There are many definitions of who the youth are in relation to their age. For instance, the United Nations (UN) defines the youth as any person between age 15 and 24 while the African Union in its Youth Charter defines the youth as any individual between 15 to 35 years. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) Article 260 defines a youth as a person aged between 18 and 34 years. This study adopted the latter definition.

Kenya national poverty prevalence rate is estimated at 36.1% in a population of 47.6 million people, over 30% being youth aged between ages 18-34 years.¹

This phenomenon is referred to as the Youth Bulge and it characterizes Africa’s demography. A youthful population could lead to higher consumption and increased productivity. A youthful population can also lead to an increase in savings because there are more working people than retirees.

¹ Kenya National Bureau of statistics (2019) Census Results

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AFRICA PLATFORM FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION

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Resources that governments would otherwise spend on health benefits, pensions and other social services for older persons would then be channeled towards development. However, Kenya has not been able to benefit from the Youth Bulge. This is because of poor planning and lack of enabling policies. Every year, large numbers of youth leave the school system and join the ranks of the unemployed. Without addressing the interplay of factors that cause youth unemployment, the Youth Bulge will continue to be a liability rather than a benefit.

Makueni County has a high unemployment rate among employable youth and an estimated poverty rate of 34.8 percent in a population of 987,653.

To mitigate against poverty, social protection has been prioritized by the Government of Kenya and the County Government of Makueni with the goal of ensuring that all Kenyans live in dignity and are able to exploit their human capabilities for their own social and economic wellbeing. Despite increasing investment in social protection programmes, inequality across age groups persists.

The Africa Platform for Social Protection (APSP) with funding support from the Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa (OSIEA) and the Open Society Foundations’ Economic Advancement Programme carried out a study in Kenya-Makueni County - in the period May –June 2019 to establish effects of social exclusions in social protection programmes on the youth (ages 18-34 years). The study mainly used key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

The study examined the following programmes implemented by the national and county governments: Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CT-OVC), Persons with Severe Disabilities Cash Transfer (PWSD-CT), Uwezo Fund, Women Enterprise Fund, Youth Enterprise Fund, the National Government Affirmative Action Fund (NGAAF), the national universal healthcare programme and county-specific social protection interventions namely: county universal healthcare scheme, Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA), Tetheka, Asset Financing among others.

The study adopted a social exclusion analysis framework as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: Dimensions and drivers of social exclusion

The study came up with the following key findings and recommendations:

Unemployment

As elsewhere in Kenya, youth in Makueni are faced with high unemployment. Growth of the Kenyan economy has failed to keep up with the thousands of school leavers entering the job market every year. The formal economy absorbs a small percentage of these job seekers. Others find jobs in the informal sector. The informal sector is exposed to a hostile macro and micro economic environment and has few jobs and, in addition, cannot offer long-term and well paying employment. Quite often, these unstable employment terms and conditions perpetuate, rather than end, vulnerability.
A few youth, mostly those who were well-connected, were able to get employment in the devolved government. Construction of the SGR also opened up a few job opportunities.

Youth who have gone into agribusiness face a number of problems. First, Makueni is a water-scarce county. The county government has introduced an initiative to help residents get tanks for water harvesting but because youth are usually left out of decision-making processes, access to this facility is limited. Second, there is inadequate or nonexistent market access as well as low pricing of products. Third, the youth do not own land and cannot get loans to improve their agribusiness. Faced with these problems, many youth abandon agriculture and go into Boda Boda business. Young women opt to sell miraa. The problem of unemployment is compounded by a prevailing attitude of looking for white color jobs instead of seeking to create employment.

Training and Attitude

There are efforts by the county and national governments to provide post-secondary school training. However, in Makueni, the vocational training centres are not resourced well enough to provide the training and skills needed by the job market. There is also a predominant view that vocational training is for failures which hinders many youth from enrolling. Because of their real and perceived low quality, youths look down upon these training facilities. Low education combines with lack of skills to exacerbate joblessness and exclusion.

For female youth, exclusion is more severe because of discriminatory cultural attitudes. In Makueni, as elsewhere in Kenya, females are expected to play care-giving roles. This excludes them from competing for the few training and employment opportunities. Young women, therefore, suffer from multiple vulnerabilities. To cope, young females enter into early marriage. Others become susceptible to sexual exploitation. These coping mechanisms exacerbate rather than reduce the exclusion of young women and are likely to perpetuate generational vulnerability.

Lack of Credit

The national government and county governments have introduced initiatives aimed at helping the youth access credit to start businesses. The UWEZO Fund and the Youth Enterprise Fund target youth and women. However, the uptake has been low because of requirements such as membership to a group and feasible business plans. The migratory tendency of the youth hunting for jobs makes it difficult to belong to a group and many of them do not have the proper skills to write business plans. Most youth come from poor families who are not able to support them to get into business. In addition, youth do not own property they can use as collateral.

Conclusion

Youth from poor families are more at risk of not completing their education. The households they come from are likely to suffer from idiosyncratic shocks due to their specific economic and social conditions. A coping mechanism is to withdraw children from school. Without an education, youths from such households suffer further exclusion. Universal programmes such as free schooling or Makueni’s universal health care are more effective in reducing exclusion of poor households and their dependent youth than targeted programmes.

The fact that Makueni is a rural and arid county forces many youth to migrate to towns in other counties to compete for jobs while possessing few skills. Weaknesses of design and challenges of implementation of social protection initiatives by both the county and national governments leave out a huge chunk of deserving families which affects youth from such families. Broadening of social protection programmes in order to take into account the multifarious nature of exclusion of youth should be part of the national and county youth agenda.
Recommendations

1. The Uwezo Fund and The Youth Enterprise Fund need to be redesigned in order to attract more up take and be more inclusive. Areas of review should include the requirement to be part of a group. A new design should lessen bureaucracy that hinders participation. Such initiatives should also be broadened in order to accommodate different interests, competencies and aptitudes.

2. Youth leaving secondary schools are often ill-equipped for the job market. Technical training curriculum needs to be re-evaluated and the technical schools well-resourced in order to offer skills required by the market.

3. Social protection initiatives by both the county and national government need to take into account the gender roles of young women which expose them to double discrimination and worsen their exclusion.

4. Investment in education up to and including tertiary education is crucial to efforts to end generational poverty. National and county government bursary systems need to be coordinated and integrated to make sure that all needy children are covered to avoid cases of some benefiting from multiple bursaries.

5. There needs to be introduction of a broad range of initiatives that reflect the broad range of interests of the youth.

6. Universal health care initiatives by county and national governments need to be consolidated and expanded so that that illness does not further deplete the scarce resources of households and their dependent youth.

7. Youth in agribusiness should be supported with skills to grow and market drought-resistant crops in view of the emerging effects of climate change. Youth should also be allowed to participate in community decision-making processes in order to benefit from community initiatives.

8. There needs for integration and coordination of county and national government social protection initiatives to avoid duplication.

9. Social protection Initiatives needs to be universal. The current means targeting except for older persons cash transfers, excludes needy households which impacts negatively on the youth.