

# In their own words: Unemployed young people on tackling youth labour market entry constraints in Botswana

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on focus group discussions with unemployed young people in Gaborone and Mogoditshane, Botswana, this paper seeks to capture the ideas of young people regarding how labour market entry constraints could be weakened to provide an enabling environment for wage employment and self-employment. The research is framed on the interpretive paradigm that conceives of youth as agents that are skilled, knowledgeable and capable of reflecting on matters that affect their existence. This is contrary to other studies of the labour market that privilege expert knowledge, presenting young people as voiceless, less knowledgeable and overwhelmed by structures. The suggested employment strategies by the unemployed youth were found to be feasible and matching expert knowledge. This justifies a call to pay attention to the voices of youth in the design of youth labour market policies and programmes.

**Keywords:** Youth voice, labour market constraints, employment strategies, Botswana

## **1. Introduction**

Since gaining independence from Britain in 1966, Botswana has registered an impressive record of economic growth in the developing world. It is among the few countries in Africa that have been given the status of upper middle income by the World Bank. While at independence the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita was equivalent to USD80 its current per capita income recorded in 2013 is USD7,770 (Index Mundi, 2015). In spite of this impressive economic record, Botswana continues to grapple with problems of poverty, inequality and high levels of unemployment (BIDPA, 1997; Fako & Sechele, 2011). While the unemployment rate for the entire country is 17.8 percent according to the 2011 Population and Housing census, unemployment rates for the different categories of youth are more than double the national and adult rates (Statistics Botswana, 2014). It is apparent that the formal sector that has been the key employer over the years is unable to generate enough jobs to meet their demand. Youth unemployment is considered to be a major concern among officials and politicians in Botswana.

This paper discusses the ideas of unemployed young people in Botswana on what they perceive to be the feasible ways of addressing youth unemployment. It is based on the call to capture young people's voices in research. In the end the ideas are assessed for their feasibility and the extent to which they are in line with expert knowledge and current think tanks on easing the labour market entry constraints for young people. The paper demonstrates that while they may be facing dire situations such as unemployment and are not occupying strategic positions in society, young people have ideas that policy makers can draw on in coming up with solutions to the problems that they face.

## **2. The significance of capturing youth voices**

Over a long period of time, children and youth have been presented as objects rather than subjects in studies that affect them. Consequently in youth policy designs, it has always been the ideas and voices of adults, officials and experts that are often projected (Barker & Weller, 2003; Sechele, 2015). This is based on the general perception that children and young people are incompetent and know less than adults when it comes to formulating strategies that could address their predicaments. Most often they are conceived of as a problematic lot and not fully socialized agents who need taming and explanation by adults and researchers (Pole et al, 1999; Valentine, 1999; Ntau & Ntsabane, 2000). According to Valentine (1999), many researchers use teachers and parents as proxies to capture the views of children. In reality what is captured is not the views of children themselves but those of parents and officials about children. Therefore research has always been 'on' children rather than 'with' them.

Recently the idea of listening to and capturing the voices of children and youth in research, policy design and evaluation has become a central theme in the sociology of youth and childhood. Halsey et al. (2006) outline some of the motivating factors that have fuelled this drive as legal models associated with the United Nations convention on the rights of the child; the rise of the citizenship agenda with emphasis on the learners voice; new conceptual and theoretical frameworks in the social sciences including neo-liberal ideology of individualism; commercial drivers and the consumer model as well as the benefits that can be derived

when children and young people are treated as partners in research and policy design.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, with marked developments in the 1990s, the theories of everyday life have come into prominence as an alternative to the then dominant positivist methodologies that have tended to depict the researched as objects with less attention being given to issues of subjectivity (Wood, 2014). Instead of considering children and young people as ‘dumb’ and ‘judgemental dopes’, the theories of everyday life as well as associated qualitative methodologies in the social sciences depict them as skilled, knowledgeable and competent actors capable of commenting on issues that affect their daily lives and reflecting on possible strategies that can free them from, or enable them to circumvent, structural constraints. This calls for the need to capture their lived experiences as well as their views.

The UN convention on the rights of the child requires parties to always ensure that in every decision that affect the child, their opinions are taken into account. The outcome of this has been the enactment of statutory instruments and formulation of policies in developed and less developed countries to ensure that this takes place (Halsey et al., 2006). In Africa, Article 3 of the African Youth Charter of 2006 requires that ‘every young person shall be assured the right to express his or her own ideas and opinions subject to the restrictions as prescribed by laws’. The charter further requires that the perspectives of the youth must be integrated well in planning and decision making as well as in all matters that affect youth programming. The idea is also fuelled by the rise of the neo-liberal philosophy that emphasises liberty and free agency to the youth (Halsey, 2006; Durham, 2007).

