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The Role of Youth Empowerment in Fostering Peace in Kenya

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Abstract:

Youth unemployment has always been a subject of discussion among various stakeholders in Kenya. Youth employment and empowerment has been identified as an important ingredient in ensuring that peace prevails in any society or community. In Kenya unemployment has been one of the daunting challenges facing the country. Consequently this has placed job creation as a priority in the Government's agenda. The violence in early 2008 highlighted the critical importance of addressing the problem of poverty and inequality, and in particular the increasing problem of idle youth as they were involved in the unrest and violence. Formal and informal employment can provide a mechanism of ensuring that the youths are empowered so that they are engaged and involved in developing our economy.

According to a survey by the Central Bureau of Statistics the youth account for 61% of the unemployed population in the country. The overall unemployment rate for youth is double the adult average, at about 21 percent. Statistics on joblessness suggest that the magnitude of the unemployment problem is larger for youth with 38 percent of youth neither in school nor work.

According to the Country's Social Analysis (World Bank, 2007) youth unemployment, especially among males, is a major contributor to frustration and tension, particularly in urban areas. Clearly, unemployment among the youth has now become a matter of serious policy concern in the country. Evidence from previous analytical work shows that lack of action on the challenges that affect youth will escalate both social and economic costs of development in Kenya.

The Kenyan Government has come up with some initiatives to try and involve the youths in key development projects such as the establishment of Youth Enterprise Fund and Kazi kwa Vijana projects that have tried to engage the youths to some extent. This might not be enough as such issues such as leadership involvement, participation in key decision making processes and collaborative management may provide additional mechanisms to fully involve the youths and in effect stave off or to a large extent reduce crime as such peace is fostered. One other avenue that may provide a platform to enhance youth economic mobility and comfort is the inclusion of youth interests in the constitution.

1. Introduction

Youth unemployment is a significant problem in Kenya. There is a need for the government to come up with quick measures to curb the high rate of youth unemployment in the country. Youth empowerment is an important aspect in ensuring that the youths in Kenya become actively engaged and involved in various socio-economic activities. The role of youths in Kenya cannot be assumed as they can contribute immensely towards social and economic development of the country.

Unemployment amongst the youth is one of the most daunting economic challenges facing Kenya today. Youth represent 30 percent of Kenya's population and 61 percent of the unemployed, yet they are at their prime productive age. The overall unemployment rate of the youth is double the adult average, at about 21 percent. Statistics on joblessness suggest that the magnitude of the unemployment problem is larger for youth with 38 percent of youth neither in school nor at work thereby aggravating the rates of reported unemployment and inactivity.

As a result of this problem the government has consequently placed job creation at the top of its policy agenda. Hence, it is in recognition of the above facts that the government conceived the idea of institutional financing as a way of addressing unemployment which essentially is a youth problem. The concept is based on the premise that micro, small, and medium enterprise development initiatives are likely to have the biggest impact on job creation. Young people who constitute the largest segment of our society, is the future of any economy and a key driver of employment growth and economic activities.

The violence in early 2008 highlighted the critical importance of addressing the problem of poverty, inequality, inequity and in particular the increasing problem of idle youth. In addition, the country's Social Analysis (World Bank, 2007) found that youth unemployment, especially among males, is a major contributor to frustration and tension, particularly in urban areas. Clearly, unemployment among the youth has now become a matter of serious policy concern in the country. Evidence from previous analytical work indicate that lack of action on the challenges that affect youth will escalate both social and economic costs of development in Kenya. This situation became clear during the crisis that erupted after the disputed December 2007 elections.

Youths were the main group involved in the unrest and violence and they were identified by both the Government of Kenya (GoK) and Development Partners as a high priority target group for addressing some of the major challenges facing the country. The most effective way of addressing the challenge of unemployed youth is to help them develop their skills in entrepreneurship and small business development. Business literacy helps young people to envision ways of getting out of poverty; do something to help themselves and their communities; and eventually ensure sustainable economic self-reliance. By engaging the youths both physically and intellectually in key development programmes and initiatives the government will ensure that peace is fostered and the country can achieve both social and economic development.

2. Capacity Building and Training

Capacity building and awareness creation forms the cornerstone of developing and providing the youths with skills and knowledge to prepare them to handle emerging unemployment challenges. Through capacity building youth are introduced to business development skills and mechanism of coming up with successful business enterprises.

