Youth experiences of the decent work deficit

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Abstract
The global population is extraordinarily youthful. This creates great opportunities, and significant challenges. With an estimated 1 billion young people entering the labour market between 2015 and 2025, only 40% are likely to find jobs under present conditions. Ensuring decent work for all is of pressing importance, so much so that it forms a major part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8, set to be achieved between 2015 and 2030. It is an immense challenge to secure decent work for all within the next decade, given that at present much of the work available to young people is poorly paid, dangerous, insecure, or in short supply. Drawing upon a survey of young people in lower and middle income countries, we offer insight into young people’s lived experiences of what the International Labour Organisation calls the “decent work deficit”. We document the struggle of getting by on low wages, and the resulting tendency towards multiple overlapping forms of ‘portfolio’ employment. We report insufficient demand for young people’s labour and the insecurity of the work which is available. Furthermore, we share young people’s reports of having too little money to kick start their education or business ventures, and their lack of connections to people who could help them secure work. This paper offers insights into young people’s lived experiences of the decent work deficit, complementing a wealth of international statistical data. We highlight the rich insights offered by young people who are struggling to make a life for themselves and their families; these are some of the lived realities of insufficient decent. We argue that young people’s accounts of their working lives are critical to designing effective interventions to deliver decent work for all.
Alusine. Entrepreneur and graduate of Restless Development’s Business Development School in Sierra Leone. Alusine describes his business as an electronics shop and uses a playlist of Nigerian, American and Sierra Leonean music to entice his customers. Photograph courtesy of Restless Development.

Introduction
It is no exaggeration to state that we live in an era defined by youth. Staggeringly, more than half of the world’s 7 billion strong population is under 30 years old – nine tenths of whom are from ‘developing’ and ‘emerging’ economies (UNESCO, 2013). Most developing countries today have a population pyramid dominated by children and young adults (Figure 1; Eguavoen, 2010 in Sommers, 2011). “Never before,” the United Nations Population Fund notes, “have there been so many young people” (UNFPA, 2014). The future, too, looks youthful with global total of 15-24 year olds expected to peak in the late 2060s; the number of young people living in low-income countries¹ will probably peak after the year 2100² (UNPD, 2019). Whether this youthful demographic profile offers a “demographic dividend or a demographic bomb” is open to debate (Lin, 2012, no page number). A debate to which decent work is central. Fairly paid, decent work for working age youth populations offers a possible route out of poverty for both individuals and countries alike.

² According to the medium variant projection.
For over two decades geographers have researched the distinctive life stage of youth, focusing on themes including politics, migration, and work (Smith & Mills, 2019). The growing body of research into geographies of youth and work, however, has been criticised for paying insufficient attention to the voices of young people and their own experiences of work (Dyson, 2008). In 2019, Geographer Lorraine van Blerk published a short article asking “where in the world are youth geographies going?” (p.1), adding to calls for greater engagement with young people. Van Blerk emphasises the need to learn from young people – in particular, a growing population of young Africans - who face enormous challenges including underemployment, climate change, poverty and inequality. It is young people themselves, van Blerk argues, who will help generate understandings of, and solutions to, the structural reproduction of inequality.

This paper contributes to the youth geographies literature by (i) outlining the youth employment challenge in lower income countries as described in international datasets, and (ii) using our international survey of young people from lower and middle income countries (LMICs3) (run by the youth organisation Restless Development and university researchers) to reflect on how these large-scale patterns are experienced in practice. We follow van Blerk (2019) in emphasising the benefit of including the voices of young people themselves.

Youth employment is a pressing global challenge with grave implications if not addressed (O’Higgins, 2017). The world economic system, in which young people’s aspirations are formed and in which they must attempt to find work, is structurally uneven and socially inequitable. We argue that rather than individualising responsibility for securing decent work by requiring young people to work hard and aim high (which is the standard response), we need to better understand youth experiences of work and address the barriers which prevent young people from accessing decent work (see Boxes 1-3 for key definitions).

