
Youth of Today, Leaders of Tomorrow: A Political Rhetoric? A Critique on Employment Opportunities and Challenges for the Out-Of-School Youth in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract: Youth unemployment and underemployment for the out-of-school has been a contentious issue amongst the top ten challenges confronting successive governments in PNG since 1975. The prevailing illusion that those categories of youth are ably catered for and supported by the traditional social safety nets, and can survive by working on their customary land (about 90% unalienated land) is no longer a reality for many young people. A great majority of them have left school and are still searching for brighter opportunities in life away from the land. Often, they are regarded as the targets of anti-social behaviors and disorderly community make-ups. Governments therefore spend relentless time, efforts and resources to keep them at bay and locked them away to pave the way for societies to function orderly for the sake of those few who are at the helm of power and wealth.

Numerous legislative and policy reforms have had no significant impact on the lives and prosperity of that particular target group, apart from the National Youth Movement Programme (NYMP-1980-1990) which will be reflected-on later in this paper. The popular slogan: “Youth of today and Leaders of tomorrow will only materialize if appropriate opportunities are provided today for them to prepare well for tomorrow”. And this paper is a brief critique of what has transpired and should be done in light of the modern challenges that are already excluding them in the process of development.

Key words: Youth unemployment/underemployment; Papua New Guinea, Social safety nets; Rural/Urban divide; Policy recommendations

1. THE POPULATION OF YOUTH IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Youth in PNG is defined by age as those between the ages of 12-25 years old. It represents the age group who supposed to be at school, thereby continuing their education until they reach tertiary level and complete their final stages of education in our inherited formal education system. That youth population represented 28.8% (1/3) of the total population in the country between 1990 and 2000. (NSO, 2000)

In the same period of time, the national population growth rate was between 2.8-3.0% per annum, with the youth population also projected to increased at about the same rate. The implication therefore was that, both the state and the society in general were confronted with a mammoth task to create and provide productive activities for the growing number of young people. That includes creating employment opportunities within both the formal and informal sectors of the economy.

The 2000 National Population Census further reported that, the youth population of PNG below fifteen (15) years old represented 42% of the total population compared to the sixty (60) years and over age group where only 4% was recorded. It represented almost half of the nation's population and by 2010, they will be in their twenties (20s). Some of them may already have become parents by then. The average age of the population was projected to remain at the twenty (20) years mark in the first two (2) decades of the new millennium to the year 2020 (NSO, 2000).

Comparatively by world standards, PNG relatively has a young population with aging a less pressing issue during the same period of time. However, by 2020 onwards, aging has become an emerging social economic issue. The nation was not prepared to mitigate and facilitated relevant policy actions in social protection and social security to accommodate that category of the nation's population.

That scenario appears to loom as a double-header challenge for the relevant authorities. They must now wrestle with the continuing plight of the unemployed youth population, as well as meeting the needs of the emerging old age population. It will remain as the order of population growth and life cycle spiralling into the next millennium and beyond.

Tables 1-3 below highlights the trends of youth population growth of ages between 12-25 years in the urban and rural areas as noted in the Revised National Youth Policy 2007-2011.

Table 1: Youth Population in PNG 12-25 Years Old.

Age	Males	Females	Total
12-25 years old	778,070	717,104	1,495,174
Rural	660,406	613,956	1,274,362
Urban	117,664	103,148	220,612

Table 2: Rural Youth Population 12-25 Years Old

Age	Males	Females	Total
12-14 years old	168,833	147,315	316,148
15-19 years old	251,598	223,971	475,569
20-25 years old	239,975	242,670	482,645

Table 3: Urban Youth Population 12-25 Years Old

Age	Males	Females	Total
12-14 years old	23,081	21,156	44,237
15-19 years old	41,679	37,233	78,912
20-25 years old	52,904	44,759	97,663

Source: Second Revised National Youth Policy of PNG 2007-2011

2. YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Youth Unemployment is defined as; “the share of the labour force ages 15-24 without work, but available and looking for employment” (<https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/PNG/papua-new-guinea>). Simply put, it refers to people who have met the requirements to gain an employment in the formal sector, but there is no work or job vacancy available for them in the labour market.

Youth unemployment has been a hot subject of discussions by successive governments in PNG for five decades. And real practical response to curbing with the unemployment and underemployment situation seemed to be diminishing as youth employable population increases by almost 3% every year. Despite numerous efforts since independence, youth unemployment continues to prevail as one of the major hinderance to development efforts in the country. And law enforcing authorities as well as the community at large often regarded it as law & order situations (Melpa, 2022). The underlying causes are rarely addressed.

