Plight of Youth in the 21st Century: Key Issues and Interventions in a Developing Economy’s Perspective

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Abstract

The issues surrounding youth are as old as humanity. However, the issues facing youth in the 21st Century are far much different from issues of youth in the yester centuries. The main purpose of this study was not only to unpack the key issues facing youth in the 21st century in a developing economy’s perspective, but also to examine the strategies that can be adopted to address these issues. Descriptive survey research design was used in the study. The target population included youth and parents/guardians in Ngong’, a town situated in the Southwest of Nairobi in Kenya. The sample size included six hundred and thirty (n=630) youth and thirty two (n=32) parents and guardians. The random sampling procedure was used to select the group of youth who took part in the study while purposive sampling procedure was used to select the parents and guardians. The data collection methods used included a questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data from the youth questionnaire were analyzed with the help of SPSS and presented in simple frequencies and percentages. Tables and figures were used to summarize data. Qualitative data collected using FGD were analyzed using a qualitative data analysis technique and reported in narrative form. The study revealed that the key issues facing youth in the 21st Century among the developing economies like Kenya included but not limited to lack of unemployment, lack of basic youth support services like funding, substance abuse, youth reproductive health issues and breaking of family and societal value system. The study suggests the local governments, development partners and communities to design local youth programs (including society and family value building programs), create youth agencies and task forces, and initiate a policy driven youth agenda to address the plight of youth in the 21st century.

Keywords: youth issues today, plight of youth, Kenya youth issues, youth issues interventions, youth unemployment, youth drug abuse, youth substance abuse, youth reproductive health issue, youth sustainability
Introduction

Youth is the period of human development which occurs between childhood and adulthood. The typical age bracket for youth is 18 to 30 years, although various countries and institutions may adjust the age brackets higher or lower to suit their particular concerns. In Kenya, the official definition of youth is the period between the ages of 18 and 35 years (KNBS, 2010).

The issues surrounding youth are as old as humanity. However, the issues facing youth in the 21st Century are far much different from issues of youth in the yester centuries. Examining the Kenya’s youth issues perspective could unpack the pronounced yet underlying issues.

Literature review reveals that there are myriad issues that continue to face youth in developing economies like Kenya today. These include but not limited to unemployment (UN Habitat, 2006), fragile livelihoods, HIV/AIDS and sexuality, abuse and exploitation, crime and violence. This would therefore imply that interventions should be directed towards the areas of policies (ILO, 2004), sexual/reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, creation of livelihood opportunities, crime, political domain and recreation and entertainment.

There is no doubt that certain efforts have been made towards addressing the plight of youth. However, developing economies like Kenya are still grappling with numerous youth issues of varied magnitude. Identifying and prioritizing the key issues facing youth could therefore provide the road map towards youth sustainability not only in Kenya, but also in other developing economies.

While it is evident that there are various ‘known’ issues facing youth in Kenya of 21st century, there are still a number of underlying and an undressed issues that continue to threaten the well-being of today’s and tomorrow’s society which rests upon the wellness of today’s youth. The past and in essence, the present interventions have neither addressed the plight of contemporary youth. Therefore, the main objective of this study was not only to unpack the key issues facing youth in the 21st century in developing economy’s perspective, but also to suggest the strategies that can be adopted to address these issues.

Methodology

Descriptive survey research design was used in the study. The design was found appropriate given the nature of the target population and sample frame. Further, the design was also suitable owing to its quantitative strength (Owens, 1991), its mode of
data collection and its potential towards generalization of the findings to a larger population. Thus, the findings on the issues facing youth and interventions to address the same could be generalized.

The target population included youth and parents/guardians in Ngong town, an upcoming suburb situated in southwest of Nairobi.

The random sampling procedure was used to arrive at a representative number of youth in the selected centers of worship and Ngong town. The study reached a total number of four hundred and eighty nine (489) youth who attended church services. Another group of one hundred and forty one (141) youth was randomly selected from Ngong’. The sample was made up of the youth in the streets, hotel, and entertainment joints. The research assistants personally assisted the respondents in answering the questionnaire.

Purposive sampling procedure on the other hand was used to arrive at the sample of parents and guardians who attended church services in Ngong’. These were selected to participate in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). In sampling the participants, the researcher was assisted by the church ushers. The total number of those who were selected included thirty two (n=32) parents and guardians. The researcher grouped them into 4 groups, each having 8 members. It was believed that a group between 7 to 10 individuals would provide a setting for effective communication and decision making (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). The focus groups assisted the researcher with provision of information on the key issues and concerns facing the youth and information on the interventions to the issues.

Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion methods were used to collect data from youth and parents respectively. The questionnaire for youth was structured while the interview schedule used in the FGD was open-ended. The instruments covered demographic characteristics of the respondents and items on youth issues and interventions.