Providing the youths with opportunities to attend capacity building and training workshop will help them in demystifying that formal employment is not the only source of income to the large number of unemployed youths. There is a need to give the youths vocational, life skills and entrepreneurship training with the objective of enabling them to increase their employability with other enterprises or through self-employment. Another strategy is to have initiatives towards enabling the youth access loans for business startups.

3. Youth and Leadership

Youth leadership occurs when young people, by giving of themselves - their energy, gifts, and beliefs - inspire and propel others to action for the common good. The provision of leadership opportunities among the youths to support peace initiatives is particularly crucial in this regard. Ensuring peace prevails and economic developments amongst the youths through the availability of leadership opportunities will ensure social justice for all.

The Government needs to design and promote a collaborative approach that prepares young people to provide leadership for positive change in organizations and civic life. This dynamic new approach, collective leadership, is quickly gaining appreciation throughout many organizations and communities. The Kenyan Government need to come up with policy measures that will address the issue of youth involvement in leadership and also provide a mechanism in which youths can be given automatic leadership slots in the national assembly and key Government positions. The government should also offer practical tools, training, and consulting services to help foundations, organizations, young people and adults develop leadership abilities rooted in their own values, goals, and skills. In Ghana for example the youths are encouraged and trained to take up leadership roles and patriotism that is inculcated in them. In the United Kingdom and United States of America they have the young democrats and young republicans too. As a country we need to borrow such models with a view of involving the youths in governance.

The youths need to act as role models and to convince others of the positive impact of a commitment to fostering peace in the society and the country at large. From a strategic perspective, youth leadership capabilities include the capacity to demonstrate purpose-driven leadership and the ability to provide strategic leadership through the development of sustainable youth development models. Moreover, there is a need to implement youth empowerment strategies and plans across various levels of societies and the general country.

4. Youth and Peace Building

The youths are generally vital to the success of a peace building process. The youths are charged with the task of communicating and transferring societal norms and expectations and are naturally important breeding grounds for both war and peace. The threat posed by an idle youth is that he or she may be easily mobilized to participate in disruptive action that leads to conflict and violence, particularly as a by-product of entrenched and endemic social challenges such as high unemployment rates.

Lack of opportunities drives young people into crime and drugs, and into a general state of hopelessness and despair. An unemployed person loses self-respect, pride, self-confidence and influence among colleagues. This can bring about serious social economic and political repercussions as evidenced in the 2008 post-election violence.

It is important to note that the youth should not be targeted as a result of the threat they may pose but by their specific qualities and features that are particularly conducive to peace building. . The traits of creativity, openness to new experiences, and desire for change, combined with the energy and vitality that the youth are associated with, are all elements of the distinctive capabilities of youth to build peace.

The Government will have to provide more opportunities for youth to broaden their engagement in social and public life, whether through undertaking projects for the betterment of society, participating in mentorship programs, forming clubs or societies that have social goals and purposes, or benefiting from programs that grant them access to social institutions.

5. Youth and Civic Engagement

There is also a growing demand to engage the youths, adults and organizations to contribute to community developments initiatives. The government should support and guide the youths to involve the communities as they plan, implement and sustain projects. There is a powerful and positive result towards community development by engaging the young people in various community initiatives.

The government should provide an avenue to strengthen the youth development profession by contributing to research, documentation, and strategies for achieving youth development outcomes through civic engagement. This will strengthen the field

of community development by identifying young people as assets with important contributions to make rather than viewing them as “risks.”

6. Youth Development

The government needs to recognize that young people can play an important role in effecting deep changes in societies. The government should work with the youth in order to strengthen relationships with young people, help them develop new skills and abilities, and work in partnership with them to improve themselves, communities and the country at large. For example there is need to involve the youth in evolving any development blueprint.

Through this process there will be strong youth development outcomes, even with alienated, hard to reach populations. The government has come up with some youth empowerment and development initiatives as outlined below. These initiatives have addressed the youth problems to some certain extent but much needs to be done to increase the level of engagement and participation amongst the youth.

6.1. Youth Enterprise Fund

Youth Enterprise Development Fund was established in December 2006 by the Government as an initiative that is hoped to address the unemployment rate among the youth. The government has so far committed Ksh. 2.25 Billion towards implementation of the fund’s mandates.

The Fund facilitates youth employment through enterprise development and structured labour export. The youth enterprise fund aims to increase economic opportunities and participation by Kenyan youth in nation building through enterprise development and strategic partnerships.

