ten years of implementing the EQUIP3 Project. Funded by USAID, EQUIP3 was designed to improve the "earning, learning, and skill development opportunities" for out-of-school youth in developing countries. Managed by a consortium of NGOs, the project established programs in 26 countries for marginalized out-of-school young people. The article describes the assumptions underlying the project—youth as assets, the need to foster opportunities for youth to earn, learn, and engage with their communities. It also describes how, in the

process of implementation, the project learned a great deal about how to develop programs to prepare out-of-school youth for entrepreneurial and employment opportunities. A number of tools, instruments and metrics were developed to create programs and assess progress. Effective youth programming was found to require a number of ingredients, including effective partnership with local implementing organizations; use of best available practices with adaptation as necessary to local conditions, resources, and needs; integrated packages of literacy, coaching and support services, access to credit, work readiness training, and work experience. The article ends with the ten most important lessons the project directors took from the experience.

Abdul Rashid Mohammed and colleagues from the Universiti Sains Malaysia highlight the critical role of skill in global languages, especially English, for individuals to contribute to national economic development in the global economy. They find a troubling inequitable distribution of that skill among secondary students in the Penang state of Malaysia. The English proficiency of students can be predicted, in part, by the socio-economic background of students, their ethnicity, and gender. These findings raise concerns about the ability of schooling to provide educational opportunity for all.

Aya Okada concludes the special issue with a review of skill development in India. Before long to belong to the world's largest country, young people entering the labor force are India's largest demographic. This demographic represents an enormous potential "demographic dividend," realization of which is stymied by lack of training, skills and opportunities for the vast majority of young people. The article summarizes the state of skill development in the country as a whole and then focuses on efforts in Karnataka state. The article ends with a cautious optimism and recommendations to: increase investment in education, ensure greater access to secondary education, offer second-chance opportunities for those who miss out, and "re-orient" schooling to demands from the informal employment sector.

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