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3 Low and middle income countries, as defined by the OECD, include: Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belize, Benin, Bhutan, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cambodia, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, China (People's Republic of), Colombia, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo, Cook Islands, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, Djibouti, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Fiji, Gabon, Gambia, Georgia, Ghana, Grenada, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kiribati, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lebanon, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Madagascar, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Marshall Islands, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Micronesia, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Montserrat, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Namibia, Nauru, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Niue, Pakistan, Palau, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Saint Helena, Samoa, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Sudan, Suriname, Swaziland, Syrian Arab Republic, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tokelau, Tonga, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Venezuela, Vietnam, Wallis and Futuna, West Bank and Gaza Strip, Yemen, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.
Figure 1: Population change in the least developed countries, in millions. This series of population pyramids shows past, current and future population age and sex structures in what the World Bank currently classifies as the 47 least developed countries. The population size is given by age group and sex, in millions. Redrawn by Georgia King, based on a graph from the United Nations Population Division (2017b).

Box 1. What is work?
‘Work’ is commonly understood as an activity that is paid (e.g. Margaret Reid, 1934, in Charmes, 2019, p.8). However, broader definitions of work encompass both paid and unpaid work activities, allowing us to recognise diverse forms of labour. In particular, unpaid care and domestic work are highly gendered and sometimes overlooked forms of work, with women spending on average 3.2 times longer than men on these tasks globally (Addati et al., 2018). The work of young people in lower income countries is self-employment, meaning that one works for oneself; this could take the form of entrepreneurship, co-operative work, or unpaid family work (OECD, 2018; Burchell et al., 2015). Here we adopt a broad definition of work, inclusive of these varied arrangements.

Box 2. What is decent work?
“Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.” (International Labour Organisation, 2019).

Box 3. Who are young people?
‘Youth’ defies easy definition as it differs with social context (Leavy and Smith, 2010). Traditionally it marks a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, indicated by events such as marriage or becoming financially independent. It is increasingly recognised that in times of economic uncertainty, the ability of young people to transition to adulthood can be delayed (for example, if they cannot find a job). Broad definitions,
A youth employment crisis

A ‘crisis of unemployment’ is frequently presented in the media, and some policy circles, as the biggest employment challenge facing young people across the globe today. In reality, the picture is rather complex. The term ‘unemployed’ captures people who are actively looking for work, and are ready to start, but are unable to find work. Unemployment differs from both excluded young people who have given up trying to find work, and underemployed young people who cannot find enough fairly paid work, and so depend upon part-time, intermittent, and/or poorly paid work (Jeffrey, 2008, p.740). Certainly, unemployment is a problem, and global youth unemployment is on the rise, having previously peaked amidst the 2009 global recession (ILO, 2017, p.15). In 2015, just over half of the youth population were unemployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Kingdom of Eswatini (Swaziland), and South Africa. Greece, Saint Lucia and Spain also had high levels of youth unemployment, ranging from 48.5% to 49.9% (UNDP, 2019). Yet it is fair to say that unemployment is “only the tip of the iceberg” (O'Higgins, 2017, p.1).

Taken at face value, unemployment figures can obscure the employment challenges facing developing countries. Indeed, unemployment in developing countries is markedly lower (9.4%) than in developed countries (14%) (ILO, 2017). This is because social protection ‘safety nets’ (support systems which catch someone when things go wrong in their life) such as welfare benefits, pensions and healthcare provision are often limited in developing countries (Figure 2). A strong welfare state

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4 This figure relates to the global youth population aged 15-24, and it reports the count of unemployed young people (which peaked 2001-2005, dipped in 2007, peaked again in 2009, then declined until 2014, and then the number of unemployed young people slowly began to rise again). The youth unemployment rate shows a similar pattern.

