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ABSTRACT

Addressing the multiple challenges faced by young people requires a multidisciplinary approach, particularly with regard to unemployment, which remains a critical political and socio-economic issue in Africa. This study examines the interaction between economic growth and youth unemployment in Zambia. Despite a declining national unemployment rate over the past two decades, Zambia's rapidly growing population adds new entrants to the labor force each year, exacerbating the challenge. Using World Bank data on GDP growth and youth unemployment rates from 1991 to 2023, the study analyzes the effectiveness of these policies in reducing youth unemployment. The results show a complex relationship between economic growth and youth employment. While economic recovery in the late 1990s led to a decline in youth unemployment, stable growth in the early 2000s did not prevent a subsequent increase in youth unemployment. Post-2010 data show a significant decline in youth unemployment, suggesting that targeted employment policies have been effective alongside stable economic growth. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on GDP growth was not matched by a significant increase in youth unemployment, likely due to government interventions. The study identifies persistent challenges such as limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure and skills mismatches, but also highlights opportunities in the digital economy and public-private partnerships. The research underscores the need for a multi-pronged approach to youth unemployment, combining economic growth with targeted skills development and entrepreneurship support. Ensuring gender equality and inclusive policies are essential to maximize Zambia's demographic dividend. The study concludes with recommendations for improving youth empowerment programs, strengthening mentorship and internship opportunities, and developing robust monitoring frameworks to ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of youth employment initiatives in Zambia.

Affrontare le molteplici sfide che i giovani devono affrontare richiede un approccio multidisciplinare, in particolare per quanto riguarda la disoccupazione, che rimane una questione politica e socioeconomica critica in Africa. Questo studio esamina l'interazione tra crescita economica e disoccupazione giovanile in Zambia. Nonostante il calo del tasso di disoccupazione nazionale negli ultimi due decenni, la rapida crescita della popolazione dello Zambia aggiunge ogni anno nuovi ingressi alla forza lavoro, aggravando la sfida. Utilizzando i dati della Banca Mondiale sulla crescita del PIL e sui tassi di disoccupazione giovanile dal 1991 al 2023, lo studio analizza l'efficacia di queste politiche nel ridurre la disoccupazione giovanile. I risultati mostrano una relazione

complessa tra crescita economica e occupazione giovanile. Mentre la ripresa economica alla fine degli anni '90 ha portato a un calo della disoccupazione giovanile, la crescita stabile nei primi anni 2000 non ha impedito un successivo aumento di tale disoccupazione. I dati successivi al 2010 mostrano un calo significativo della disoccupazione giovanile, suggerendo che politiche occupazionali mirate sono state efficaci insieme a una crescita economica stabile. Tuttavia, l'impatto della pandemia di COVID-19 sulla crescita del PIL non è stato accompagnato da un aumento significativo della disoccupazione giovanile, probabilmente a causa degli interventi governativi. Lo studio individua sfide persistenti come l'accesso limitato ai finanziamenti, le infrastrutture inadeguate e gli squilibri tra domanda e offerta di competenze, ma evidenzia anche le opportunità offerte dall'economia digitale e dai partenariati pubblico-privato. La ricerca sottolinea la necessità di un approccio su più fronti alla disoccupazione giovanile, che combini la crescita economica con lo sviluppo mirato delle competenze e il sostegno all'imprenditorialità. Garantire l'uguaglianza di genere e le politiche inclusive sono essenziali per massimizzare il dividendo demografico dello Zambia. Lo studio si conclude con raccomandazioni per migliorare i programmi di empowerment dei giovani, rafforzare le opportunità di tutoraggio e tirocinio e sviluppare solidi quadri di monitoraggio per garantire la sostenibilità e l'efficacia a lungo termine delle iniziative di occupazione giovanile in Zambia.

Keywords: Youth, Unemployment, Economic Growth, Policy

1 – Introduction

Addressing the multiple and complex problems faced by young people requires a multidisciplinary approach. One of these difficulties is unemployment. Despite the efforts of some governments to attempt and promote youth performance in their economies, youth unemployment remains a major political and socioeconomic problem in Africa (Baah-Boateng, 2016). Zambia faces a challenge with youth unemployment, despite having a large young population (ILO, 2024). Almost one in five young Zambians are without a job, and the situation is worse in cities. This disproportionately affects young women, especially in urban areas. Furthermore, a significant number of youths are not engaged in education, employment, or training. This limits Zambia's ability to benefit from its young population. Zambia's unemployment rate has generally declined over the past two decades, but more needs to be done as the country's population is growing at an annual rate of 2.8%, which means that many more people, especially young people, are entering the labor force each year. In Zambia, political violence and crime are closely linked to youth unemployment. Many young people are believed to be involved in criminal activities and violent political campaigns by politicians from different political parties due to the lack of youth employment (Mukosa et al., 2020).

