

Understanding the effect of educational attainment and unemployment on youth engagement in conflicts in Machakos County, Kenya

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Accepted 17 February, 2022

ABSTRACT

Globally, the extensive damage caused by violent conflicts with subsequent social and economic costs have posed a real concern that needs to be urgently addressed. The provision of quality education is a force that can be utilized to curb constant conflicts within society. The purpose of the study was to establish the effect of the educational attainment and unemployment on youth engagement in conflicts in Machakos County. The study was carried out in Machakos County and targeted the youth incarcerated in two prisons located in Machakos town, Machakos County. The sample was 168 respondents consisting of both male and female youth between 18-34 years. Descriptive survey design was used. The study used Semi-Structured questionnaires to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The data was analysed using both qualitative and quantitative techniques assisted by use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. From the findings, a close link between the level of education and youth engagement in conflicts was established. The study findings indicate a statistically significant relationship between the level of education and the conflicts among the youths as illustrated by $P > 0.05$. The study established that the youth with low levels of education were also the group that lacked employment and reported cases of conflicts and crimes. From the study, most of the youths who engaged in conflicts had low levels of education as reported by 49.4% of respondents and mostly were those who had never completed basic education, lacked basic skills required in the labour market and were found to earn less than two dollars a day. The study recommends that the government come up with affirmative action to empower such groups to engage in productive activities to enable them to earn a living.

Keywords: Youth, education, conflicts, conglomeration, incarceration.

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INTRODUCTION

Youth as a concept has been used to refer to a transition phase of life across the boundaries of childhood and adulthood. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), youth terminology is defined as the adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 years, while the United Nations as the age between 15 and 24 as provided by the United Nations General Assembly (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2006).

In most African countries, youth is perceived as a

transition period from boyhood, often marking the age to gain autonomy and take up societal responsibilities such as protecting the society and marriage phase. Under the African youth Charter, youth is defined as an individual between 15 to 35 years. In Kenya as guided by article 260 of the Kenya Constitution 2010, youth refer to individuals from age 18 to 34 years (Republic of Kenya, 2017), and that was the group that the study focused on. The question arises whether youth engage in conflicts simply because they are energetic and in the transition stage. The study, therefore, sought to establish

the link between education, unemployment and youth engagement in conflict activities in Machakos County.

In a world of escalating skill demand, an individual's level of education is vital. Education has been acknowledged as a powerful tool in the development of human capital. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number four (4) urges countries to ensure the provision of quality and inclusive education opportunities to enable lifelong learning for all those willing and able to learn. Investment in human capital has been a key in sustainable development as it is highly linked with high returns in form of earnings, poverty reduction as well as a great equalizer in life and a ray of hope for the global sustainability vision (United Nations, 2017; Becker, 2002; UNESCO, 2006; Chambers, 2002). Further, education has been associated with the transformational patterns of inequality and as a driver of intergenerational social change (Causa and Chapuis, 2009; OECD, 2010). These returns can only be reaped once the citizens engage in sustainable employment. According to International Labour Organization ([ILO], 2019), it is through the sustenance of material needs and escape from poverty that enables citizens to have decent lives, a sense of identity and belonging. Hence, all Countries need quality education for their young citizens in order to reap the benefits therein.

Based on the returns reaped from investment in education, it is no surprise that the delivery of equitable quality education underpins the world's development goals that include the promotion of peaceful co-existence and inclusive societies. Sustainable development Goal number 16 clearly shows that development can only be attainable in peaceful and secure environments. Hence, Goal number 16 advocates for the promotion of inclusive societies for sustainable development that provides access to peace, justice, and strong institutions among countries, the first target is the reduction of crime, terrorism, violence and fatal conflicts within global communities with particular emphasis in developing countries (United Nations, 2017).