5 The classification of countries varies by organisation and over time. For this ILO (2017) report, the list of developing (low income) countries included: Afghanistan, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Tanzania, United Republic of Togo, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

6 The classification of countries varies by organisation and over time. For this ILO (2017) report, the list of developed (high income) countries included: Andorra, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bahamas, Bahrain, Barbados, Belgium, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Channel Islands, Chile, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, French Polynesia, Germany, Greece, Guam, Hong Kong (China), Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Kuwait, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macau (China), Malta, Monaco, Netherlands, Netherlands Antilles, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Norway, Oman, Palau, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Qatar, Saint Kitts and Nevis, San Marino, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan (China), Trinidad and Tobago, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States, United States Virgin Islands, and Uruguay.
or family wealth can cushion young people who are out of work, meaning they are not forced by circumstance into poorly paid, dangerous or undesirable work (e.g. Jeffrey, 2009). The opposite applies where forms of social protection are minimal. Here, unemployment tends to be low because people cannot rely on safety nets for support. Unemployment therefore becomes almost a “luxury” that few in the very poorest countries can afford to choose (Fox et al., 2016). Social protection is therefore an important part of the United Nation’s definition of ‘decent work’ (Box 2). In this context, the greatest challenges for young people in developing countries relate to the quality and quantity of their work.

Figure 2. Public social protection expenditure as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product. Latest available data by 2017; health spending is not included. Redrawn by Georgia King, based on a map from the International Labour Organisation, 2017.

‘Decent work for all’ (SDG 8) is especially relevant to young people who are even more burdened by insecure work and working poverty than older adults (see Box 2 and Figure 3). In developing countries, 96.8% of employed young people work informally, compared to only 90% of employed adults (ILO, 2017). Informal work describes work not covered by formal legal arrangements. There is debate as to whether this informality is problematic because on the one hand there is less legal protection and taxation, on the other hand the informal sector provides at least some form of work for the vast majority of people in developing countries. However, informal work is often associated with low pay which leads to poverty as it offers lower average wages than formal sector work and a lack of workers’ rights (ibid.; Chen et al., 2006). Some 70% of young people in developing countries are in working poverty (ILO, 2017) and over 50% of youth in low income countries are underemployed (Ayele et al., 2018).

Yet informal and poorly paid work has not always been so widespread. Following the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes and other neoliberal reforms in many lower income countries from the late 1980s, public spending cuts extensively reduced government jobs (historically a major formal employer) and overall formal sector employment (Jeffrey, 2008). The private sector has, to date, not been able to fill the void in formal work left by this retreat of the state (Jeffrey, 2009). In its place, informality and casual employment have expanded (Boampong, 2010), bringing
greater insecurity, with the private sector employers in lower- and middle-income countries paying lower wages than the public sector (Chen et al., 2006). Thus, history assures us that greater equity is possible.

Figure 3. Extreme and moderate working poverty, in 2017. Here extreme poverty means earning less than US$1.90 per day; moderate poverty means earning US$1.90-US$3.10 per day. Here youth means people aged 15-24 years old; adult includes ages 25-64. This graph is redrawn based upon a graph from the International Labour Organisation (2017).

Methods
In Autumn 2018 we launched an international survey of young people from LMICs, aged 18-35 years old. The age range of respondents includes young adults only (18 years and over), due to the additional ethical responsibilities involved with recruiting and working with children. The upper age limit of 35 acknowledges how the life stage of ‘youth’ is extended in the context of economic uncertainty (Box 3). The survey generated new insights into young people’s experiences of, and aspirations for, work. The survey was administered online and only in English, which we acknowledge limited responses to young people who speak English, and have IT skills and internet access.

