

Youth Unemployment in Urban Zimbabwe in the 21st Century: Analysing the Drivers, Impacts and Cultural Implications

Abstract

Zimbabwe entered the 21st century experiencing an economic decline. This has had a great bearing on the country's youth in terms of employment. Young people in urban areas have been especially badly affected. The cause of such a high unemployment level has been a contentious issue. Contending issues have centred around, on one hand, the external environment impinging negatively on the Zimbabwean economy and on the other hand a failed state and economic mismanagement. Rising unemployment has had various impacts on the young people's economic, political and economic plight. This research analyses the various competing factors that have led to unprecedented levels of urban unemployment in Zimbabwe in the 21st century. It also considers the effects of unemployment on Zimbabwean society as a whole and suggests ways of dealing with this problem. Methodologically, the research relies on secondary sources and relies on already existing and available interviews in the media.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, Youth, Unemployment, Zimbabwean Culture, Urban Society.

Introduction

Just like other developing countries, Zimbabwe has been experiencing the challenge of growing youth unemployment. The drivers of this phenomenon are the complex circumstances derived from the historical development of the country as well as international political-economic issues beyond the state's control. It is against this background that the paper seeks to explore the causes of youth unemployment in urban Zimbabwe as well as its impact.

Historical Background to Unemployment in Zimbabwe

Unemployment causes widespread poverty, increased crime rates, political instability, exploitation of labour and reduced economic development in society.³ The International Labour Organization defines unemployment

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3 'What are the Effects of Unemployment on Society?', *Reference*, 25 March 2020, <https://>

in terms of three criteria, namely “without work, available for work or seeking work at the time of reference.”⁴ Based on this definition one can note that it describes the state of many young people in Zimbabwe based on the statistics given above. Colin McIntosh defines employment as the fact of being paid to work for a company or organization.⁵ The Round Table Community has suggested five types of unemployment: frictional – which refers to a person who is attempting to find a new job; cyclical – which is a result of an economic recession whereby the supply of labour is greater than demand; voluntary – which occurs when people choose not to work; structural – when the skills, experience and education of workers do not match job openings available and institutional unemployment – which is caused by government interference in the labour market.⁶

The definition of “youth” has also been a contentions one especially when it comes to the issue of unemployment. For Zimbabwe it is clearly defined by the Constitution, Section 20 sub section 1, which defines youth as any person aged between 18–35.⁷ However, when it comes to stating the figures for unemployment it is important to note that the majority between 18 to 25 still go to school – high school, tertiary institutions, vocational training centres and university.

Youth unemployment in Zimbabwe in the 21st century has been rising at a fast rate, accounting for 62.1% in 1994, 65% in 1999, 67.5% in 2002 and 59.6% in 2004⁸, with estimates for 2012 indicating 68%. Research has shown that Zimbabwean youth experience all the above types of unemployment, but especially voluntary, as evidenced by the enormous growth in the informal sector,⁹ which is said to be dominant in the economy. The general indications are that most young people are involved in carpentry, co-operatives, agriculture, technical skills (catering, hairdressing, electronics repairing, decoration, car

www.reference.com/world-view/effects-unemployment-society-fe1a57c72fca5b51 (accessed 23 August 21).

- 4 International Labour Organisation, http://www.roundtablecommunity.org.hk/qef/mconf/mg20_topic_sg.pdf, (accessed 13 February 2017).
- 5 Colin McIntosh, *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 496.
- 6 International Labour Organisation...
- 7 Government of Zimbabwe, *Constitution of Zimbabwe*, 2013, p.20.
- 8 African Development Bank, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, *Africa Economic Outlook 2012, Promoting Youth Employment*, 2012, www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/sites/default/files/content-pdf/AEO2012_EN.pdf (accessed 14 February 2017).
- 9 ‘Informal Employment Dominates,’ *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 23 June 2015, <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=453276029&Country=Zimbabwe&topic=Economy> (accessed 13 February 2017).

wash, dress making and design and so on), construction, vending, mining, arts and culture, and commercial sex. This contrasts with McIntosh's definition, which is biased only on formal employment. The situation on the ground in Zimbabwe shows that employment is not only limited to formal white collar jobs but also includes informal self-employment.