According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD], 2015), education is the best safeguard against unemployment among the youth. It has however been noted that in developing countries, security and peaceful co-existence is still a mirage. Work holds collective significance by providing a network of connections and interactions that forge social cohesion among groups in society (ILO, 2019). The OECD (2015) however shows that the high level of out-of-school youths whose employment opportunities decline with low educational qualifications has remained a serious threat to peace and stability in many developing countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates that violent conflicts occur mostly in

the world's poor countries where scarcity of resources has led to cut-throat competition leading to a vicious circle of poverty (World Bank, 2006). Violence has continued to negatively affect society, threatening the social fabric and well-being, thereby challenging the realization of an individual's potential. Scholars such as Kyalo and Kyalo (2011) and Fountain (2000) opines that education promotes the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that eventually lead to behaviour change and harmonious coexistence in society. It is through the transformation of personal characteristics that enable children and youth to curb overt and structural conflicts and violence and also enables the creation of a conducive environment for peaceful co-existence among groups at different levels.

In times of violent conflicts, education plays a vital role in restoring normalcy, safeguards the most vulnerable and provides psychosocial care by unifying the members of the community. It has further been established that the nature of values within the content learned in schools can save lives, promote a productive life and protect the youth from forced recruitment and exploitation. (UNICEF, 2006). Even though education positively influences individuals' attitudes and behaviors thereby imparting social values, high poverty levels and high dependency ratios afflicting many developing nations has resulted in many out-of-school youths (UNESCO, 2016). For instance, in Kenya, UNESCO Institute of Statistics report (2021), more than 1.8 million children and youth between the ages of 6-17 years were reported to be out of school. The World Bank (2000) points out that the poorly educated are faced with serious life challenges with few prospects leading to desperation in life.

Research carried out by the World Bank (2006) suggests a strong link between revenues generated from natural resources and violent conflicts among communities in different regions. Such revenues have fueled and financed devastating conflicts in a large number of countries and regions. According to World Bank (2006), conflicts and violence disrupts community activities, lead to collapsing of services and infrastructure, and work becomes arduous, requiring flexibility and adaptability. Most conflicts involve an individual's endeavours to meet certain social, political and even psychological needs. The youth of the 21st century is faced with fewer education opportunities, unemployment, the HIV/AIDS crisis, and such similar conditions have created a fertile ground for youth engagement in violence and conflicts (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2006). It has been established that the international community has recently focused more on the child soldiers and the adolescents who are easily and forcibly recruited into armed groups thereby suffering problems of trauma, sexual abuse, and loss of educational and economic opportunities have been given little attention (USAID, 2005).

An econometric study carried out by USAID (2005) on

the causes of violent conflict reveals that low levels of educational attainment and lack of employment opportunities precipitated young men to engage in conflicts in society. Conflicts within communities have been manifested in a variety of ways (Senga and Kiilu, 2021). Sharp (2005) recognizes some of the conflicts to be in form of Protest and persuasion using strategies such as petitions, leafleting, picketing, vigils, marches, sanctuary, boycotts, strikes and civil disobedience. Conflicts have life-affirming as well as life-destroying aspects and they are formed from contradictions in the structure of society. According to Galtung et al. (2002), conflict formation takes place with the emergence of a conflict as the parties' interests come into conflict or the relationship; they become oppressive.

Youth unemployment refers to the number of unemployed youth in a given youth population (OECD, 2021). The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.6 is concerned with the promotion of youth employment, education and training. According to OECD (2015), between 2007 and 2012, the level of youth unemployment among the OECD countries was recorded to be more than 7.5 million. Most of the unemployed youth were found to have minimal skills, 85% of youth hardly attained education beyond upper-secondary and most of them encountered difficulties in maintaining the few available job opportunities (OECD, 2014c). It is well documented that educational attainment is closely linked to the level of individual earnings, implying that the youth who drop out of school without a basic educational qualification and that means they are devoid of skills required in the labor market. Education empowers individuals to enhance productivity, helps in solving problems and enables harmonious and peaceful co-existence (UNESCO, 2015). The persistently high levels of unemployment among the youth is however an indicator that education systems have failed to equip the young adults with the relevant skills for the labour market (The World Bank, 2020). The United Nations Development Programme ([UNDP], 2006) report indicates that inadequate basic literacy and numeracy skills are among the obstacles that hinder the youth from entering the labour market, further marginalising them from independent lives as adults.

