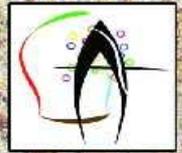CODESRIA

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L'Afrique et les défis du XXIème siècle
Africa and the Challenges of the Twenty First Century
A África e os desafios do Século XXI
إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

Claiming the 21st Century: Young people's perceptions and aspirations of future employment in Ghana

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The UN declared 2011 the International Year of the Youth even before the tumultuous and world-changing events in Tunisia and Egypt underscored the fact that the actions and hopes of young people are a force shaping our world. Africa is spoken of as a 'youthful continent' because of the rising population of young people.[1] If Africa would grasp the opportunity that this youth bulge presents, those who suggest that the 21st century is the African century may well be vindicated.

However, there are challenges to be overcome if young people are to fulfil their own and the continent's potential. Unemployment is perhaps the preeminent challenge; while the problem of jobless growth is a reality for many African countries, we see that the rates of unemployment are disproportionately high for young people, and paradoxically for the more educated -- a fact behind the frustrations that fuelled the North African uprisings. A recent study on policy narratives in five African countries showed that one of the main threads of policy discourse is the importance of employment for young people.[2] Despite this heightened policy interest, there is a dearth of research to inform policy decisions. There is scant of literature on young people on the African continent that ventures outside of physical, reproductive and mental health behaviours. *Of this, very little empirical work – most of it dated - engages with young people's aspirations.*[3] Yet aspirations are a potentially a major influence on young people's choices and eventual life outcomes.

This paper derives from the first stage of a multi-year study at the University of Ghana on students' aspirations. It has its empirical basis in structured interviews of 98 undergraduate students, complemented with 12 focus group sessions involving the same students. The sample was purposively selected from all four years of undergraduate programming, and across the faculties of the university. In this non-random sampling, a conscious effort was made to obtain diversity in terms of disciplines, genders, income and family backgrounds, and so on.

The study has three related purposes. First, it explores the social imaginaries of students regarding the world of work, focusing on the values, attributes and contexts of a successful

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[1] UNECA/AUC 2010 figures indicate that 70 per cent of Africa's population is under the age of 30.

[2] Unpublished papers prepared for the Young People and Agriculture Theme of the Future Agricultures Consortium -- Anyidoho, N. 2011. Policy Narratives Around Young People and Youth – Ghana; Kayuni, H. 2011. Policy Narratives Around Young People and Youth – Malawi; Ndungu, J. 2011. Policy Narratives Around Young People and Youth – Kenya; Sall, M. 2011. Policy Narratives Around Young People and Youth – Senegal; Tadele, G. 2011. Policy Narratives and Discourses Concerning the "Youth" in Ethiopia.

[3] See Leavy, J. and Smith, S. (Sally). Future farmers: Youth aspirations, expectations and life choices. *Future Agricultures Consortium Discussion Paper 13.* Retrieved on 17 May 2011 from www.future-agricultures.org

work life. Secondly, it seeks insight into both the content and rationale of students' work aspirations. Thirdly, the study aims to link these future plans back to the choices that students make in the present time.

An analysis of data from the interviews and focus groups produced the following findings: To begin with, students were almost unanimous that social connections -- 'who-you-know' and 'who-knows-you' -- are the most important factors in obtaining work, even more important than one's disciplinary background, grade point average or personal attributes. What is illuminating is the complex ways in which these social relationships are thought to operate in work settings (for instance, in getting a foot in the door) and yet are not a guarantee of a successful work life; such long-term success was understood to be more contingent on individual traits and choices. Secondly, students had varied sets of aspirations about work, signalled by their use of different terms. In particular, we found that the word 'career' was not commonly used by students because it connoted a predictability of circumstances and availability of opportunities which, while desirable, was inconsistent with students' reading of their economic and social environments. The majority of the students limited their aspirations to 'getting a job', 'being employed' or 'finding work' and could only be hopeful that, in the far future, they might 'attain a career'. Finally, young people assessed the opportunity space offered by the tertiary institution based on what they thought was important for boosting their future work lives; for instance, they valued the ability to create wide networks in the university almost as much as the degree they would earn.

The paper goes on to make recommendations for policy in institutions of higher education that would help shape and support young people's aspirations. It also makes some suggestions for national youth and employment policy more broadly.

The study adds to the scant literature available that investigates young people's perceptions and aspirations, and how these are shaped by context. Primarily, the paper points out that policies and programmes that rightly attend to young people should be informed by an understanding of young people's lived realities. This is the best way to help prepare Africa's young people to claim the future.