The youth enterprise fund has been met with a lot of criticism as to the mechanism of how the funds are being disbursed. According to some youth interviewed most of them are unaware of the existence of the fund and for those aware they have tried in vain to access financial assistance from the fund. There is a growing demand from interested youths that the Government should device some mechanism to ensure adequate, fair and effective distribution of the funds right to the grass root level.

6.2. Kazi Kwa Vijana (KKV)

The Kazi Kwa Vijana (KKV) initiative is a project owned and implemented by the Kenya government to address youth issues, such as the post-election violence experienced in 2008, and the youth unemployment faced since 2006. The Kenyan government approached the World Bank to contribute to the financing of this program. The financing is utilized to ensure increased community participation in various projects leading to greater ownership and stronger sustainability. It is also aimed at improving operational features of various projects under the programme. This has been done through expansion of the KKV by linking the project to youth training and internship with the private sector to ensure more sustainability for this support. The project, which is entering its second phase, plans to build on, and enhance the already existing efforts to address the youth unemployment crisis.

6.3. Youth Employment Marshall Plan

The Youth Employment Marshall Plan, aims to create 500,000 new jobs over the next four years by expanding the number of technical training institutes and subsidizing students, supporting entrepreneurs in rural areas, initiating labor-intensive public works, developing the information and communication technology (ICT) sector, and paying young people to plant trees, through a Trees for Jobs program, to help reverse the effects of deforestation. The Government alone cannot ensure creation of 500,000 jobs every year hence there is a need to involve development partners and the private sector in the process of resource mobilization for the implementation of youth employment Marshall Plan.

7. Participatory Management and Decision Making

The Kenyan Government has to come up with a mechanism of involving the youths in decision making processes especially on matters that directly affect them. There is a need to come up with a management system that will use a participatory/consultative approach and give voice to the young people. The objective of this approach is to support the aspirations and the needs of the youths through providing opportunities for consultations and sharing of ideas so as to mitigate any negative attitudes towards youth unemployment. Failing to build on the strengths, skills, abilities and knowledge of the youths will most likely place the peace building process at risk. Peace building cannot be sustained without the active and on-going participation of the youths in various Government development initiatives.

People do not participate if their contributions are not valued and recognized, or if the participation does not improve their particular situation. There is no need for the involvement of the youths if the Government and other stakeholders are not willing to give them a meaningful role or address their interests and needs. As such the Government should develop strategies that will ensure that there is wide consultations and collaborative approach with the youths in the process of engaging them in various development programmes.

8. Partnership

Partnerships are a good vehicle for building effective youth development processes and structures. This is a relationship where two or more parties with compatible goals form an agreement to share the work, risk and results or proceeds. It is appropriate for the youth to work in partnership with local and international organizations. Local organizations may include Community Groups, Corporate Organizations, Media, Kenya Private Sector Alliance, National Convention, Concern Citizens for Peace, Local

authorities, Religious groups and Informal sector and international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme, the British Council, the United States Embassy and many others.

The partnerships should be used to promote policies related to youth empowerment at the appropriate level, pursue fair gender policies, strengthen and upgrade educational opportunities for youth, develop strategies for youth employment through skilled and professional vocational training. Through this the partners will become part of the network to promote youth development and empowerment. Partnership with other development organizations will strengthen youth initiatives and therefore lead to creating more livelihood opportunities for the youths not only in Kenya but also in other parts of the world.

9. Conclusion

The Government has been tasked with the responsibility of ensuring the lives and the future of the Kenyan youth is upheld. For the peace building process to be successful then the problems affecting the youths have to be addressed effectively by developing long term solutions to the problems. The Government has to develop appropriate strategies that will ensure that the youth projects and programmes that have been initiated become sustainable so that they can address the persistent youth problems to a large extent.

For instance the government should ensure that that the development partners enhance and continue to support the various youth unemployment intervention measures already established to ensure that they become sustainable. On the other hand it should ensure that the private and public sector who are the major employers formulate youth friendly employment policies that ease on demand for experience and in addition they should offer youths undertaking or those who have completed training internships and attachment to make them more skilled and marketable.

The youth on their part ought to cultivate a positive attitude towards work that is available. This is so because in some instances where manual work is available, some young people are unwilling to take up those jobs.

Finally the youth must form an integral part of the development process in the formulation of policies, governance and patriotism.

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