



Youth: An opportunity to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty

CAPE TOWN, 10 Nov. 2015 – There is an urgent need for a comprehensive approach to supporting youth as they transition into adulthood. This includes addressing structural barriers that undermine young people’s development and ultimately the country’s growth trajectory. An intersectoral approach is needed and it is therefore essential to establish a central coordinating body with the authority to steer implementation of the government’s new youth policy and hold other departments accountable.

These recommendations emerged out of the *South African Child Gauge 2015*, which focuses on the theme of youth and the intergenerational transmission of poverty, released today [EDS: 10 November 2015] by the Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town (UCT).

The tenth issue of this annual publication is produced in partnership with UNICEF South Africa, the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development in the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation; World Vision South Africa; the DG Murray Trust; the DST-NRF Centre for Excellence in Human Development, University of the Witwatersrand; and UCT’s Poverty and Inequality Initiative. The publication focuses on the situation of young people aged 15 – 24 and highlights the need for a range of interventions that continue to support children as they transition into the crucial developmental stages of adolescence and young adulthood.

Need to break the cycle of poverty and inequality

“South Africa has a large youth population”, explains one of the contributors, Murray Leibbrandt, UCT’s Pro-Vice Chancellor for Poverty and Inequality, “and they are often described as a possible asset to the country’s growth. However, all of us need to be proactive if we hope to realise this possibility. Right now the majority of young people remain trapped in the continuing inequalities created by apartheid. This vicious cycle will continue to the next generation of children if we don’t invest in youth today.”

Currently, 59% of youth aged 15 – 24 years live in households with less than R620 per person per month, and many of them experience multiple forms of deprivation such as limited access to quality education, health care, housing and high levels of unemployment. Poor youth also lack the beneficial kinds of social networks and information needed to access post-school education and the labour market.

The lead editor of the 2015 issue, Ariane De Lannoy, from UCT’s Poverty and Inequality Initiative, says the recent/current wave of protests over university fees is a clear indication that youth are not apathetic, as is often suggested: “But what they need is support to strengthen their ability to

negotiate adverse and challenging environments, navigate the systems and access resources that will contribute to positive long-term outcomes for them, as well as their children.”

An opportune moment to intervene

The government earlier this year approved the new National Youth Development Policy 2020, and De Lannoy emphasises that “now is the time to focus on a strong implementation plan that draws on the evidence base to identify, evaluate and scale up best practice interventions”.

“We also believe that the policy’s implementation should be overseen by a central body with the authority to steer and coordinate youth services across different government departments – this will help deal with the current fragmented approach to youth development.”

Quality education and the link to labour

The publication spells out very clearly the critical link between quality education and entrance to the labour market. “Without access to quality education – which remains a challenge for the majority – the public school system in essence becomes a poverty trap because poor youth start with a disadvantage, remain behind and are unlikely to proceed to further education. This situation undermines young people’s employment chances, earning potential and self-concept”, explains Nic Spaull, from the Research on Socio-Economic Policy Unit at Stellenbosch University.

This state of affairs means that poor youth are likely to inherit the social standing of their caregivers. For this reason, the quality of education must be improved, starting in the foundation phase; current learning deficits in high school need to be tackled; and drop-out rates reduced through comprehensive support to learners and their families.

Support to access and complete further education

Access to information on further education and career options, as well as financial support, is critical to enable young people to access further and higher education. Only 8% of youth aged 18 – 24 years attend college or university. Notwithstanding the ongoing evaluation of fees, first-year university tuition can be as high as R65 000 per year, and drop-out rates remain worrying. Financial aid, accommodation, transport, study support, psycho-social and health care services are essential, as is a welcoming institutional culture that enables students to stay the course until they graduate. It is also recommended that greater investment is made in the college sector to expand access to technical and vocational education and training, as well as linking up colleges with employers to establish clear learning and employment pathways for students.

Creating employable youth and labour opportunities for them

The publication sketches a concerning picture for youth’s current job prospects: This year, 37% of those aged 15 – 34 find themselves unemployed, up from 33% in 2008. This rate increases to 45% if discouraged work-seekers are included in calculations. “What is needed is that the job market produce more jobs and absorb more unskilled labour, and the education system produces job-seekers with the necessary skills”, according to Lauren Graham from the Centre for Social Development in South Africa, University of Johannesburg. But this is a long-term goal, so interim measures are needed to enhance young people’s employability. These include learnerships and skills programmes to increase young people’s employability, encouraging businesses to increase their demand for youth employees, and supporting youth to access the labour market and develop sustainable livelihood strategies.

Healthy young people, healthy next generation

Poverty, inequality and gender dynamics are intertwined causes of ill health among adolescents, which is why there is a call for an integrated and multi-pronged approach to promote youth health and well-being. Key interventions include youth-friendly clinics and a comprehensive range of accessible, high-quality health services. “Physically and mentally healthy young people are not only an asset to themselves, but also to their families and the next generation of children”, says De Lannoy. “But the impact of poverty on people’s emotional well-being is currently not sufficiently understood or addressed, and mental health services are poorly resourced.”

Support for teen parents

Research has shown that South Africa’s rate of teenage child-bearing has been declining steadily over the past two decades. But, teen pregnancy does still occur and has significant, negative consequences for both the young mother and the child’s well-being. Catherine Ward from UCT’s Department of Psychology explains that “education is key to employment prospects, so we should not only work to prevent pregnancy among schoolgirls, but also to support teen mothers to finish their education”.

Such support would include prioritising teen parents for parenting programmes, antenatal care, social assistance and child care services. “Poverty makes parenting very difficult and can result in harsh or inconsistent care, which in the long-term will negatively affect children’s development.” For this reason, says Ward, “greater investment in parenting programmes is needed to provide much needed social support and promote healthy family relationships and positive child outcomes.”

Youth on the move, belonging and identity

Other critical areas of support that are outlined in the publication are those of youth mobility and migration, and youth identity and belonging. The majority of children live in rural areas, but many move away in their late teens and early 20s to seek better education and income-generating opportunities. They may face an uncertain existence in informal settlements on the outskirts of cities.

For these reasons, city planners need to consider the needs of youth by making available affordable transport, housing and safe recreational spaces. Improved digital access can also go a long way to help young people gain access to information, education or job opportunities. Such resources, opportunities and other support measures can help enhance youth engagement and belonging.

A word to youth, from youth

Weighing in on the debate about support to youth is a group of young people from IkamvaYouth, Axiom Education, GCU Academy and the South African Youth Project. The group produced an accompanying bulletin for the release of the book, which summarises the key challenges they face. They emphasised the need for quality education for all, both at school and post-school level; the need for jobs; and the need to find solutions for challenges such as violence, crime and substance abuse.

They also stress the need for better access to information and, importantly, broad societal support to enable them to act on their aspirations. They, however, also included this inspirational message of agency to their peers:

“Learn self-love and self-respect, because with that anything is possible. The positive change we speak of can only happen when we take ourselves seriously and we take up the opportunities that

are out there. Go and look for them, make them work for you. Don't give up or sit back ... Be positive. Dream big. And don't let anything get you down."

END

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