Youth unemployment has largely been described as a major primary catalyst for youth unrest political, societal upheaval and violent conflicts among developing nations. The youth cohorts with few life opportunities to get integrated into the community and social structures are less able to acquire the skills they need for peaceful and constructive adult lives. The deprived, frustrated and traumatized youth cohort unable to cope with life challenges have resulted in involvement in violent conflict for decades (ILO, 2020).

In Africa, more than 60% of the population is made up of youths, with median age of 19.7 in 2020. The continent has the youngest population globally, with more than

540.8 million (0 to 14 years old) and 454.5 million (15 to 34 years old), amounting to 22.7% of the world's total youth population (UNESCO, 2020). This is a significant age gap when compared to 31.0 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 32.0 in Asia, 33.4 in Oceania, 38.6 in Northern America and 42.5 in Europe, the oldest continent. A study by Shirley de Villiers (2015) indicates that 75% of conflict deaths had resulted from five sub-Saharan African countries among which included the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. In relation to access to education, UNESCO (2018) report shows that although some improvement has been achieved, still only around half of those who would qualify for lower secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa are enrolled. The African average score for Education Quality in most African countries has deteriorated between 2013 and 2017.

The youth in Africa represent a powerful workforce that can transform the continent in terms of development. Africa hosts 22.7% of the world's youth population, second to Asia which hosts 58.0%. The literature further indicates that although some improvement in terms of access to education has been noted, more than half (51.5%) of the continent's 54 countries registered a deterioration in education outcomes implying a deterioration in learning achievements, with exception of Togo. Rocca and Schultes (2020) further shows a glaring mismatch between the skills required in the labour market is worse in Africa compared to the rest of the world, which has resulted in low participation in paid employment among the youth. Most African countries not only struggle with the education of their youth but also with job creation and political disenfranchisement that has often resulted in instability has been a teething challenge. Although Africa's total labour force participation rate was 63.1 percent higher than the global at an average which stood at 60.7 percent, more than 12.2 million youth in the African continent were unemployed by 2019 (ILO, 2020).

In some countries such as South Africa which has the second-largest GDP on the continent, 55 percent of the youth were jobless by 2019. Research indicates that by 2019, more than 63 percent of youth lived in poverty in Africa and the per capita incomes in Africa have remained low and growth rates volatile. It has been established that by 2017, 53 percent of the youth who were members of extremist groups in Africa were between 17 and 26 years old when they joined (ILO, 2020). Furthermore, studies show that employees in Africa have experienced a decline in wages since 2015 (ILO, 2019).

In Kenya, although the Kenya Youth Development Policy (2019) meant to address the unemployment challenges recognizes the youth innovativeness and creativity essential for job creation, the Kenyan youth are still facing unemployment challenges and view the future as uncertain and blink (UNDP, 2006). Although the

governments of Kenya have put efforts to reduce the level of unemployment such as the National Youth Policy, the Youth Development Fund, Kazi Kwa Vijana, the challenges of unemployment and its teething effects persist. For instance, the 2019 housing and population census indicated that more than 5,341,182 (38.9%) of the 13,777,600 Kenyan youths were neither in self-employment nor in formal employment. Out of the 13.7 million youth population aged 18 to 34, 61% are working while 1.6 million are yet to get paid. Recent data has shown that Kenya rates among the highest youth unemployment rates in East Africa.

Disparities in access to basic quality education have been reported to be among the sources of exclusion from the labour market leading to frustration and increased levels of instability and violent conflicts in society. Literature indicates that the education acquired by individuals plays a big role in shaping their perceptions regarding their interaction with the world and further instilling values of citizenship, responsibility and Cooperation (BCPR, 2005). A survey carried out in the United States of America (USA) and Britain to establish the level of conflict among the youth indicated an escalating scenario. In the USA for instance, more than 188,000 cases of violent crimes were reported among youths who had low level of educational attainment (Nourollah, Fatemeh and Farhad, 2015). However, a survey of 1,357 adults in the West Bank and Gaza found that the better-educated groups who included secondary school graduates and professionals supported terrorism activities against Israeli citizens compared to laborers and illiterate communities (Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2001).