Elected governments must establish policies and procedures that support and address public concerns in order to achieve sustainable economic growth (Yangailo, 2024a). The government of Zambia continues to pursue a multi-pronged strategy to address unemployment. Affirmative action in specific industries, skills development efforts, and youth empowerment grants are examples of government initiatives. The formulation of the National Industrial Policy in 2018 was motivated by the aspirations of Zambia's Vision, which aims to transform Zambia into a prosperous middle-income economy by 2030 (Yangailo & Chambani, 2023, p.153). Public-private partnerships encourage investment in industries with high employment rates and provide internships. While these initiatives face obstacles in terms of coordination and resource availability, they aim to provide young Zambians with the

opportunities and skills necessary to secure decent employment. In addition, this study examines the interaction between economic growth and youth unemployment in Zambia.

2 – Literature Review

Despite a youthful population, Zambia struggles with high youth unemployment (18.8%), with urban areas (20%) faring worse than rural areas (16.5%) (ILO, 2024). This challenge disproportionately affects young women, especially in cities, where their unemployment rate reaches a staggering 23.7%. More worryingly, half of Zambia's youth are not in education, employment or training (NEET), hindering the country's ability to capitalize on its demographic dividend (ILO, 2024). The literature on youth unemployment highlights various factors that contribute to the problem. Baah-Boateng (2016) notes that youth unemployment in Africa is driven by structural economic issues, including a mismatch between the skills provided by the education system and those demanded by the labor market. In Zambia, Twambo and Kabubi (2018) highlight poor governance and a preference for formal employment over entrepreneurship as key drivers of unemployment. Mungule (2016) further identifies the lack of mentorship and experience as barriers to employment for young Zambians.

Research by Bhorat et al. (2015) highlights the importance of access to finance in promoting youth entrepreneurship, noting that financial constraints significantly limit the ability of young people to start businesses. This is consistent with findings from other developing countries, where entrepreneurship is seen as a viable solution to unemployment but is often hindered by financial barriers (Jumpah et al., 2020).

2.1 – Development Policies and Youth Employment in Zambia

In Zambia, where more than half of the population is under the age of 18, finding work for young people remains a major challenge. To reduce youth unemployment, the government has launched a number of policies and initiatives in collaboration with various international organizations.

2.1.1 – National Youth Policy

The National Youth Policy (NYP) recognizes young people as valuable assets to society and aims to empower them in various aspects of life. It prioritizes equipping young people for the workforce through vocational training and entrepreneurship programs, while promoting healthy lifestyles through access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health education, mental health support and HIV/AIDS prevention (National Policy, 2015). Education remains a key focus, with the goal of equipping youth with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the economy. The NYP also promotes civic participation by encouraging youth participation in decision-making and providing platforms for their voices to be heard. Finally, the policy promotes gender equality by ensuring that young women have equal opportunities in education, employment and leadership.

2.1.2 – Technical Education, Vocational and Entrepreneurship Training Policy

The Technical Education, Vocational, and Entrepreneurship Training policy is a cornerstone of Zambia's strategy to improve the skills and employability of its workforce, especially the youth. It addresses the skills gap and aligns the education system with the needs of the labor market

(TEVETA, 2024). A study by Afeti and Adubra (2012) shows that similar vocational training initiatives in other African countries have been effective in reducing youth unemployment by providing practical skills that meet labor market demands.

2.1.3 – Youth Empowerment Programs and Funds

Zambia's youth empowerment efforts are guided by the National Youth Policy (NYP), first launched in 1994 and revised in 2006 and 2015. The policy aims to integrate youth into the national development agenda, promote youth participation in decision-making, and enhance the socio-economic welfare of young people (National Youth Policy, 2015). Similar programs in Ghana have shown that targeted empowerment initiatives can significantly improve youth employment outcomes (Chigunta, 2017).

3 – Methodology

The primary objective of the study is to examine trends in youth employment opportunities as a result of Zambia's development policies over time. A number of other development indicators were also examined, including GDP and the national unemployment rate. The following study analyzes development policies and their outcomes using data on Zambia's GDP growth rate and unemployment rate from the World Bank data website for the years 1991-2023.