According to the 2000 National Population Census, the Employment Rate remained at 2.8% in between 1990-2000. In 1990 the percentage of Formal and Subsistence/Semi-subsistence labour force stood at 18% and 74 % respectively, whilst unemployment was recorded at 8% of the total population (NSO, 2000). Informal wage employment was recorded at 15% in 2003 and was expected to increase to 20% with the passing of the Informal Sector Bill in 2004.

A recent NRI (National Research Institute) report indicated that, youth unemployment represented 62% of the total population in 2020 (<https://pngnri.org>).

In recent years since 2019, youth unemployment rate has slightly improved and remains steady with a minimal increase in 2019 according to Macrotrends. <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/PNG/papua-new-guinea>).

Without empirical data to substantiate these trends of development, the rare declining trend can be attributed to a number of factors. Such include the introduction of the government's *'leave no child behind'* policy in education which aimed to retain the school age children in the classroom until they reach grade 12 level of education.

In recent times, most Provincial Governments as well as individual Members of Parliament too have initiated school subsidy programmes for their respective electorates. These efforts bear mutual benefits to the politicians, as well as financial relief to the parents and sponsors

All those initiatives Culminated with the introduction of the HELP (Higher Education Loan Scheme) by the National Government for students attending tertiary institutions in the recent past. None of those efforts are aimed at the out-of-school youth population.

At this stage, there are no empirical evidence to link such education subsidies to the slide decline in youth unemployment as illustrated in Table 4 below.

The other assumption is the emergence of increasing number of private educational institutions and collages in the last decade which had provided additional spaces for potential school-leavers.

These efforts are not linked directly to creation of new jobs in the labour market for the youth population, nor is there any clear pathways to determining the demands of labour market with the number of graduates each year, especially at the tertiary level.

Our universities and colleges produce countless accountants, lawyers, engineers, social workers, teachers, doctors and other professionals anticipating the job market will provide them with employment opportunities after they graduate. They are not trained to return to the village and become rural village farmers or cultivate their land. That has its own social-cultural as well as legislative and policy implications.

On the contrary, they all graduate and seek white-collar jobs in both the public and private sectors, and increasingly today in the NGO sector as well.

Table 4 illustrates the youth unemployment rate in PNG between 2019 and 2023 highlighting a steady, but fluctuating scenario for that short period.

Table 4: Papua New Guinea Youth Unemployment Rate between 2019-2023

Period (in years)	% Rate	Increase by %	Decline by %	Comments
2019-2020	4.26	0.3		
2020-2021	4.08		0.18	
2021-2022	3.72		0.36	
2022-2023	3.70		0.02	

Experts estimate that as of the beginning of the new millennium, approximately 80,000 young people will leave school every year out of which only about 12.5 % are able to get absorbed into the formal labour force. And one third (1/3) of the total labour force is self-employed and found in the agricultural sector (Revised National Youth Policy, 2007-2011).

There is that inherent illusion amongst our leaders and policy makers that, the rural informal sector which makes up 87% of the population has, and will continue to sustain those who cannot be accommodated by the formal sector of the economy, including the projected 80,000 school leavers each year.

Such perception is contrary to the inherited education system which creates expectations and prepares the school leavers for white-collared jobs when they leave schooling at various levels of education. Very little emphasis is placed on rural, village-based life style in our existing education curriculums.

The 2000 National Population Census estimated that, the employment rate in PNG was at 2.8% which was equal to the annual national population growth rate. That means that every time when a new child is born, a

young man or women is added to the list of the unemployed, hence the state must create the employment opportunities for that new person.

The employment rate has remained at the same rate for almost two decades since early 1990s and was expected to remain at that rate to the end of 2010. In 1990 the percentage of formal and subsistence/semi-subsistence labour force stood at 18% and 74% respectively. Unemployment was recorded at 8% of the total population (NSO, 2000)

In the informal sector, the informal wage employment was 15% in 2003 and was expected to increase to 20% by the end of the first decade of the new millennium with the passing of the Informal Sector Bill in 2004.

3. GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO ADDRESS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN NATION - BUILDING SINCE INDEPENDENCE FOR THE OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH POPULATION

The very first government policy on youth development, the National Youth Policy of Papua New Guinea was adopted by the National Executive Council in 1983.