Within the realm of citizenship and democratic agendas, there has been a heightened call to involve all categories of people and citizens in leadership, governance and decision making, particularly with regard to soliciting their views. Young people have therefore been at the centre of this inclusion (Ntsabane & Ntau, 2000; Braggs, 2007).

While marketing research has in the past concentrated on families and adults as consumers, contemporary research views children as significant consumers of goods and services whose views need to be captured. According to Braggs (2007), children are seen as important influencers on the choice of products and services that are purchased by their parents. As a result marketing establishments spend sums of money to find what the tastes and interests of young people are as a strategy to increase their sales. The idea here is profit maximisation for the firm rather than a desire to improve the welfare of young people.

Some researchers have highlighted the benefits that can be derived when children are given a platform to express their views. First this provides a way for policy makers, development practitioners, and social workers to understand them. In cases where they are spoken for by adults, they are most likely to be misrepresented and misunderstood (Slim & Thomson, 1993). Consequently, the support by practitioners always misses the mark in that it is not appropriate. The support may not capture exactly the concerns of young people (Sechele, 2015). Secondly, capturing the voices of youth and including them in decision making is a way of increasing their confidence and self-esteem as they perceive themselves as important partners worthy of consultation (Halsey et al., 1999). In this way the process should be understood as empowering the youth to become active citizens.

On the basis of a general consensus to treat young people as agents, there has been an increasing move by researchers towards exploration of research methods and techniques that would give the youth a platform for expression of their voices such as in-depth interviews and focus groups. Some researchers have gone to the extent of exploring some non-traditional methods such as mapping, song, drama and photography as other forms of expression for this cohort. According to Gallo (2001:53), 'by taking up cameras to create realistic images about themselves and their lives, learners become empowered to communicate and engage in critical reflection, and bring about changes in their worlds'. What they communicate and express about themselves is usually different from the stereotypical and belittling images produced about them by the mainstream media as well as adult driven research (Gallo, 2001).

### **3. Methodology**

As unemployed young people in Botswana have, to a large extent, been denied a voice in research and the design of government policies that are meant to improve their lot (Sechele, 2015), it was hoped that by employing focus groups method, my study would address this problem squarely. According to Morgan (1996:130), focus groups constitute 'a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher'. The focus group, together with other reflexive methods such as life stories, is advantageous in the sense that it serves as a platform for expression of the usually hidden voices such as those of women and youth (Slim and Thompson, 1993; Bryman, 2004).

Four focus groups with unemployed young people, two in Gaborone and two in Mogoditshane, were conducted. Each group had five participants selected through snowball sampling. The meetings were conducted in residences and scheduled for different dates. In Gaborone focus groups were held at my residence while in Mogoditshane, two families willingly offered their residences/houses for the meetings. However, the parents did not form part of the discussions. This was advantageous in that it gave the youth an opportunity to discuss the issues freely and without interference from adults. In order to ensure openness in discussions, the groups were further segmented into sex groups. According to KLawns et al. (2003:298), 'being in a group with others 'like you' can give people confidence to speak about their experiences in a way which may not occur in one-to-one interviews...'

Discussed in these groups were mainly external constraints in the areas of formal labour market and self-employment entries. Where constraints were mentioned, I, as the moderator, invited participants to reflect on their knowledge and awareness of existing opportunities such as self-employment funding. The groups also reflected on what they perceived as a way out of their labour market situation. Therefore, focus groups covered external structures as enablements and constraints, internal structures where they reflected on knowledge of enablements and opportunities, and agency where they reflected on what they thought were feasible ways to enhance their entry into the labour market, including the acquisition of relevant skills. The views of young people were tape recorded on their consent and later transcribed to produce written documents that are the basis of excerpts in this research.

The focus groups were found to be engaging by all those who participated in them. The participants reported having learnt a lot from others during these discussions, including what they could possibly do as individuals to enhance their entry into the labour market. They also provided unemployed young people an opportunity to get to know each other and to network. The fact that they stayed on to continue the discussions after the formal end of the sessions is an indication that they were interested in the subject matter of focus groups and that they had bonded as a group. These informal interactions were also facilitated by the refreshments that were served in the course of the discussions.