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data from the youth questionnaire were analyzed with the help of SPSS and presented in simple frequencies and percentages. Tables and figures were used to summarize data. Qualitative data collected using FGD were analyzed using a qualitative data analysis technique. The researcher’s work was made easier by the fact the data collected from the focus groups was already sorted out during the open forum. The main points that were noted down were used for qualitative analysis.
### Results

#### Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The majority (61%) of the youth who took part in the study were between the ages of 15 and 25 years. Slightly more than half (56%) of them were males. The vast majority (83%) had acquired secondary and tertiary education. Only 16% of them were married. In terms of job placement, only 19% of them had formal employment while 14.3% had no any form of employment.

The background information for parents and guardians showed that 69% of them were female while the remaining 31% were male. The majority of them were teachers and others were engaged in small informal businesses.

#### Family Issues facing Youth

The following were the theorized family related parameters from which the data were collected about family issues affecting youth in the 21st Century: praying together, eating together, family gatherings and recreation together. Figure 1 shows the distribution of youth on whether they participated in various family related activities.

![Figure 1: Whether families prayed, ate, gathered or recreated together](image-url)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Activities</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Praying</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the family activities, 15% of the youth indicated that they had never prayed together with their families, 11.7% had never held family gatherings, 10.8% had never recreated and 7% had never dined together. This could imply that parents did not often gather or pray or even recreate together with their children. Lack of close knit families could therefore be the undoing of today’s developing society.

**Socio-economic Issues Facing Youth**

The following were among the predetermined issues from which the data were collected about socioeconomic issues facing the youth in the 21st Century. These issues were ranked according to their order of priority. Those, which were ticked as most urgent, were the most pressing issues that needed immediate attention. The social-economic issues included unemployment, lack of funding, substance abuse, school dropout, crime, poor moral standards and lack of spiritual commitment. Figure 2 shows the distribution of youth on the issues.

![Figure 2: Socio-economic issues facing youth](image)
On prioritizing the main social-economic issues facing youth in the 21st Century based on “very urgent”, the following order emerged: first, unemployment (64.4%); second, lack of funding (55.9%); third, alcohol and drug abuse (45.7%); fourth, low spiritual commitment (41.9%); fifth, crime (36.8); sixth moral decadence (31.4%) and seventh, school dropout at 27.6%.

In order to clearly show and rank the key underlying issues facing youth in the 21st Century growing economies, the distribution of youth regarding the most urgent issues was further tabulated. Table 1 shows youth issues prioritization ranking percentage based on the ‘urgency’ responses.

Table 1
Youth issue-priority ranking percentage (n=630)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>64.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Funding (youth services)</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse (alcohol and drugs)</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low spiritual commitment</td>
<td>41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in crime</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral decadence</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School dropout</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the issue-priority ranking, it was evident that the top most key issues facing youth in the 21st Century among the developing economies like Kenya included unemployment, lack of basic youth support services like funding and substance abuse.

Parents’ and Guardian’s Responses on the Plight of Youth
The data collected from the Focus Group Discussion based on the questions asked about the major issues facing youth today, were qualitatively analyzed. The following issues were singled out: unemployment, lack of youth services and funding opportunities, alcohol and drug abuse, crime and violence, lack of awareness on reproductive health, inadequate attention from the parents, lack of role models in the society, school dropout, social stratification in terms of economic and social background, negative peer influence, wide generation gap between the parents and children and identity crisis.

The feedback from parents and guardians about the major issues facing youth in developing economies like Kenya were quite much consistent with what the youth who took part in the study indicated. Most of the participants were in agreement that the key issues facing youth included high rates of unemployment, lack of adequate youth services
Interventions to Address the Key Issues Facing Youth

The interventions to the issues facing youth in developing economies like Kenya were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The data collected from the youth were analyzed quantitatively while data from FGD were qualitatively analyzed.

The data collected from youth about the interventions to the problems facing youth included initiating the following: initiating self help groups, increasing youth funding channels, supporting entertainment industry, introducing informal entrepreneurship training programs, organizing youth retreats, initiating and supporting income generating projects.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supporting youth self help groups</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering general support of youth micro-enterprises</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing youth retreats</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing youth funding channels</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting entertainment industry</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The key interventions that were suggested by the majority of youth who took part in the study included supporting youth self help groups (74%) and offering general support of youth micro-enterprises (54%). A considerable percentage (19%) indicated that organizing youth retreats could also help in addressing the key issues facing youth today. This could have driven by the fact that youth today lack self-introspection and objective driven approach to life. Thus, such approaches could help in addressing some of the key underlying issues characterized by the wave of globalization.