This brings us to the conclusion that many who are unemployed are voluntarily unemployed. This view has been buttressed by Leubker, who noted that the informal sector contributed above 80% of jobs in the country in 2004.¹⁰ He argues that the concept of an informal sector is not necessarily relevant in industrialised countries where paid employment in formal enterprises dominates, and where the majority of own account enterprises are registered under national legislation which is the case with most in Zimbabwe. Research has revealed that this is a result of factors such as laziness, ignorance, being choosy, fear of stigmatisation, stereotypes that the informal sector is for the uneducated, and social status, just to mention a few.

The Drivers

I. Industrial Collapse

The country has faced industrial collapse as one of the effects of 'investor-repulsion' policies, such as the Indigenisation and the Economic Empowerment Policy, which was adopted as an Act of Parliament in 2007, hereinafter the IEE Act.¹¹ According to Section 3 (1) (a) of the IEE Act: "The Government shall, through this Act or regulations or other measures under this Act or any other law, endeavour to secure that: At least 51% of the shares of every public company and any other business shall be owned by indigenous Zimbabweans."¹² This policy was enacted in 2013 as part of the ruling party ZANU PF's manifesto during the 2013 elections. These policies led to a huge outflow of white commercial farm owners as well as foreign investors leaving millions either formally unemployed or massively retrenched as the commercial agriculture and industrial sectors declined. According to studies by the Confederation of

10 Malte Luebker, 'Employment, Unemployment and Informality in Zimbabwe: Concepts and Data for Coherent Policy Making,' *Issues Paper No. 32 and Integration working paper No. 90*, ILO-Sub Regional Office for Southern Africa, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2008, [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Ghana_Jan2009/Background%20doc2%20for%20paper%2039%20\(ILO-WP-90\).pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Ghana_Jan2009/Background%20doc2%20for%20paper%2039%20(ILO-WP-90).pdf) (accessed 15 February 2017).

11 Government of Zimbabwe, *Indigenization and Economic Empowerment Act*, FAOLEX Database, 2007, <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC170800/> (accessed 22 February 2017).

12 Government of Zimbabwe, *Frameworks, Procedures and Guidelines for Implementing the Indigenous and Economic Empowerment Act*, 2016, Chapter 14:33, <http://www.investzim.com/attachments/article/252/Indigenisation%20Framework%204%20January%202016.pdf> (accessed 22 February 2017).

Zimbabwe Industries (CZI), industry's capacity utilisation was 18.9% in 2009, 57% in 2011, 44.9% in 2012 and 39.6% in 2013¹³. Saungweme, et al concluded that the economy of Zimbabwe was shrinking, whilst the labour force was growing, that is, the economy was unable to absorb growing labour input, resulting in rising unemployment.¹⁴

Another factor leading to industrial collapse has been the economic sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe by the West. According to Moyo, the purpose of the targeted economic sanctions is to wreak economic havoc in the country and render it dysfunctional.¹⁵ The sanctions were imposed in the form of the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic recovery Act (ZIDERA) of 2001 by the United States Congress, which gave the US veto powers on Zimbabwe's applications to multilateral financial lending agencies, the suspension of budgetary support previously provided to the government by the European Union (EU), the imposition of visa bans and asset freezes by the US, EU, Canada, New Zealand and Australia on influential individuals associated with the government and the ruling ZANU PF as well as the prohibition of military support and technical assistance that could enhance the government's repressive capacity. The sanctions resulted in a drastic scaling down of business and the economy as well as souring of relations with the West, which forced the government to look elsewhere, namely in adopting the "Look East Policy" which some scholars have argued is a new form of "Eastern Colonisation" of Africa.