#### **4. Suggested employment strategies**

The study sought get the perceptions of young people regarding what constituted the constraints to labour market entry that they faced. Instead of just noting the constraints, the study went on to get their perspectives on how such constraints could be addressed or lessened. This is contrary to most studies about the youth that never capture this aspect. Instead, solutions are usually those proposed by researchers as experts and presented as recommendations at the end of the report of survey. As Sechele (2015) has noted, it is never clear what the young people have proposed as strategies to address labour market entry constraints. The articulated employment strategies were formed around a number of constraints, such as, limited opportunities for formal jobs, unfair share of youth in the labour market, difficulties in accessing institutional funding, lack of information on training and employment opportunities and legal constraints. In order to address these constraints and to provide a more enabling environment for jobs and self-employment, the youth suggested the following: formation of the unemployed youth organisation, enforcement of minimum wage legislation, job sharing schemes, international job searches, short term skills training programmes targeting unemployed youth, paying equal attention to job creation and self-employment and their linkages, information packaging and repealing of inhibiting legislation.

##### *4.1 Unemployed youth organisation*

Young unemployed people are worried that many of their concerns are either unknown or do not reach the policy makers and the legislature in that there is no organisation that represents the voice of unemployed young people. If only they could mobilise themselves to form such a collective body or structure, they would have a platform to share their unemployment experiences and ideas regarding how they could get out of their situation. They would also get more informed about government policy and empowered to make meaningful changes in society. Such an organisation is expected to improve dialogue between the government and young people on issues that affect their entry into the formal labour market and self-employment:

...Sometimes we just talk...but we do not let the policy makers know about it. Our ideas and suggestions must be implemented by those who are in a position to do so. We need to form a group as young people to make sure this is done (Female, participant).

It is very important to note that presently unemployed young people in Botswana work as individuals in an attempt to solve their own individual problems and do not have their own forum where they could discuss them as well as share experiences. The formation of an organisation for the unemployed young people would be an important contribution which would link them with the Botswana National Youth Council (BNYC). The BNYC plays an advocacy role for youth organisations with the government but deals with registered non-government organisations and not individuals.

#### *4.2 Minimum wage policy and creation of decent employment*

One of the issues that young people have raised is the lack of enforcement of minimum wage legislation and the fact that some activities are not covered. As a result those who find jobs are often exploited by the employers by paying them a pittance to the extent that they quit their jobs to remain unemployed or look for better ones. They suggested that the existing minimum wage legislation should cover all sectors of the economy. In this way it is expected that young people would be attracted to take some jobs that are currently unprotected and therefore perceived as undesirable. This would reduce the number of young people who roam the streets unemployed. A focus group participant decried the lack of enforcement of the minimum wage legislation and its consequences as follows:

Also if a minimum wage limit could be set and implemented seriously, I take it that at the moment the minimum wage is about P800; but it is not being followed at all and this discourages many of us. If this was followed up and implemented, I could actually go and look for a job as a house maid because I think P800 is something I can work for. But this law is not implemented at all. When you get a job as a maid you get paid only P300 by employers which is not adequate to meet our needs (Female participant, Gaborone).

Implied in the excerpt above is that not only should the minimum wage be set and applied to all types of employment, but the wages must be adequate to maintain a minimum standard of living. In an attempt to ensure compliance with the minimum wages by the employers, young unemployed people take cognisance of the fact that there could be staff shortages within the government which would affect implementation capacity. In this way they recommend out sourcing of some government activities. A young unemployed woman in a focus group discussion in Gaborone noted: ‘... let the government give the implementation responsibility to a private company because the government keeps on talking about these things and none goes around to check whether the laws are being implemented in the households...’

#### *4.3 Job sharing programmes*

One of the constraints to labour market entry noted by the unemployed youth is a tendency by adults to remain working until they reach a compulsory age of retirement, without giving way to the youth to have their own share in the labour market. As a strategy to ensure that all benefit from the national cake, the young unemployed people are suggesting introduction of job sharing programmes by the government. These could be in the form of offering short term jobs by the government which has been the largest employer for many years:

I would say that people must be employed on a contract rather than permanently. Let's say if employed for only three years it would be easy for the employer to tell them to go at the end of this period to give way for a fresh graduate... (Female participant, Gaborone focus group).

Within the government sector the retirement age is sixty years, but employees could retire and receive a pension after serving for twenty years as government employees or when they are aged forty-five years. However there is no evidence that many people retire early. It would be important to induce people to do so by offering some attractive monetary incentives or other benefits to those who opt to retire early as a way of opening up employment opportunities for young people. On the suggestion of short term employment contracts, this would mean turning pensionable jobs into short term contracts, which is most likely to disadvantage the citizens.