Parents and guardians on the other hand suggested various interventions that could be put in place to address the plight of youth. They suggested that youth seminars/workshops covering various thematic issues could help address some of the key underlying issues. They also pointed out that entertainment programs could be introduced including but not limited to Youth Talents Shows, Music, Poetry, Sports among others. Such initiatives should be coupled with educational programs.

Parents also suggested the introduction of guidance and counseling offices to take care of youth counseling, career guidance and job placement needs. Further, they reiterated...
that the initiation of endowment funds by various development partners could also support youth enterprises. Since youth are characterized by inconstancies, the participants further suggested that youth enterprises support mechanisms should be set to continually monitor and evaluate youth driven projects to ensure sustainability.

**Discussion**

The finding of this study on the issue of youth unemployment as being key and critical issue facing youth in the 21st Century is not new. Youth unemployment in the world currently stands at two or more times the rate of adult population, a fact that is consistent in both developed and developing countries. According to ILO (2010) findings, the youth unemployment issue is a global issue which is prevalent in both developed and developing economies. However, the problem is much more acute in developing economies like Kenya which are still trying to address other economic, social and political concerns. Thus, the issue of youth unemployment is likely to continue taking center stage in many developing economies of the world in the next couple of decades.

Substance abuse among both adults and youth is another common issue. However, with increasing levels of stress due to the demands of modern day life, the rates of substance abuse are on the increase. In this study, almost half of youth (45.7%) indicated that substance abuse was a key and one of the most pressing issues facing youth today. This finding is consistent with earlier literature which shows that alcohol use and drug abuse among youth in Kenya is on the increase (NACADA, 2012). Bearing in mind that the majority of youth have no constant source of income, taking of alcohol and other drugs not only exposes them to health problems but to social problems. Thus, there is a need for tangible interventions, including designing and implementation of sound youth drug abuse policy framework.

This study further revealed that reproductive health concern among youth in developing economies is among the key issues facing youth in the 21st Century. Today, more than ever before, the plight of youth in dealing with reproductive health concerns is far much deeper owing to various threats such as HIV/AIDS prevalence, globalization and the erosion of moral values that traditionally held the society morally together (Wahab, Odunsi, & Ajiboye, 2012). Reproductive health concerns that include but not limited to lack of adequate knowledge about sexuality, HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancies and abortion are key and real issues facing developing economies like Kenya. The need for counter-interventions is therefore a matter of urgency rather than choice.

Another key issue facing youth today is the lack of cohesion in the family unit. This was evident from the extent of youth participation in key family activities like praying together, eating, gathering and recreating together. A substantial percentage of youth indicated that they never participated in these family activities. This was also echoed by parents and guardians who participated in the study. The family as a unit of nature and
nurture has been compounded with numerous challenges. Traditional societal values that held the family together in Africa’s context are today profoundly threatened by the social-economic demands (Bigombe & Khadiagal, 2002) of the 21st century. Thus, interventions to address youth issues are expected to be much shaped by changing family and societal value system. There is a need for interventions to be geared much more towards influencing key family and societal values. Without such interventions, there is a high likelihood of ‘things falling apart’ and ‘the center no longer holding’ in the society of 21st and later Centuries.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The scores with the highest percentage resulting from the analysis of the responses of youth on the level of urgency regarding the main issues facing youth represent the highest priority areas. These include prioritizing youth employment, youth support services including funding and substance abuse interventions.

Owing to the fast changing dynamics in the society, it is not enough to put in place youth issues interventions mechanisms without closely reinforcing the values of the family unit which is the foundation of youth well-being.

Some unintended outcomes of this study included the following:

- Education and awareness - not only did parents get involved in focus group discussion but also they learnt about research application from the data collection process and also became much aware of youth issues and concerns,
- Networking - focus group participants learnt from each other and built professional and personal relationships that could develop into future collaborative local programming efforts and
- Program design - as a result of the focus group session, some participants indicated that they were planning to use the information in initiating youth programs and projects.

Recommendations

The study suggested networking initiatives to be undertaken by members of local communities and development partners. Determining if similar youth issues and concerns are being confronted by other communities in developing economies would be helpful in planning and implementing programming efforts. For instance, if other neighbouring
communities are already addressing some of the identified top youth priority issues, the immediate study community might also learn and benefit from their experiences.

Communicating the findings of the study to people via various channels of communication like chief barazas (meetings) church groups and other forums like media might help in creating awareness which may result to certain measures being undertaken.

The findings of the study are also expected to help the local governments, development partners and communities to design local youth programs (including society and family value building programs, create youth agencies and task forces, and initiate a policy driven youth agenda to address the plight of youth in the 21st century.

**Recommendations for further studies**

While this study endeavored to examine the key issues facing youth in the 21st Century from a developing economy's perspective, the study did not exhaustively explore the issue of family and its impact on youth well-being. Thus, there is need to conduct further studies on the impact of structural fabrics of African family on youth development.

**References**


Citation