

## THEME 01

# Who are the African youth?

GENERATIONS

AFRICA

UNEMPLOYMENT

In a few decades, Africa will be home to the largest number of young people globally, set to be almost a billion under-18s by 2050. The current and future youth employment challenge provides an increasingly important focus for national and international policies and interventions. However, conceptions of African youth are marked by contradictions, as they are sometimes portrayed as “the nation’s future”, but mostly referred to as a threat that could destabilize the continent. What can we say about the African youth?

## Our observations

- Around 60% of Africa's population is currently under 25 years old, and the continent's youth will account for twice Europe's total population in 2100. The median age on the African continent is half the European one. In 2050, the continent will be home to the [largest number of young people](#), amounting to nearly twice the young population of South Asia and Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Oceania.
- Every year, [10-12 million](#) African youth enter the job market and only about 3 million of them find a job. By 2035, Africa will contribute [more people](#) to the workforce each year than the rest of the world combined. By 2050, the continent will be home to 1.25 billion people of working age. In order to absorb these new entrants, Africa will need to [create more than 18 million new jobs each year](#).
- However, demographic and economic trends are not in tune. The continent's economic growth of the last decade has been mainly jobless. Demographic dividend, which is when the growing number of people in the workforce relative to the number of dependents boosts economic productivity, no longer exists, as labor supply outstrips labor demand in many African economies. As a consequence, many young Africans are formally unemployed and the demographic dividend is not realized. And thus, this vast majority of youth entering the labor market is often referred to as a problematic “youth bulge”: the situation of a country reducing infant mortality but still having a high fertility rate, leading to a large share of the population comprising children and young adults.
- Creating jobs for Africa's youth is one of many national plans to avoid wasting the demographic dividend. For example, many countries have appointed a minister of youth and have created national youth strategies, such as the [Kenyan National Youth Policy](#). Also, providing decent work for all is an internationally agreed upon Sustainable Development Goal and part of the [Agenda 2063](#) by the African Union. And in the last few years, youth has also become a trending topic in foreign policies of Western countries. The Dutch ministry of foreign affairs is prioritizing African youth in its development strategy and recently appointed a Youth Envoy, who will focus on youth unemployment in multiple African countries.
- However, the youth are not a homogenous group and failing to account for differences in gender, class or religion, family heritage, communities and broader social relations, has implications for the effectiveness of youth policies. Critics, such as Marc Sommers his book [The Outcast Majority](#) (2015), have drawn attention to the problems that can arise from using a single category of “youth” for a heterogeneous group and portrayal of “the youth bulge” as a risk.



## Connecting the dots

An important commonality shared by African countries across the continent is the number of young people. The ten youngest countries in the world are all in Africa. But who are the African youth? They have become a project for governments, political leaders, and NGOs, too many interests are at stake and there's a great variety of projections in which the youth take different positions in the social order. As a result, [African youth have lost their naivety](#). Moreover, referring to young Africans in terms of the youth bulge does not lead to a neutral demographic discourse. The concept is often associated with "population explosions" or a "ticking time bomb". Also, it is often stated that the youth bulge leads to [instability](#), disregarding the other factors that result in instability. On the other hand, African youth are also often framed as an untapped resource for the world's fastest-growing economies or as Africa's greatest economic asset. Among the leading figures giving the current African generations a voice and trying to counter these simplified narratives about the African people, is Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She cautions against "[the danger of a single story](#)" that categorizes African people. In particular, she warns of the single story of Africa as a place of "negatives", popularized by Western literature, a critique that can also extend to framing youth solely as an underutilized asset.

What helps is involving the perceptions of the African youth themselves. A [study](#) shows that East Africans identify slightly more as being young than as being of a certain nationality. The survey among 18 to 35-year-olds in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda, conducted in 2014 and 2015, showed that about 40% of the respondents saw themselves first and foremost as young people, while 34% saw themselves first as citizens of their countries. Only 11% identified themselves by their faith first and 6% identified as members of their family first. Only 3.5% reported their tribe or ethnicity as the first dimension of their identity. Although there is not much evi-

dence of the perceptions of the youth across countries, these results reflect the force of modernization that is affecting communities across the continent, especially as young people are more mobile and more interconnected than ever, regarding internet as a [force for good](#). Indeed, across the continent, they are rapidly moving to cities and modernizing. They are the active agents of the continent's radical transformation from a mainly rural to a predominantly urban region, leading to a concentration of youths in urban centers. Although leaving some traditions behind and aspiring to a modern life, they are still tied to the traditions and worldview of their rural upbringing. For instance, although there is a growing number of young, college-educated Africans who are modernizing farming and call themselves [agripreneurs](#), integrating modern methods into the traditional profession, traditional farming is often associated with poverty and only [5%](#) of Rwandan youth is interested in farming or agriculture as a full-time job,

In addressing the challenge of youth unemployment, it would make sense to invest in modern industries and sectors that are future-proof in order to appeal to the youth. In fact, as [Brookings](#) argues, it is in these "non-smokestacks industries" that the biggest potential for meaningful work lies: tourism, ICT services, agribusiness, transport. These are among Africa's most dynamic sectors, and like manufacturing, they benefit from productivity growth, scale, and agglomeration economies, but they are outpacing the growth of manufacturing in many African countries. Between 1998 and 2015, Africa's services exports grew more than six times faster than merchandise exports. Between 2002 and 2015, exports of tradable services and agri-business increased as a share of non-mineral exports by an average of 58%. In order to offer the African youth, no matter how diverse this group is, a real chance, African countries will have to focus on developing a variety of future-proof sectors.

## Implications

- As [this young Kenyan writer](#) argues, African youth are becoming aware that they are being categorized and politically problematized, leading them to push against narratives that frame them as a risky bulge.
- [Mo Ibrahim](#) considers the new African continental free trade agreement a way to deal with the youth unemployment challenge. As we noted [earlier](#), the AfCFTA aims to create a single continental market for goods and services as well as a customs union with free movement of capital and persons.
- 85.8% of employment in Africa is considered informal. The informal sector is seen as a main job creator. The WEF writes that companies across the continent are pioneering business models that bridge the formal and informal sectors. The penetration of mobile technology has mobilized large numbers of informal actors in their supply chains or service delivery. These "gig economy" companies function as bridge companies that are pioneering new ways of injecting efficiency and higher productivity into traditional informal markets. According to the [WEF](#), these companies are defining the future of employment in African countries.