3.1 – Validation and Triangulation

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, the study employed triangulation. This approach helps to corroborate the findings and provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between economic growth and youth unemployment.

3.2 – Reliability

Consistency of the data was checked through cross-verification with multiple sources, including government reports and international databases.

4 – Presentation and Analysis of Results

Figure 1 shows the trend of GDP growth rate and youth unemployment rate in Zambia from 1991 to 2023.

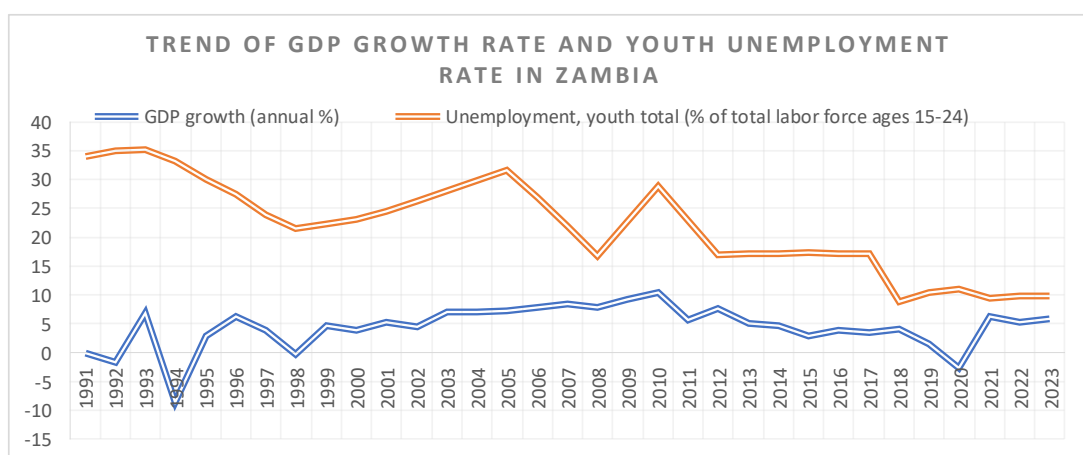


Fig. 1 – Trend of GDP growth and Youth unemployment rate in Zambia

4.1 – GDP Growth Rate

The GDP growth rate shows significant fluctuations over the period. In the early 1990s there were periods of negative growth, especially around 1993 and 1994. A strong recovery is observed in the late 1990s, with peaks around 1996 and 1998. The early 2000s show moderate and stable growth rates. After 2008, there is a more stable and generally positive growth trend, albeit with some volatility, particularly around 2015, and a notable dip in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2021 onwards, the growth rate seems to stabilize around 5%.

4.2 – Youth Unemployment Rate

Youth unemployment was very high in the early 1990s, peaking at over 35%. From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, there is a noticeable decline in the youth unemployment rate. After a relative low in the mid-2000s, the youth unemployment rate begins to rise again, peaking around 2010. After 2010, a significant decline in youth unemployment is observed, stabilizing at around 20% from 2015 onwards.

4.3 – Early 1990s Economic Turbulence

The early 1990s were characterized by economic instability, with negative GDP growth rates and extremely high youth unemployment. This period was influenced by structural adjustment programs, economic reforms or external economic shocks.

4.4 – Recovery and Stabilization

The late 1990s show a recovery in GDP growth due to economic reforms, stabilization policies and increased investment. This period also saw a corresponding decline in youth unemployment, suggesting that economic growth created employment opportunities for the youth.

4.5 – Early 2000s Stability

The early 2000s show a period of more stable economic growth with moderate fluctuations. However, despite stable GDP growth, youth unemployment rates begin to rise again in the mid-2000s, suggesting that economic growth during this period may not have been inclusive or labor-intensive enough to absorb the growing youth labor force.

4.6 – Impact of the 2008 Financial Crisis

The 2008 global financial crisis does not appear to have caused a sharp downturn in Zambia's GDP growth, but subsequent years show fluctuating growth rates. Youth unemployment has continued to rise in the aftermath of the crisis, suggesting a delayed impact on employment.

4.7 – Post-2010 Developments

After 2010, a sharp decline in youth unemployment suggests effective policies or economic conditions that created job opportunities. The stabilization of both GDP growth and youth unemployment rates in recent years suggests a more resilient economic structure and possibly effective youth employment programmes.

