

Youth Unemployment in Ethiopia: An overview

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1. Describing of the employment crisis

This description is mainly an expression of the Ethiopian reality as I perceive it to be based on my knowledge and experience. I teach Employment Law, Human Rights Law and Land Law in my law school and my experience might help in exploring the issues.

When many people speak of youth unemployment, it is mostly the case of the urban dwelling youth that is the focus of commentaries. In my opinion, this is a misguided approach. The case of urban and rural unemployment has to be separately considered as the causes and effects thereto are different. The rural youth population is incomparably higher than the urban one. If we take the often cited urban-rural population ratio in Ethiopia, we can say the rural youth constitute more than 80 percent of the youth population in Ethiopia. Since the rural youth is predominantly engaged in agriculture, I believe that the unemployment issue has to be considered from the point of view of access to rural land. The Ethiopian constitution has made land and natural resources out of the private domain.¹ One among the justifications why private ownership of land is constitutionally condemned is to create job opportunities to the landless youth by providing land by way of redistribution.² However, redistribution is not being done in many parts of Ethiopia. There are regions where it has not totally happened since the regime change in 1991. Even in regions where this has been done, two decades have already passed. This means the new generation does not have first hand access to rural land to earn its living which is the most significant means of employment.

Since accessing land from the government by way of distribution or redistribution is a pious wish, the absolute majority of the rural youth have to access land from their family either by way of donation or inheritance. Though details vary from region to region, the federal rural land proclamation³ has stringent requirements for one to access land even from his/her family. Among other things, the law puts residency requirements which would force the landless youth not to migrate to urban centers for fear of being non-eligible to inherit their parents' land. Nor does the law allow them to be engaged in activities other than agriculture since dependence on agriculture is one among the grounds to access rural land even from one's family. Therefore, a significant proportion of the rural youth are left unemployed. To make things worse, they simply wait and see what the

¹ *Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proc. No. 1/1995, Federal Negarit Gazeta, Year 1, No. 1 (hereinafter referred to as the FDRE Constitution), Art. 40(3).*

² *See, An Explanation to the draft Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, An Unpublished document (Original document in Amharic, translation mine), p. 98. See also, Fasil Nahum, Constitution for a Nation of Nations: The Ethiopian Prospect, The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1997, P.54.*

³ *Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Rural Land Administration and Land Use Proclamation, Proc. No. 456/2005, Federal Negarit Gazeta, 11th Year No. 44, Arts. 2(5) and 5. This proclamation sets the framework for regional rural land use and administration and hence has nation-wide implications.*

future holds for them rather than looking for chances out of their locality as moving their locality would render them landless.

Coming to the situation of unemployment in urban areas, the problem remains to be similar in a different context. Both the public and private sectors have a very limited labor absorbing capacity. Years before it was only those who couldn't find university degrees who had difficulties in getting jobs. By now even those with a masters degree are in trouble to get employed. It is not very uncommon to see university graduates without a job for two years or more. I can sense that the government has already recognized this problem. In a series of televised programs by the state owned television, it has been reported that university graduates are working as daily laborers in road constructions. The sad thing is that this was hailed as a success by the media. It is not a surprise to see degree holders applying for non-professional posts such as a cleaner. To use a very familiar example, the cleaner in my office was a psychology graduate with a bachelor degree. The reason why the media hails it as a success could be because still many others cannot even afford to cover living expenses despite being graduates. This, I believe, shows the magnitude of the problem of youth unemployment in the Ethiopian context. Even those who are employed cannot afford to cover their living expenses.

2. Major Causes of Youth Unemployment

I would suggest that the following are the major driving forces of very high youth unemployment in Africa, taking the Ethiopian reality as a case in point.

- ✓ Absence of land justice. The way one accesses rural land is not as such fair and logical. Moreover, there are countless problems related to accessing land even from ones family and getting rural land possession certificates. The most important resource i.e. land is left for the corrupt practices of local officials. In the absence of land justice we can not imagine the rural youth to be [self] employed;
- ✓ Legal and policy problems as well as perceptions thereof preventing the rural youth population from effectively engaging in activities other than agriculture;
- ✓ Misguided educational policy. The educational policy focuses on quantity and merely relies on quantitative truth. Though tens of thousands are claimed to have got graduated, they can not access job; nor can they be claimed to have acquired basic skills and knowledge;
- ✓ Capital intensive technologies. Most employers are nowadays using capital intensive technologies which significantly diminish their potential to create more employment opportunities;
- ✓ Nepotism and corruption. The widespread nepotism and corruption paves the way for unemployment. This has a lot to do with almost all issues ranging from accessing rural land to getting employed in public institutions. Ethnic and political bias by public and private employers upon recruitment cannot be underestimated;
- ✓ Lack of a culture of work ethic and job creation in the respective societies;
- ✓ Lack of knowledge and skill to perform jobs. The regrettable educational quality problem takes a lion's share of the problem in this regard.

3. Effects of Youth Unemployment

- ✓ The immediate effect of rural youth unemployment is starvation of the youth and their family;

- ✓ In rural areas a young person who does not have land cannot establish a family. Similarly, an unemployed young person in urban centers cannot do the same. This will inevitably be a source of very serious social problems in the foreseeable future;
- ✓ It seriously affects the country's economy;
- ✓ It makes the youth vulnerable to substance abuse;
- ✓ It makes the youth hopeless in education. If the educated can not get a job, the children of today couldn't imagine a future worth suffering in the educational world. This in the long term affects the future of our continent;
- ✓ Unemployed youth can easily be manipulated for any cause of which one could be armed groups rebelling against governments. This will take our continent to the vicious circle of civil war and instability.

4. Strategies to Integrate the Youth into the Labor Market

Integrating the youth into the labor market is a benefit for the overall wellbeing of the society. I think the following strategies might help in integrating the youth into the Ethiopian labor market.

- ✓ Ensuring access to rural land for the unemployed youth;
- ✓ Creating job opportunities for fresh graduates;
- ✓ Using labour intensive technologies;

The fact that new graduates are no more in a position to easily get jobs has to trigger us to explore the why of the problem. Among other things, the practical inability of new graduates to be technically capable of fulfilling the expectations of the labour market is the most important reason. In the legal aid center which I am directing in our university, I have seen the problem of employing fresh graduates devoid of previous free legal aid experience. Those who were exposed to the practice as part of our clinical programs were incomparably better than those who didn't have such an experience. I propose the following measures may contribute a lot in improving education-work condition framework in Ethiopia:

- ✓ Revisiting our educational curriculums so that our universities produce the man power genuinely relevant to the labor market in the continent;
- ✓ Giving trainings to prospective graduates targeted in equipping them with basic skills in implementing their theoretical knowledge;
- ✓ Arranging forums between universities and potential employers of graduates so that they can harmoniously work towards a common end.

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