Our survey allows us to reflect upon how labour market trends of high youth underemployment, and demographic trends of peak youth/progression towards peak youth, are playing out in diverse national and local contexts. The survey was distributed by Restless Development a youth-focused International Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), to young people via their hubs in India, Nepal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, as well as their Youth Power and Youth Think Tank networks. The Youth Power network has 204 partners in 45 countries and was originally established as part of a campaign to

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7 Further details on our methods are available in a longer report on this topic (Barford and Coombe, 2019).
achieve the SDGs. The Youth Think Tank is a network of 4 cohorts of research alumni in 7 sub-Saharan African countries (Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, and Ghana) brought together to conduct youth-led research on youth economic opportunities through a partnership between Restless Development and Mastercard Foundation. Most survey respondents therefore had some connection to the international youth NGO Restless Development.

Collectively, these factors mean that the 263 young people who replied to our survey were relatively privileged, educated and well-connected within their home countries. All respondents were aged 18-35, and at least 60% of whom were aged 20-29. 60% of respondents were male, 39% female and 1% transgender / non-binary. All were born in LMICs, with 77% originating from Sub-Saharan Africa. Tanzania (12%), Zambia (12%), Uganda (10%), and Zimbabwe (8%) returned the most responses. 52% of respondents lived in urban areas, 31% in suburban or peri-urban areas and 17% in rural areas. This survey is not statistically generalisable to the broader youth population. Instead, it offers detailed insight into working patterns, experiences and aspirations which help us to reflect on the broader trends shown in international datasets.

Findings

The nature of the challenge

Most of the young people we surveyed took part in a broad portfolio of work activities, for instance by taking on multiple paid and/or unpaid roles in order to meet their financial and familial responsibilities. In fact, 56% of respondents were engaged in unpaid work activities which do not fit conventional definition of work, but are nevertheless critical to maintaining a household and community, including domestic work, childcare, supporting others’ livelihoods, and volunteering. Almost a third of respondents had no income generating activities at the time they were surveyed. For those with paid work, nearly a third of them generated an income by combining self-employment with employment for another person/company, whilst over a quarter of young people who were self-employed ran two or more businesses and a fifth of those who were employed by another person/company held down more than two jobs (Figure 4). A highly qualified 26-year-old Indonesian woman explained how she engages in several activities to earn a living and support her family:

“I’m working as a lecturer in a University […] to earn money for my family. Yet, I make food and snacks to be sold. I sell them online to my friends, colleagues and others to support our family’s income too.”

As this testimony highlights, the young people we surveyed at times undertook a portfolio of different jobs as a direct response to underemployment. Portfolio working can therefore be understood as a coping mechanism adopted to deal with challenging economic circumstances. This finding is perhaps unsurprising given the employment trends explored earlier, where the vast majority of young people in developing countries work informally and are poorly paid. Yet given that the young people reached by our survey are likely to have been relatively well-off within their home countries, the fact that many of them needed to combine multiple income
Beyond defining insufficient work, ‘underemployment’ has a second meaning - the underutilisation of a person’s skills or qualifications in their work (Jeffrey et al., 2008). Several young people in our survey spoke of the lack of skilled jobs on offer, which resulted in them taking on work for which they were overqualified. For example, a 28-year-old Master’s degree graduate from Cameroon describes her dissatisfaction with her underemployment:

“I am not satisfied with the work I do now because it’s not my field of work […] but after school, after having applied for jobs for over a year, being an administrative assistant was the best offer I got.”

Most survey respondents worked in the informal sector and many of their testimonies identified a prevailing challenge that poor-quality work impaired their efforts to make a living. Amongst the respondents, 36% highlighted ‘security and stability’ as one of the most desired characteristics of a job for them. Most respondents (76%) reported that the income they received was insufficient to meet their needs and responsibilities. The importance of sufficient income and financial stability – both key components of decent work (Box 2) – are described by a 27-year-old man working as an informal trader in Zambia, who spoke of the financial insecurity he faces:

“The uncertainty of when and where a client will come from is too much stress … when it’s time to pay bills. The income is not consistent … I have rentals to pay and a small house to run, normally these are the most prominent things that takes me into debt which means I have to work extra hard to pay off the debt the following month.”