4.8 – Impact of COVID-19

The decline in GDP growth around 2020 is consistent with the global economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting reduced economic activity. However, the youth unemployment rate remained relatively stable, suggesting government intervention or support mechanisms that cushioned the labor market impact on youth.

5 – Discussion

This study examined youth employment trends in Zambia in the context of the country's development policies. While the focus was on youth unemployment, the analysis of GDP growth provided a valuable context for understanding the economic environment in which youth employment policies were implemented.

5.1 – Economic Growth and Youth Unemployment

The results show a complex interaction between economic growth and youth unemployment. The early 1990s, characterized by negative GDP growth, coincided with the highest youth unemployment rates.

This highlights the crucial role of a growing economy in creating employment opportunities for young people. In the late 1990s, economic recovery coincided with a decline in youth unemployment, suggesting that effective economic policies can contribute to youth employment. This supports Baah-Boateng's (2016) view that economic stability is crucial for creating employment opportunities for young people. However, the picture is not always so clear-cut. Despite stable economic growth in the early 2000s, youth unemployment started to rise again. This suggests that economic growth alone is not sufficient to tackle youth unemployment. The nature and composition of economic growth is likely to play a role, with some sectors being more labor-intensive and thus creating more job opportunities for young people.

5.2 – Post-2010 Developments and Policy Interventions

An analysis of trends beyond 2010 shows encouraging signs. A significant decline in youth unemployment was observed, coinciding with a period of relatively stable GDP growth. This suggests that a combination of economic growth and targeted youth employment policies may have been effective. The potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth unemployment appears to have been muted, possibly due to government interventions that mitigated job losses among young people.

The apparent success of post-2010 policies in reducing youth unemployment suggests that a combination of stable economic growth and targeted interventions can be effective. This is consistent with the findings of Chigunta (2017), who found that well-designed youth employment programs supported by stable economic conditions can lead to significant reductions in youth unemployment.

5.3 – Sectoral Analysis

The sectoral composition of economic growth is critical. For example, growth in the mining sector may not generate as many jobs for young people as growth in manufacturing or services. Policies should therefore focus on promoting sectors with high employment potential, such as

agriculture, manufacturing and ICT. In addition, promoting entrepreneurship in these sectors can create many job opportunities for youth. In addition, a more diversified economy would create new jobs and opportunities for Zambians, thereby promoting broader economic growth and development (Yangailo, 2024b).

5.4 – Addressing Skills Mismatch

One of the main challenges identified is the skills mismatch between what is taught in educational institutions and what is required in the labor market. The policy on technical education, vocational training and entrepreneurship is a step in the right direction but needs to be more responsive to market needs. Regular cooperation between industry leaders and educational institutions is essential to update curricula and provide relevant skills training.

5.5 – Gender Equality and Inclusive Policies

Ensuring gender equality in education and employment opportunities is critical. Policies must specifically target young women, who face higher unemployment rates, through initiatives such as scholarships, mentorship programs and support for women entrepreneurs. Inclusive policies should also address other marginalized groups and ensure equal access to opportunities.

5.6 – Recommendations for Improving Youth Unemployment

5.6.1 – Enhance Technical and Vocational Education

To effectively address youth unemployment, improving technical and vocational education is paramount. A critical component of this improvement is curriculum alignment. Regular curriculum updates, developed in close collaboration with industry stakeholders, ensure that the training provided is relevant and up to date with market demands.

This alignment helps bridge the gap between education and employment, making graduates more employable. In addition, there is an urgent need for infrastructure investment. Increased funding for technical and vocational education and training institutions will improve their infrastructure and resources, providing students with better learning environments and equipment that reflects industry standards. In addition, providing scholarships or financial incentives is essential to encourage more youth to pursue vocational and technical training. These incentives can reduce financial barriers and attract more students to these critical fields, ultimately reducing youth unemployment.

5.6.2 Promote Entrepreneurship

Promoting entrepreneurship among young people can significantly reduce unemployment. Improving access to finance is a key measure. Establishing youth-focused financial institutions or funds that offer low-interest loans and grants can enable young entrepreneurs to start and sustain their businesses. Mentorship programs are equally important. Creating robust networks in which experienced entrepreneurs mentor young entrepreneurs can provide invaluable insight and support to help them navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship. In addition, the development of incubators and accelerators specifically for youth-led start-ups is crucial. These incubators can provide access to resources, training and markets, giving young entrepreneurs a solid foundation on which to grow their businesses and create employment opportunities for their peers.