Ten (10) years later in 1993, the NEC through its Decision No. 114/93 directed the National Youth Commission to review that Policy together with the NYC Act 1991. This review was necessary to streamline youth development programmes with the political and administrative structural reforms in the country at that time. The consequent outcome was the adoption of the Revised National Youth Policy by Parliament in January 1997, followed by the enactment of the National Youth Commission Bill two (2) years later in December 1999 (Wrondimi Review Report, May 2006)

The Bill then provided for the establishment of the office of the National Youth Commission which became the central government agency responsible for youth development work in the country. The National Youth Policy was revised once again six (6) years later in 2003, this time with greater focus on the roles and responsibilities of the Commission in order to reflect and realign with the reforms.

The review was also necessary to accommodate the changing needs of the youth population and the society at large ten (10) years after 1993.

3.1 The National Youth Movement Programme (NYMP)

The PNG Government's first practical initiative for the out-of-school youth populations was the establishment of the National Youth Movement Programme (NYMP) in the early 1980s and parked under the Prime Minister's Department. It was just an office which also accommodated the Women, Sports & Recreation, and Religion functions, and officially known then as the; Office of Youth, Women, Religion, Sports & Recreation (Wrondimi Review Report, May 2006)

The fact that the NYPM was located directly under the Department and Ministry of the Prime Minister himself, coupled with the appointment of a senior Statesman in the form of the late, Bernard Narokobi as the founding Charman of the nation's youth council network was a symbolic gesture of priority accorded to harnessing and involving young talents in the process of nation-building, as well as an inclusive, participatory, development approach by the post-independence Somare-led government.

NYMP's programmes and activities were centered around the three main themes of Mobilization, Participation, and Productiveness. The principal goal was to mobilize the (mainly out of school) youth into manageable groups of between 15-30 members, have the groups registered, then engage them in productive activities, hence contributing meaningfully to the development process.

To realize those three themes or pillars, the your activities were align under five components, which included; i) the Youth Council Network, aimed at providing a forum for them to address issues affecting them, ii) the Grants Scheme, to engage them in productive self-employment activities, iii) the Youth Training Programmes, to train them in various leadership and organisational knowledge and skills, iv) the Youth Shows, to provide avenues for the youth to display their talents in productive economic and cultural activities, and, iv) the Community Youth Co-ordinators (CYC) Scheme, where outstanding young people were identified and appointed to co-ordinate youth activities at community level. They were place on regular allowances of K80.00 per month (Wrondimi, 2006)

To compliment those initiatives, I collaborated with Mr. John Honani from the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and initiated a weekly one-hour programme for the young people known as “*youth of today*” in 1985. The live broadcast provided an avenue for the young people to call up and discuss any issue of concern which they wanted to share with one another to even to express matters concerning the plight of the young people to the government and other relevant stakeholders. I was then the Youth Coordinator for National Capital District Urban Youth Programme, the urban component of the National Youth Movement Programme.

- *Reflection on the Impacts of NYMP between 1980-1990*

After 45 years on (2025 now), and NYMP still remains as the most successful youth development programme in the country in terms of mobilizing the unemployed, underemployed and out-of-school young people to meaningfully engage in, and constructively contribute to community and nation-building at that time.

By the time when NYMP was replaced with the then, National Youth Service (NYC Act 1991), the former was fully established with a nation-wide youth council network comprising a National Youth Council, 20 Provincial Youth Councils, 97 District Youth Councils, over 10 Urban Youth Councils in the ten selected major urban centres, and a good number of Area Youth Associations at the sub-district levels (Wrondimi, 2006)

At the peak of its existence after ten years of operation in 1989, over 30,000 youth groups were registered amassing an estimated 300,000 youth population throughout the country. It was the largest youth movement programme in the short history of the nation, and the first of its type in the entire Pacific Region. Many island nations in the region were beginning to emulate the youth development model which was already making news headlines as an alternative voice for the voiceless youth population who were very vulnerable to the inevitable influences of modernization in the globally changing world.

The youth councils offered the only forum for the young people to meet regularly and discuss issues affecting them in the seemingly uncaring world pertaining to their advancement in life. It provided the only legal avenue through which they were able to discuss issues, share experience of common interest, and safely express their views and concerns for greater participation in the development process.