Here we offer two contrasting experiences of underemployment, and both point to a lack of well-paid work opportunities despite these respondents being well-qualified. These examples hint at a structural economic obstacle to decent work for all to which we now turn: the lack of labour market demand.
The % shows the proportion of respondents doing these activities who were in work (n=163). Source: Barford and Coombe, 2019; designed by Georgia King.

**The root of the problem**

Geographers are trained to see connections and think relationally (Jackson, 2006; Barford, 2014), and so it is crucial that we acknowledge how the youth decent work challenge does not exist in isolation. Scholars critical of dominant development ideas, such as Ben Selwyn (2017), point to how the uneven distribution of global wealth and income is rarely presented as being causally related to youth underemployment in developing countries. Selwyn describes “a social system of exploitation” in which “super-exploited” workers are paid below subsistence levels and wealth is accumulated elsewhere in the chain (Selwyn, 2017, pg. 35). This critique highlights both the importance of thinking structurally in order to understand the obstacles to securing decent work for all and at the same time of engaging with young people to understand how these structural trends are experienced in practice.

Policy efforts designed to foster youth employment currently focus predominantly on supply-side interventions (designed to help young people enter the labour market through programmes such as skills training), with far less attention paid to creating new jobs for young people (demand-side interventions) (Barford and Coombe, 2019). Such interventions, whether intentionally or not, individualise responsibility to the young person themselves suggesting that if they work hard and aim high, they can find decent work. Yet despite holding high aspirations for the future, many of the respondents to our survey found that they were held back by structural, demand-side barriers. Five years into the future they hoped to own businesses (32%), pursue higher education (16%), and become political leaders (14%). They held these aspirations in an environment of constrained economic opportunity. According to our survey, by far the top barrier faced by young people looking for work was a lack of available opportunities (Figure 5). This shortfall was compounded by other
challenges, such as a lack of money and nepotistic recruitment practices, as shown in the experiences of a 21-year-old Zambian woman looking for work:

“There are few opportunities out there and the ones that are there are secured for the relatives of those that are already in employment.”

As this testimony highlights, in practice there are considerable obstacles (social, cultural and economic) which prevent the idealized linear pathway from high aspiring and hardworking young person into full and decent employment. Put simply, without increasing demand and confronting social barriers such as corruption, supply-side interventions can be expected only to redistribute existing jobs and not to alter absolute employment levels (Fox and Kaul, 2017). Given this disconnect, it is clear that we must engage with young people’s experiences of searching for work if we are to better understand and tackle the barriers they face.

Figure 5. Barriers faced by young people in work or in seeking work. The % shows the proportion of respondents who selected that factor from a list of pre-given statements (n=249). Source: Barford and Coombe, 2019; designed by Georgia King.

Conclusion
The era of youth presents both great challenges and opportunities. Our research collaboration between NGO and university researchers has given us exceptional access to networks of young people in LMICs who have shared their experiences, frustrations and ideas about work. In this article, we have shared new insights into the working lives of young people in some of the world’s lowest income countries to explore what the decent work deficit means to them in practice and the nature of the obstacles they face in gaining decent work. Our findings complement international datasets which depict the employment challenges between and within countries, highlighting in particular just how widespread the experience of poor-quality work actually is and enabling us to think about the large-scale structural inequalities
behind the youth employment crisis. If we are to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the era of youth, we concur with Geographer Lorraine van Blerk (2019) that it is critical to work with young people to generate solutions. Amongst these solutions, there is a clear need to formulate youth-centred policies which challenge the structural reproduction of underemployment (Barford and Cieslik, 2019). As we have argued, young people’s input is key to understanding and then challenging the ‘decent work deficit’.

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Resources
Restless Development, International Youth NGO
http://restlessdevelopment.org/

Decent Work and Youth Livelihoods group, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge
https://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/decentwork/publications/

References