#### *4.4 Tapping into the global labour market*

Young people are cognisant of the fact that although Botswana population is very small (approximately 2 million), the labour force has grown more than the number of jobs that are being created. In the context of limited formal job opportunities in the country, it has been suggested that young people and other citizens must now consider job search outside the country: '...we should start looking for jobs in other countries just like foreigners do...' (An unemployed young woman participant: Gaborone focus group). Apart from the apartheid era where they used to work in the mines in South Africa (Livingston, 1985), Botswana citizens do not usually seek employment opportunities outside their country. While there is no legislation that restricts the citizens to work only in Botswana, the government has contractual agreements with students it sponsors outside the country to return to Botswana after graduation so that they can contribute to its development. However, in the context of limited job opportunities in the country, young unemployed graduates suggest that they should be allowed to work outside the country when they graduate, rather than return to join the ranks of the unemployed.

#### *4.5 Improving labour market information: packaging and dissemination*

In Botswana self-employment is seen as a panacea for shortage of formal sector jobs. As a result, the government has come up with programmes to facilitate young people to participate in self-employment such as the Youth Development Fund, Young Farmers Fund and Citizen Entrepreneurial development Agency (Okurut & Ama, 2013). These provide funding on a subsidised basis for young people who wish to venture into self-employment. While unemployed young people are aware of these funding opportunities, the focus groups revealed that they do not have detailed information about them and that there were no readily available pamphlets and television programmes about them. This makes it difficult for young people to participate in these programmes:

We have heard about these programmes, but what I know is that most of the young people do not have much information about them. We, including those who have graduated from the university like me, lack information about how we can use these programmes to start our projects (Participant: Mogoditshane young women's focus group).

The unemployed people have suggested that funding agencies and the Department of Youth should come up with information packaging on available self-employment opportunities. This should highlight what funding programmes are available, where, and how they can be accessed. It was found that young people have received conflicting information about government funding programmes from their friends. As suggested in focus groups, information could be disseminated effectively using the national television and undertaking of school and community out reaches by the Department of Culture and Youth:

We really need guidance and counselling. We are now technologically advanced because we have a TV station. But the station does not provide slots for guidance... Most of the time slots are occupied by cartoon programmes...Our TV station must introduce programmes that encourage and teach us how we can make a living as young people. They must give us advice on the different projects that we can come up with (Participant: Gaborone young men's focus group).

...They [youth officers] must also visit...secondary schools to spread the message about self-employment and how the young people could benefit from their programmes so that when they leave school they are well informed about these possibilities in case they want to start their businesses...(Participant: Mogoditshane young women's focus group).

#### *4.6 Special training programmes for out of school and unemployed youth*

These programmes would assist in meeting the skills gap, particularly for those viable projects that are required for funding through government programmes. Unemployed young people feel that the government must not be content to dismiss their applications for funding on the grounds that they do not have relevant training in the case of skills intensive projects. Instead, the government must address this need by designing short term courses tailor made for young people who wish to enter self-employment. Since young people do not have funds to attend formal training in government and private institutions to acquire skills, one suggestion is that once they have an idea and are without training, they should have their proposed projects approved by the Department of Culture and Youth, following which they are sent for training in this area. This suggests that the existing youth development fund, which disburses funds to support self-employment, should be extended or modified to cover training related to this. As noted by a participant in the Gaborone young women's focus group, 'It would be good for young people to be taught in this way because they could use what they have learnt to start something for a living, like an agricultural project'.

#### *4.7 Wage employment and self-employment linkages*

The dominant thinking among politicians and policy makers in Botswana is that young people should seek to create their own jobs by engaging in self-employment activities. They are expected to come up with feasible project ideas and submit applications for funding to the Department of youth and other funding agencies such as citizen entrepreneurial development agency. While this is a good move by the government to assist young people, it appears that this has been over-emphasised to the extent that creating and increasing access to other forms of employment such as paid jobs for an employer have been subordinated. In focus



groups, unemployed young people suggested that the government must also create jobs (wage employment) for young people rather than focus exclusively on self-employment:

The other major problem is that we don't find jobs at all. If we had jobs then we could save up and then apply for a loan so that we top up to start our projects. If you have money then you can start a good project that will generate income to allow you to pay back the loan. When you have a loan you will be compelled to payback, won't you?

Drawing on the excerpt above, the youth are for the idea of treating self-employment and wage employment as mutually inclusive rather than mutually exclusive categories. This implies designing labour market strategies in such a way that they capture and facilitate linkages between the two domains as well as paying equal attention to both. It was suggested by focus group participants that given the difficulties of accessing funds, a paid job for an employer would assist in setting up young people into self-employment.