II. Unavailability of Formal Vacancies as a Result of "Stale Employees"

The research discovered that one of the driving factors behind youth unemployment is the fact that there are many so-called "stale employees" who are still formally employed. In a focus group discussion, one young man defined these "stale employees" as those of over pensionable age and the elderly who should legally be in retirement. This research also observed that the Constitution and the Labour Act Chapter 28:01 of Zimbabwe do not provide for a retirement age limit under conditions of termination of employment. In addition, the Constitution also does not give an age limit or definition of an elderly person,

13 Talknice Saungweme, Simeon Matsvai and Rose C. Sakuhuni, 'Econometric Analysis of Unemployment, Output and Growth of the Informal Sector in Zimbabwe (1985-2013),' *International Journal of Economics and Research*, March – April 2014, p. 1–9, [http://www.ijeronline.com/documents/volumes/Vol%205%20iss%2002/ijer%20v05%20i2\(1\).pdf](http://www.ijeronline.com/documents/volumes/Vol%205%20iss%2002/ijer%20v05%20i2(1).pdf) (accessed 22 February 2017).

14 Saungweme, Matsvai and Sakuhuni, 'Econometric Analysis...'

15 Simbarashe Moyo, 'Delinking as Panacea to a State under Siege: Zimbabwe's Reaction to the Targeted Economic Sanctions,' in *The Post 1980 Chimurengas Explained*, Richard Runyararo Mahomva and Simbarashe Moyo (eds), Bulawayo:LAN Publication, 2015, p. 59.

thereby leaving the interpretation of the term open. The retirement age has been generally set between 55–65 by Pension Fund service providers, indicating a lack of uniformity in terms of the legal framework guiding retirement age as the limit is set differently by the various pension funds. As a result this leaves employers and the pension funds free to retire an employee at their discretion, which may disenfranchise the economically active youth who are unemployed without any primary legal binding conditions.

III. Attainment of Higher and Tertiary Education

Research has also shown that some young people are unemployed because they are still in education. Based on the definition of ‘youth’ given earlier from the Constitution of Zimbabwe, at the age of fifteen young people are in secondary school in forms two or three working towards getting their Ordinary Level education. If they have pass they proceed to Advanced Level, which they finish around the ages of 18–20.

Zimbabwe’s education system is regulated by the Education Act of 1987.¹⁶ Tsiko compiled a factsheet in 2018 that revealed the following facts: the Zimbabwean education system is made up of two years of pre-primary school – referred to as Early Childhood Development (ECD), which is offered to children from 3 to 5 – seven years of primary school and 4 to 6 years of secondary education, followed by higher education in college or university. Additionally, the report shows that in 2018, Zimbabwe had 13 State Universities and 7 Private ones, 13 Polytechnic Colleges, 13 Teachers’ Colleges, 43 vocational training centres and 16 quasi-government and independent research institutions. However, Tsiko also notes an important fact that while Primary and Secondary education have been meant to be entirely free since 1980 when this was declared as a fundamental right, parents now pay fees to support budgets that come from the state, which are largely inadequate.

The above data shows an increase in the enrolment of students in tertiary institutions across board between 2009 and 2014. Additionally, the report also reveals that, on average every year, about 300,000 students sit their O-level examinations and out of this number, about 30,000 proceed to A-level and another 20,000 enroll at tertiary institutions – for vocational, polytechnic and university education.

16 Sifelani Tsiko, ‘Where does Zimbabwe’s Education Stand?’, in *Zimfact*, 13 March 2018, <https://zimfact.org/factsheet-where-does-zimbabwes-education-stand/> (accessed 20 August 2021).