It further provided the avenues for them to develop their leadership and organisational skills, which enabled some of them to become provincial and national leaders like (the late Albert Mokai, Premier for Southern Highlands), and Greg Maisen (Deputy Premier for East Sepik Province) to name a few. They both were community youth workers under the NYMP’s Community Youth Coordinators Scheme, and later became chairpersons of their respective Provincial Youth Councils in the late-1980s.

More than 300 you leaders were trained and certified as qualified community youth workers at the YMCA training centre in Lae. About 50 of them advanced to received their Diplomas in Youth and Development at FIJI after completing two years of advanced studies in youth and development.

Many more young people benefited from the NYMP Grant Scheme where project grants worth K1000 (maximum) were made available to fund successful youth projects. Such benefits were not all monetary, but in-kind as well including transfer of new knowledge and skills in project planning and management, budgeting, accounting, and the whole concept of entrepreneurship.

The Annual Provincial and Regional Youth Shows also provided windows of opportunities for the young people by bringing together people from all walks of life to congregate, interact, show case their youth talents, as well as getting to know each other and share experiences and skills between and among one another.

3.2 The National Youth Service Act (1991)

The National Youth Service (NYS) Act of 1991 replaced the NYMP which promoted both continuity and diversion on youth development work in the country. Whilst consolidating the initial youth network which was established under the ousted NYMP, it also provided a new dimension which was aimed at engaging the young people as volunteers in close allegiance with the disciplinary forces as their trainers and supervisors.

The main emphasis of NYS was on Network Strengthening, Total Participation and Advancement (NYS Act, 1991) which was basically to continue from the benchmark that was already set under the previous programme (NYMP).

The main goal for the young people to be involved in the construction of infrastructure facilities and engage in community service activities under the close supervision of the disciplinary forces (which was the original intention of the new NYS Act) never eventuated. Instead, a Youth Brigade Scheme was initiated and piloted in several major urban centres like Port Moresby, Mount Hagen and Lae where the unemployed young people were mobilized and trained by members of the three disciplinary forces to provide security services to individuals, business houses and public facilities in and around the cities.

In return for their services, some payment in both cash and in kind were made to the NYS offices, some of which was later redistributed to the youths as their wages and allowances. I coordinated the Lae programme for a short period of time from October 1992 to July 1993. In August 1993, I joined the University of Papua New Guinea as an academic and has remained in that profession since then.

The whole idea under both youth programmes was to provide alternative opportunities for the unemployed and underemployed out-of-school young people in the informal sector, both to keep them occupied, as well as to create avenues for them to participate in and make meaningful contribution to the nation's development process.

3.3 The National Youth Commission Bill (1999)

The government's further reform in youth related work took place in 1997 which resulted in the passing of the National Youth Commission Bill (1999), and the subsequent development of the Draft National Youth Policy 2007-2011 of Papua New Guinea in 2006.

The main emphasize of that revised youth policy was on Massive Participation, Rural Development, Decentralization, Integration, Democratization, Volunteerism and Unity, among both the service providers and youth themselves at all levels and across all sectors of society (Wrondimi Review Report, May 2006). It further paved the way for the establishment of the National Youth Commission which became the official government agency responsible for all youth related matters in the country.

The National Youth Commission had wide ranging powers and function, so much of which has not been fully or effectively implemented during the first six years of existence. It was entrusted with eight major functions under section 4 (1) of the Bill. These included the following:

- To co-ordinate policy development on youth matters, provide policy advice to Provincial and LLGs on government matters pertaining to youth, identify and provide training opportunities for both youth workers as well as the youth population, facilitate efficient research on youth matters, provide technical specialists to Provincial and Local Level Governments, establish standards and reinforce and monitor level of youth service across all sectors, monitor youth development plans at all levels, and provide opportunities for youth participation at international as well as aid activities within the Country at all levels (Wrondimi, 2006)

- *Reflection*

Despite all these latter government legislative and policy reforms in the years since the abolition of NYMP in 1990, the youth population still remain untouched and disengaged right across the nation as participants, beneficiaries and the primary target group of those government efforts.

There is currently a huge gap between policy making and policy implementation. All benefits appeared to be enjoyed by the bureaucrats who conduct numerous conferences, workshops and seminars hence using funds for youth work for their own travel logistics and allowances, as well as for their wages.