According to USAID (2005), some leaders in many parts of the world make use of negative ethnic and religious stereotypes to mobilize political violence sometimes reinforced by mass media, the content of school and family values. For instance, from Sierra Leone to Uzbekistan, the youths have often joined militant teams to earn a living due to lack of due to a lack of other alternatives for survival, or even to escape from humiliation at school and oppressive family settings. This concurs with a qualitative study carried out through interviews by Peters and Richards which found some youth even under the age of 18 years to engage in conflicts with the perception that they needed to defend themselves just like adults did, and so joined militias groups (UNDP, 2006). This curtailed their potential to continue with education, eroding the possibility of gaining the returns associated with education.

In Kenya, the Government has planned to enhance security in all regions as a prerequisite to the economic growth and wellbeing of its citizens (RoK, 2007). To foster peaceful co-existence among its community members, the Third Medium Term Plan (2018-2022) (MTP) indicates that Kenya has been at the forefront in peacebuilding, with more than 462,449 million Kenya

shillings budgeted for peacebuilding and conflict resolution in 2018/2019 to 2022/2023 plan (Republic of Kenya, 2018). The overall ambition for the security sector under Kenya Vision 2030 is to “a society free from danger and fear” (RoK, 2007: 9). Despite the high investment to ensure peaceful co-existence among its citizens, Halakhe (2013 cited in Rohwerder, 2015) points out that the incidences of conflicts and insecurity in Kenya have been escalating especially during an election period. The youths are cited as the major vehicles who are used to perpetuate conflicts in society.

Literature reveals that the more than 192,885 reported cases of conflicts in Kenya in the years between 2013 and 2017 were associated with the youth aged 16-35 years (Senga and Kiilu, 2021). It has been suggested that the provision of targeted skill training and employment is an essential element in dissuading the youth from participation in violent conflicts (OECD, 2015). The study, therefore, sought to establish the effect of educational attainment and unemployment on youth involvement in violent conflicts in Machakos County, Kenya.

METHODS

The study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design method to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. A cross-sectional survey design was preferred as it enabled the researcher to collect a large number of variables from the population that was found to be cheap. Creswell (2012) and Bryman (2012) defines a research design as the scheme, blueprint or outline used to come up with answers to research questions.

To obtain information for understanding the link between educational attainment, unemployment and youth involvement in violent conflicts, the targeted youths aged 18-34 who were incarcerated in two prisons, one officer Commanding police station and 20 probation officers. From the total youth population of 566 incarcerated in two prisons in Machakos Town, a sample of a sample size of 234 respondents was obtained using Krejcie and Morgan tables which ensures a good decision model as it portrays the population and the corresponding sample sizes at 95% confidence level (Krejcie and Morgan, 1990). By utilization of the tables, it was 95% certain that the results obtained were similar had the entire population been conducted, with an acceptable sampling error of 5%.

To arrive at each unit of analysis, simple random sampling was used for both male and female respondents. Two probation officers and one officer commanding the police station were selected purposively. Purposive sampling methods ensure that relevant data is obtained from the experts who are assumed to have first-hand information by their expertise and work experience (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). To study used

semi-structured questionnaires to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. According to Bryman (2012), questionnaires enable researchers to collect a wide range of information from a large number of respondents within a short period of time. The questionnaires were distributed to the youth incarcerated in two prisons in Machakos town, Machakos County. Data from the Officer commanding the police station and the two probation officers were obtained by use of face-to-face interviews. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative techniques. The results were presented in tables, graphs and charts. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality and voluntary participation were observed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Education plays a significant role in creating an environment for youth to develop a sense of purpose-driven life, livelihood skills and values to foster peace and stability in society. Investment in Education has been known to be a catalyst to economic growth and human development as it promotes employment, earnings, health and poverty reduction (The World Bank, 2018 cited in Kiilu and Mugambi, 2019). It has highly emphasized that there is no development without human capital and peaceful co-existence in society (Schultz, 1961). Kiilu et al. (2019) points out that closing the

education gap spurs a community's social cohesion.