Tertiary education enrollment

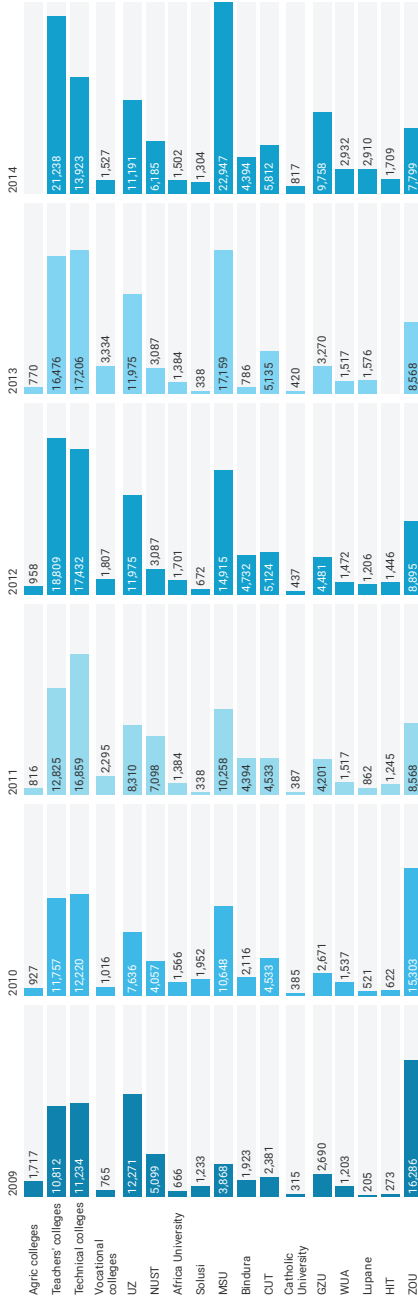


Chart: Nelson Banya - Source: ZIMSTAT - Get the data - Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1. Enrolment in Tertiary Education in 2014¹⁷

17 Tsiko, 'Where does Zimbabwe's...'

Experts say enrolment at the postgraduate level accounts for a very small proportion of the total enrolment in public universities in Zimbabwe. While there have been more than 30,000 enrolments at undergraduate level in recent years, there are fewer than 4,000 students registered for masters' degrees and fewer than 350 pursuing doctoral studies in Zimbabwean higher education institutions. This shows that a great number of students who pass their Advanced level education proceed to enroll at undergraduate level in universities whilst others go into the other tertiary institutions, as shown in Figure 1 and so attain at least one basic tertiary certification. This may also explain the reluctance of young people to enroll for further tertiary education such as post graduate and doctoral studies. The above data help explain why some young people are unemployed at this age.

Beyond the age of twenty, young people are usually pre-occupied with attaining Higher and Tertiary Education through First degrees, Masters Degrees or PhDs. A general observation of enrolment statistics at the Midlands State University shows that the enrolment age ranges between 18–30 years for undergraduate degrees. This leaves them with the last five years of their youth to secure formal employment, which may not be guaranteed given the small labour market, as well as unrealistic qualification requirements.

Unrealistic Job Requirements by the Employers

The case in Zimbabwe is that most formal employers require experienced employees, with the minimum being 4–5 years. Young people tend to fail to qualify for these jobs as a result because they will tend to be fresh graduates from tertiary institutions. Hence they will be looking for those jobs in order to gain experience. However, some companies and organisations offer unpaid internship programmes for young people, which give them first-hand experience on the job.¹⁸ This in turn makes the programmes less attractive for young people hoping to get a pay check and be able to afford to pay for their upkeep and their families.

V. Unregistered Informal Enterprises

The research shows that some youth are concentrated in the unregistered enterprises of the informal sector.

“Faced with a lack of employment opportunities in the formal sector, Zimbabweans have displayed great ingenuity to create jobs for themselves as carpenters, street-vendors, cross-border traders, sculptors or brick-moulders. These jobs have kept many people in employment,

18 Global Peace Careers, *NGO Internships in Zimbabwe*, 2021, <https://globalpeacecareers.com/magazine/ngo-internships-in-zimbabwe/> (accessed 25 August 2021).

and thus have helped to avoid high open unemployment despite adverse economic conditions. However, most informal workers find themselves on the fringes of the law – they often lack the required license or violate zoning by-laws that ban commercial activity from residential areas.”¹⁹