#### *4.8 Legal changes*

Unemployed young people revealed that they are discouraged and disadvantaged by conflicting legislation and policies to enter self-employment. While young people could be allocated funds to start their own income generating projects at the age of 18 years, there are some laws, such as the Interpretation Act and Land Act that bar young people aged less than 21 years from applying for land for the same purpose on the grounds that they cannot sign legal contracts. Young people have suggested that the government must look into this matter to ensure that they are not disadvantaged. A young unemployed woman in the Mogoditshane focus group captured this constraint and the need for legislative changes as follows:

...oh, yes! Another thing is that some young people aged 18 years do not qualify to apply for land even if they have some business ideas. Yet young people who are aged 18 years would normally have completed their secondary schooling and are also allowed to vote in national elections. I find it strange that while they are allowed to vote, at the same time they are not to apply for land. Isn't this a contradiction in laws? In the end the business idea that this person had would die. Something must be done about these laws.

Whilst they did not specify how the laws could be changed to facilitate their entry into self-employment, one possibility is to lower the majority age from 21 years to 18 years as was done with the voting age. Once this is done the youth will be able to apply for ownership of business land whenever available. The laws would not be incompatible with funding policies. The youth also suggested that they be assisted by the government to protect their ideas, as they noted that they are stolen by funding agencies after rejecting their applications. One participant in the Mogoditshane unemployed young people's focus group suggested that 'The government must advise us on these matters. It must teach us the basics of starting a business and how to protect our ideas'.

### **5. Reflection on suggested employment strategies**

Whilst the employment strategies discussed in this paper are not formulated by experts, they are however at par with expert knowledge and echo youth employment concerns highlighted

by international organisations such as the ILO. The need for dialogue between the unemployed youth and policy makers through the suggested unemployed youth organisation, for instance, is a validation of the core of this research paper that the youth are capable of reflecting on the strategies that can improve their lot in as far as labour market entry is concerned. This is also in line with the United Nations convention on the rights of the child as discussed in this paper. The suggestion to create decent employment opportunities and apply the minimum legislation to all sectors of the economy as well as good pay is in line with the United Nations millennium development goal of creating decent employment for youth (Garcia & Fares).

There is also a general consensus by labour market experts that, considering the youth budge and high levels of youth unemployment, the youth need to be given their fair share of the labour market and other national resources (Curtain, 2004). In this research the youth have queried employment strategies that keep the adults for too long on the job without paying much regard to protracted periods of youth joblessness.

As the world economies are increasingly becoming integrated through the globalisation process, countries are encouraged to have a global outlook. The thinking among the unemployed young people is in line with this as they wish to explore job searches not only locally but even in other countries and that they need to be assisted by governments in this regard. This calls for a change in the educational curriculum to produce graduates that would be absorbed in the local and global labour markets.

The suggestion to target the out of school and unemployed young people with short term training programmes is in line with the thinking among many African governments and supported by the World Bank to offer them second chances (Garcia & Fares, 2008). Usually such programmes are based on a curriculum that offers technical and practical skills and is less flexible as well as uses less formal instruction methods. These are expected to assist in improving young people's chances for absorption into the labour market. Other second chance programmes include public works programmes to offer young people initial work experience and back to school initiatives for those who have left without completing their general education (Garcia & Fares, 2008).

Gathering from their expressions in this research, the youth do not consider their knowledge and suggested employment strategies as the only valid ones. They are fully aware that while they have ideas, they are not the policy implementers and need the cooperation of, and negotiations with, the policy makers if their wishes are to see the light of the day. This suggests that expert knowledge as well as that of policy makers and implementers should be taken into account. The ideas proposed by the youth should be assessed by all concerned stakeholders, including young people themselves, for their feasibility.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research set out to uncover the views of young people on what they consider as feasible forms of employment for the youth, especially the strategies that could be formed and employed to address their concerns. It is based on the idea that young people are able to do so,

albeit they may not be able to put those ideas into practice as they do not occupy strategic positions in society as far as policy making is concerned. The young people were found to be articulate in focus groups and have come up with the ideas that policy makers can draw upon. Their knowledge was found to match that of experts. The suggested strategies are: specialised training that targets the out of school and unemployed youth, creation of decent employment, availing information on existing employment opportunities, the need to tap into the global market, review of laws that inhibit youth labour market participation, wage employment and self-employment linkages and continued dialogue between policy makers and youth on how to ease labour market constraints. However, the fact that they are able to come up with suggestions does not imply that they want a world of their own apart from adults, policy makers and experts. Their agency is based on the significance of collaborations and negotiations with these key stakeholders if their wishes are to see the light of the day. This calls for explorations of fora where they could effectively and freely exchange views with experts such as annual conferences on youth employment and unemployment.

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