The study, therefore, sought to establish the influence of the level of education on youth engagement in conflicts in Machakos County. The questionnaire return rate was 168 (72%) and their responses were analyzed and the findings presented in Table 1.

Findings in Table 1 show that the majority of youths at 58.5% agreed that the level of education had no impact on participation in criminal activities among the youth between 18-34 years. Most of the youth respondents (49%) disagreed with the statement that the level of education had no impact on youth engagement in conflicts. However, 42% affirmed the statement while 10 percent were neutral. On the effect of dropouts and conflicts, the findings showed that school dropouts engage more in conflicts as attested by 55 percent of the respondents. However, 34 percent of the respondents confirmed that school dropouts engaged more in conflicts compared to school completers. Notable from the findings is that most of the respondents (61%) disagreed with the statement that the highly educated, skilled community members of society hardly engaged in individual-to-individual conflicts. Meaning that it is likely that even the more skilled and highly educated, engaged in violent conflicts in Machakos County. Regarding academic performance and conflicts, most respondents (50%) were positive that those with poor academic performance were more likely to get involved in violent conflicts.

Table 1. Influence of education level on youth engagement in conflicts.

Statement	SD		D		N		A		SA	
	f	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
The level of education has no impact on youth engagement in conflicts	52	31	30	18	17	10	35	21	34	21
School dropouts engage more in conflicts compared to completers	59	35	34	20	18	11	28	17	29	17
Highly educated, skilled hardly engage in conflict activities.	63	38	38	23	16	10	24	14.	35	21
Youth with low education levels are likely to engage in conflicts	47	28	39	23	17	10	32	19	33	19.0
Poor academic performance is related to ones' high rate of engagement in conflicts activities.	68	40.0	16	10.0	10	6.0	27	16	47	28
Valid N	168									

Interview from two probation officers established that 'most of the incarcerated youth were either secondary school dropouts or had only completed primary level of education.' One of the probation officers asserted that 'it is difficult to handle less educated individuals even here at the prison because they are unable to follow instructions. Furthermore, too many of the incarcerated youth here are school dropouts.'

Educational attainment and youth involvement in conflicts activities

Glasser (2009) asserts that normally conflict originates from within an individual irrespective of his or her academic standing as long as the influencing environmental factors are therein.

To establish the influence of educational attainment

and youth involvement in conflicts activities, a statistical significance was sought and findings were presented in Table 2.

The findings in Table 2 demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between the level of education and youth engagement in conflict as illustrated by $P > 0.05$. This implies that youth with lower education levels are mostly engaged in conflicts thus high cases of crime rates in Machakos County. This is highly attributed to high poverty levels, high education costs and unemployment; thus, these factors deny the majority of

youths access to basic education in Machakos County. The findings obtained concur with a study by Mao (2013) whose study found higher education levels to have a reduction effect on crime rates. The probation officer likewise agreed with the officer commanding the police station that interpersonal conflicts were the most common among the youth. The findings resonate with previous research by Mushanga (1976 cited in Igbinovia, 1988) whose study classified criminal activities as comprising two categories as involving person to person violent conflicts as well as economic crimes.

Table 2. Educational attainment and youth involvement in conflict activities.

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2 sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	31.622 ^a	12	.002
Likelihood Ratio	26.427	12	.009
Linear-by-Linear Association	.454	1	.500
No. of Valid Cases	57		

Unemployment and youth participation in conflict activities

Youth unemployment has become a global challenge. Studies show a close relationship between educational attainment and unemployment among the youth. The study sought to establish the effects of youth unemployment and youth engagement in conflict activities in Machakos County. Research indicates that in Kenya, 30 to 45 percent of the youth involved in conflicts

lack employment opportunities (RoK, 2015). A study by USAID (2005) on the causes of conflict revealed that lack of education and employment opportunities precipitated young men to engage in conflicts in society. These findings concur with Barakat et al. (2009) who assert that shortage of educational opportunities limits employment opportunities which may result in increased grievances and conflicts in society in the long run. The findings on youth unemployment and conflict have been presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Unemployment and youth engagement in conflicts activities.