This is another factor that distorts the statistics of the government and other research institutions, which are based upon registered enterprises. According to the 17th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) cited in Leubker, “employees are considered to have informal jobs if their employment relationship is, in law or in practice, not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits (advance notice of dismissal, severance pay, paid annual or sick leave, etc.).”²⁰ The reasons may be the following: non-declaration of the jobs or the employees; casual jobs or jobs of a limited short duration; jobs with hours of work or wages below a specified threshold (e.g. for social security contributions); employment by unincorporated enterprises or by persons in households; jobs where the employee’s place of work is outside the premises of the employer’s enterprise (e.g. outworkers without an employment contract); or jobs for which labour regulations are not applied, not enforced, or not complied with for any other reason.” In addition most young people are self-employed or doing work for food – *maricho/ ilima* – in rural areas, which is a type of employment.

The Impact

1. Drug and Substance Abuse

The University of Maryland Medical Centre defines substance use as the continued use of alcohol, illegal drugs, or the misuse of prescription or over-the-counter drugs with negative consequences that may include problems at home, work or interpersonal relationships as well as with the law.²¹ A wise man once said, “An idle mind is the devil’s playing ground.” This has manifested itself in communities where idle and demoralised unemployed young people have sought refuge in taking drugs and intoxicating substances. Most of these substances are illegal and very cheap, for instance very strong cough syrup, which they call “Broncho,” marijuana which they smoke or eat raw in meals or baked muffins known as weed cakes and glue. The use of these substances tends to be abuse because they are used in ways which they are not meant for (entertainment). In addition to the above-mentioned consequences, these

19 Leubker, ‘Employment, Unemployment...’, p. 5.

20 Leubker, ‘Employment, Unemployment...’, p. 13–14.

21 ‘Drug Abuse,’ University of Maryland Medical Centre, <http://umm.edu/health/medical/ency/articles/drug-abuse> (accessed 28 February 2017).

also result in spontaneous decisions such as sex orgies, unprotected sex, and rape among other things, which may lead to outbreaks of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

2. Vandalism of Property

Unemployed idle youth may often find themselves engaging in social ills such as property vandalism as a form of entertainment. This may take the form of graffiti on infrastructure as well as theft. Some have lost their lives for example in the theft of copper electrical cables. High density suburbs such as Nkulumane in Bulawayo have experienced theft of water pipes and meters and some households have not managed to replace them.

3. Social Loitering

Redundant youth may also resort to loitering just to kill time. Many spend time sitting or walking around in groups, sometimes posing as a threat to public security, especially when they are intoxicated with substances. Sometimes they verbally abuse passers-by, thereby violating other people's right to freedom of movement.

4. Marital Breakup

Unemployment has driven many young men and women to prefer dating married men and women so they can be well taken care of economically and financially. The young unmarried want to be associated with already established older men and women rather than their single counterparts who may still be struggling to find themselves. As a result many marriages have crumbled.

In addition, some have argued that unemployed young men cannot afford to pay the traditional *lobola* (bride fee) that gives them the right to marry. On the average, research has shown that *lobola* can be charged at a minimum of \$5,000 excluding the cattle and other cultural requirements. An article by Dube notes a young couple whose relationship was on the verge of collapse after the family had charged him \$1,500 worth of groceries, \$9,000 for various charges and 8 cows as *lobola*. In response to the article, a talk show host, Mai Chisamba, said publicly that the current *lobola* charges were unjustified. She stated that,

“the charges are taboo. People are no longer following culture. They have commercialised the practice and unfortunately this is blocking our children from getting married [...] Parents should remember that the ‘boys’ who are marrying their daughters do not have money.”²²

22 Jennifer Dube, ‘Zim’s Lobola Charges Stir Controversy,’ *The Standard*, 17 February 2013,

In some instances, this has led to employed women helping their significant others by contributing a part or paying the total amount of *lobola* themselves, which is culturally not acceptable as the Africans believe that the payment of *lobola* by a young man is a sign of commitment to the bride and her family, thereby guaranteeing respect and loyalty eternally.

