

SOUTH AFRICA: Idle minds and hands a social time bomb

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Nearly three million of the 6.7 million young South Africans in the 18-to-24-year age group were unemployed or not receiving education and training in 2007 - and they pose a threat of "serious social disruption". These facts have been revealed by research funded by the Ford Foundation and undertaken by the Cape-based Centre for Higher Education Transformation and the University of the Western Cape's Further Education and Training Institute.

Youthful protesters have been central to a current wave of service-delivery unrest around South Africa.

Conducted last year using Statistics South Africa's 2007 Community Survey and education department statistics, the study "Responding to the Educational Needs of Post-school Youth" says that of the 2.8-million who were unemployed and not in education institutions, 44% were African and 41% coloured (mixed race).

Reasons for young people not being in education or jobs include:

- * Lack of a diverse post-school public or private college sector.
- * Reduction in educational opportunities because of institutional mergers.
- * Failure of sector education and training authorities to provide adequate learnerships.
- * Less labour market absorption because the government is not meeting its target of 6% annual economic growth.
- * The uncontrolled introduction of more than two million relatively well-educated foreign workers into the labour market.

John Butler-Adam of the Ford Foundation speculated that most idle youngsters are "at home, or wandering the streets, or both. Joining gangs will be an option - a social security blanket" - and crime is an option.

"They could be a social time bomb and could start taking social action. They are a lost generation and need to be found," he said, referring to recent looting by beleaguered unemployed people at a protest in Durban.

The study examined attendance at educational institutions in the 18-to-24-year age group for 1996, 2001 and 2007. While South Africa's population grew and more learners were studying, in real terms there was a decline in the number attending educational institutions.

While 46% of 21-year-olds were studying in 1996, this dropped to 36% in 2001 and 32% in 2007. At the same time, the number of learners in secondary schools has grown. In 2007, 508,600 youths had not reached grade 10, and almost a million left school after completing grade 10.

"This is not only an enormous waste of educational resources, but it is also the group that seems the most vulnerable to unemployment," the study points out, adding that "the decrease in participation [in educational institutions] for the 18-to-24-year age group severely affects the life opportunities of young people".

Butler-Adam believes learners could be dropping out before reaching grade 10 for financial reasons, or because they are "frustrated that schools are not serving them well".

Pointing out that the number of unemployed youths not receiving education or training has increased since 2007, he warned that the number will continue to grow each year as young people leave school without completing grade 12, as grade 12 leavers fail to find jobs or gain access to universities, and as university students drop out.

The report of the study argues for the expansion of educational and training and internship opportunities and special youth-service programmes. In particular it recommends that the existing Further Education and Training (FET) vocational college sector be enlarged and strengthened.

One option is for some FET colleges to be franchised by universities to offer programmes and award credits towards university degrees.

Seamus Needham of the University of the Western Cape said public FET colleges are running three-year programmes, but learners needed to earn an income. "It's not a realistic option," he said, adding that shorter courses are needed.

Butler-Adam agreed that a wider range of educational institutions is required to absorb the youth. But he said: "We can't afford to continue like this. We need people with skills, who pay taxes and strengthen and enrich society."

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