Statement	SD		D		N		A		SA	
	f	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Unemployment has led to escalated youth engagement in conflicts activities	32	19	18	11	8	4	56	33	62	37
The unemployed youth experience high poverty levels, hence engage in conflicts.	39	20	24	14	11	7	43	26	57	34.0
Highly educated skilled employed youth rarely engage in conflict activities.	42	25.0	14	8.0	13	7	34	20	65	39.0
Unemployed Youth with low academic levels are likely to engage in conflicts	47	28	11	7.0	15	9.0	28	16	68	40
Valid N	168									

Findings in Table 3 show that the majority of youths at 70% agreed that unemployment among youth was a catalyst to their involvement in conflicts activities. As indicated by 68%, the unemployed Youth with low

academic levels were found to engage in conflicts compared with the educated unemployed young adults, while. Most youths agreed (60%) that people who had lacked employment experienced high poverty levels

hence engaged more in conflicts compared to those who were actively engaged. However, from the findings, 34% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the unemployed youth experience high poverty levels as they could be engaged in other income-generating activities, but seven (7) percent were neutral.

A study by the African Development Bank (AfDB) (2013) found unemployment as a catalyst to social inequalities, hence instability and youth vulnerability. These findings concur with some scholars such as Schultz (1961) regarding the role of education on individual earnings, that education has a screening effect in labour market. Schultz (1961) further views education as a tool for crime reduction and social cohesion as it enhances the quality of an individual's life thereby ensuring socio-economic progress. However, a study carried out by Stewart (2012) research found education to be a vehicle for fostering peace, social justice and respect for human rights. Regarding whether highly educated skilled employed youth engaged in conflict activities, 59% of the respondents agreed, while 33 percent disagreed. Of the total 168 respondents, eight (8) percent were neutral.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the study, findings indicate a close link between the level of education and youth engagement in conflicts. The study concludes that the lower the level of education, the higher the chances of youth engagement in conflict activities. The study further concludes that it is not always those uneducated who engage in conflicts, but also those educated but facing the challenges of unemployment and unable to sustain their livelihoods.

RECOMENDATIONS

Youth engagement in conflicts has persisted. From the study findings, there is still a high level of unemployment among the youth in Kenya. The study, therefore, recommends that the country diversify the economy to create more opportunities for the youths. More industries could be established to create opportunities for the less skilled school youths who left school before completion. The country needs to engage more in industrialization to absolve all categories of the labour force, including those with low or no skills at all. The Government should provide incentives to enhance investments in specific key areas that create employment opportunities and decent sustainable work. Once youths with fewer skills are engaged in activities that earn them a living, conflicts emanating from competition for scarce resources would be solved.

The youths should be empowered financially irrespective of gender, to engage in more innovative and productive ventures to reduce the causes of conflicts in

society. Further, the education system needs to be transformed in such a way that all those who leave school at a certain level attain competencies and skills which can be used to engage in self-employment. Since education is one of the exit routes from poverty, developing countries need to embrace lifelong learning to equip their citizens with practical skills that are relevant to labor markets.

Work policy also assists in the alleviation of unemployment. Workers need a policy that promotes their rights on terms and conditions of employment regarding working hours and a living wage. Kenya as a country needs to come up with innovative strategies regarding the future of work and employment through the creation of stable environments and dialogue with multilateral institutions to reduce unemployment levels.

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Citation: Senga, M. M., and Kiilu, R. M. (2022). Understanding the effect of educational attainment and unemployment on youth engagement in conflicts in Machakos County, Kenya. *African Educational Research Journal*, 10(1): 46-53.