Furthermore, in some instances unemployed youth have been traditionally forced into arranged marriages so as to economically and financially sustain the family. This scenario is rampant in traditional society, which still believes in polygamous marriage whereby a family forces their daughter or arranges that the daughter be an additional wife to a wealthy man. In most societies early marriage has been practiced from time immemorial. Children used to be married after attaining puberty, from the 12 to 16. This was the case for most of the girls who were given to men often as old as their fathers. The family prestige depended on how many children their daughters bore for her husband. The chance of bearing many children was secured as early as possible. Marriage of girls used to be a source of income to many families. This is how parents used to pressurise their daughters to get married.²³ In some instances, young women have got married out of choice especially in urban Zimbabwe where they choose to be a “small house,” a colloquial and derogatory term that describes a married man’s quasi-polygamous, informal, long-term, secret sexual relationship with another woman. The general public and private discourse conceptualises the “small house” as transactional sex and as a key driver of Zimbabwe’s HIV epidemic.²⁴

Poverty

The World Bank classifies a person as in poverty if they live on less than \$1.90 per day.²⁵ This means that these people only rely on this amount per day as income that is needed to get a basic living standard to afford things such as food, healthcare, education and housing. Unemployed youth often cannot afford basics especially sanitary ware and toiletries for ladies.

<https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2013/02/17/zims-lobola-charges-stir-controversy/> (accessed 25 August 2021).

- 23 Ruth Michael, ‘Factors which Contribute to Early Marriage among Teenagers in Rural Areas. A case of Kasulu District in Kigoma Region,’ M.A. Dissertation, Open University of Tanzania, 2014.
- 24 Mildred Mushinga, ‘The ‘Small House’: An Ethnographic Investigation into Economically Independent Women and Sexual Networks in Zimbabwe,’ PhD Dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2015, https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/57213/Mushinga_Small_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 26 August 2021).
- 25 The World Bank, ‘Poverty Overview,’ 2021, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview> (accessed 14 March 2017).

The Future of Unemployment in Zimbabwe

1. There is need for the government to revise its policies and enact investor-friendly policies which will attract investors, thereby creating employment and economic rehabilitation.
2. The government must be strategic in executing its foreign policy and pursuit of national interests, so as to avoid creating diplomatic enemies in the international system as this will only isolate the country and stall economic development.
3. The basic and higher education sectors have tried to indoctrinate students that they should not only strive to be employed after school, but also employ others. An example is the teaching of entrepreneurship as a mass compulsory module at the Midlands State University. Even though this is essential in combating unemployment, it only equips the students with theoretical aspects of the practice. The learning institutions do not have the capacity to establish practical facilities where students can fully practise. Hence it becomes useless. Therefore, it is important for institutions to become innovative and come up with sources of revenue and capacitate themselves, in the face of dwindling government financial support.
4. The prospective employers must have realistic recruitment requirements in order to make space for inexperienced youth fresh out of school. In addition, the requirement of experience should be emphasised on managerial posts not general shop floor positions where one's capabilities for the job can be assessed through probationary periods which can be paid or unpaid depending on the contractual agreements.
5. The national primary regulatory legislation such as the Constitution and the Labour Act should explicitly state the retirement age of every employed adult so as to create uniformity in the application of the law. This would also avoid the accumulation of stale employee and create space for young people. The *status quo* whereby that decision is left to the discretion of the pension funds does not protect the unemployed who are not members of the pension funds. Additionally, the inefficiency of the pension system may work better for stale employees by giving them the opportunity to work for longer and maintain their economic conditions as long as possible.
6. Institutions of higher learning have come up with modes of entry that cater for those who are formally and informally employed such as the parallel, block release and weekend school. Therefore young people no longer have an excuse of not working due the fear of losing out on pursuing their studies.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that youth unemployment in Zimbabwe has varied causes and a wide ranging impact on society. Addressing the challenges calls not only for revitalisation of governmental policy to include an investor-friendly environment and careful manipulation of the external environment, but also for individuals concerned to make strategic choices regarding their future.