5.6.3 – Strengthen Public-Private Partnerships

Strengthening public-private partnerships is a strategic approach to tackling youth unemployment. Internship programs fostered through collaboration between government, educational institutions, and the private sector can create numerous internship and apprenticeship opportunities. These programs provide practical experience and enhance the employability of young people. In addition, encouraging companies to include youth employment programs in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives can make a significant contribution to reducing youth unemployment. By integrating these programs into their CSR strategies, companies can play an active role in nurturing the next generation of workers and entrepreneurs.

5.6.4 – Digital Economy Opportunities

The digital economy offers tremendous opportunities to reduce youth unemployment. Expanding digital literacy training programs is essential to equip youth with the skills needed for the modern job market. These programs should cover various aspects of digital literacy, from basic computer skills to advanced technologies such as coding and data analysis. In addition, providing incentives and support for youth-led technology start-ups is critical. Access to technology and innovation hubs can foster creativity and innovation among young entrepreneurs, enabling them to develop technological solutions that address societal needs and create employment opportunities. Supporting these startups not only helps create jobs, but also drives economic growth through technological advancement.

5.6.5 – Inclusive Policies

The development of inclusive policies is essential to ensure that all young people, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities for education and employment. Gender-specific programs, such as women's entrepreneurship initiatives and employment services, are needed to address the unique challenges faced by young women. These programs can help bridge the gender gap in the labor market and empower young women to make a significant contribution to the economy.

Similarly, policies and programmes must be inclusive of young people with disabilities and provide them with the necessary support to access education and employment opportunities. Ensuring inclusiveness in policymaking can create a more equitable and diverse workforce, driving innovation and economic growth.

5.6.6 – Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation

Continuous monitoring and evaluation of youth employment programs is critical to their success. Implementing a robust monitoring and evaluation framework can help track the effectiveness of these programs and identify areas for improvement. This framework should include regular data collection and analysis to assess the impact of different initiatives on youth employment.

Using data from monitoring efforts, policymakers can make informed adjustments to continuously improve policies and programs. This adaptive approach ensures that initiatives remain relevant and effective in meeting the evolving needs of the youth labour market, ultimately contributing to a sustainable reduction in youth unemployment.

5.7 – Policy Implications

The findings underscore the need for a multi-pronged approach to tackling youth unemployment in Zambia. While economic growth is essential for creating employment opportunities, it must be complemented by targeted policies that address the skills mismatch between graduates and employers. Investing in technical and vocational education and training (TEVET) programs, as well as promoting entrepreneurship through access to finance and mentorship programs, could equip young Zambians with the skills and resources they need to succeed in the labor market. In addition, ensuring gender equality in education and employment opportunities is critical to maximizing Zambia's demographic dividend. By empowering young women to fully participate in the labor force, Zambia can realize its full economic potential.

The apparent success of recent policies in reducing youth unemployment warrants further investigation. Understanding the specific interventions and the economic context that contributed to this decline would allow policymakers to replicate these successes in the future. Finally, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of youth employment policies is essential to ensure their continued effectiveness and adaptability in the face of a changing economic landscape.

5.8 – Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study relied on secondary data analysis, which limited the ability to delve deeper into the specific content and implementation of youth employment policies. Future research could include qualitative studies to examine the experiences of young people navigating the labor market and to assess the effectiveness of specific youth employment programs on the ground. In addition, an examination of the sectoral composition of economic growth and its relationship to youth employment opportunities would provide valuable insights.

6 – Conclusion

This study examined the complex issue of youth unemployment in Zambia. It explored the interplay between economic growth and youth employment policies, highlighting the need for a multifaceted approach to address this challenge. The findings show that economic growth plays a critical role in creating employment opportunities for young people. However, economic growth alone is not enough. The nature and composition of growth, as well as targeted youth employment policies, are critical factors.

While there have been positive developments in recent years, with a significant reduction in youth unemployment, challenges remain. Limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure and skills mismatches continue to hamper progress. Cultural norms and gender inequalities further complicate matters.

Looking ahead, there are opportunities to strengthen youth empowerment initiatives. Investment in TVET infrastructure, public-private collaboration and the promotion of inclusive policies are essential. Strengthening mentorship and internship programs, along with a robust monitoring and evaluation framework, will ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of these efforts.

In a nutshell, addressing youth unemployment in Zambia requires a multi-pronged approach. By promoting economic growth that is inclusive and supports job creation, alongside targeted skills development, support for entrepreneurship, and ensuring gender equality, Zambia can empower its young population and unlock its full economic potential.

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