One of the contributing factors to the creation of that communication and implementation gap are the various provisions in the Provincial and Local Level Government Act (1995) which the national youth office continuously applies as an excuse to justify its stand that, *its function is to make policies only. It is the role of the lower lever governments to implement the policies.*

In my view the Act should be reviewed and such inhibiting provisions be repealed because the practical reality on the ground does not reflect the purpose and original intentions of the Act today. It is indeed the main contributor to the lack of collaborative efforts by the three-tier government system in the delivery of services, not only for the youth population, but the wider rural communities throughout the nation.

3.4 The Introduction of Youth Wage

Amongst many earlier measures taken to address the youth unemployment situation in the country since independence, the government through the then Department of Labour & Employment under the Minimum Wages Board made a historical decision to include National Youth Wage for new entrants into the labour force for the ages between 16-21 years old at 75% of adult minimum wage (Department of Labour and Employment, 2000). It was an inclusive decision for both the adult and the youth employees under the National Minimum Wage structure, and was applauded by many youth employer organisations and agencies across the nation, especially churches and NGOs who were already engaging the youth in greater numbers under voluntary or temporary wage arrangements.

However, in less than a year, the government of the day resented the MWB decision and reverted back to the 1992 National Minimum Wages which has remained since then. It excluded the youth population as a special category of workforce who deserved such a recognition. It was a regressive decision, and a slap in the face for the employable young people in their new hopes for a fair share of the cake in the nation's paid labour market. Among many other reasons, the reversal of the MWB was attributed to the argument that, the demands by the workers were beyond the employers' financial capacities to comply. Simply put, the employers could not afford to implement the new MWB's decision. The Government using its veto power was sympathetic to the employers and disallowed the decision when the workers walked out of the determination hearing in protest, subsequently reverting back to the Minimum Wage Rates of the 1992 Determination.

In 2003, a Supplementary Minimum Wage Agreement was reached between the Employers Federation of PNG (acting on behalf of the employers) and the PNG Trade Union Congress (acting on behalf of the workers), which was registered as Award No.11 of 2003. This Award has allowed for a uniform Wage rate for all the youths right across the country, which was consistent with the intentions of the Award to generalize this Award to all the workers, outside of PNGTUC and the EFPNG memberships.

The new Interim Minimum Wage (which replaced the 1992 Minimum Wage, until a new Minimum Wage rate is agreed to) is K37.20/week or K74.40/fortnight. "The new National Youth Wage therefore shall be 75% of the proposed new Interim National Minimum Wage and shall be applied to all new entrants to wage employment between 16 and 18 years" (MOA of the Award No.11 of 2003)

In 2004 the government passed the Non-Formal Sector Bill which recognises and promotes the involvement of the 85% of the population in the development process through the informal sector activities. It is thus expected that many more young people will be involved in unskilled, self-employed activities to benefit themselves and their families and communities.

The government at that time also committed to spend over PNGK346.9 million on Income Earning Opportunities alone in the next three years between 2005-2007 (MTDS 2005-2010). Such initiative aimed to boost the employment rate as well as the overall GDP to higher levels in the medium and long term if the economy growth continues to remain steady at its current level.

In the nutshell, the government of PNG has given political recognition and support in terms of legislations and policies on youth development for two (2) and half (½) decades since 1980. Regardless of all its efforts, there are no specific youth employment or employment-oriented programmes targeted at the out-of-school young people alone, so that they can clearly identify with and participate in it since the 1990s. Neither are there any combined youth employment programmes between the various sectors which are restricted only for the young people. In a very competitive labour market, the young people are the least fortunate and often get missed out for lack of experience, mistrust and nowadays for not knowing the "*buddies*" in the system.

3.5 Factors Affecting the Employment Situation of Youth in PNG

The common factors affecting the employment situation in this country has some similarities to those in other Pacific countries. Those that are unique to Papua New Guinea context, and hence requires greater attention by decision-makers, policy- makers, and youth workers are highlighted in the ensuing discussions.

According to Wrondimi (2008), the following were some of the main factors affecting youth employment activities in this country;

- *Global influences*

The inheritance of the global free market economy has increased social problems around the world, mainly in the developing and third world countries like Papua New Guinea. There is now an increasing gap emerging whereby the income distribution is concentrated at the top 5% of the wealthy population thus affecting the redistribution of limited resources to benefit the majority. Employment creation has thus become a low priority of government in this country since the 1990s while it concentrates on meeting the demands of the well-to-do citizens in the multinational corporate and private sector agencies.

Globalisation has also increased marginalisation of labour and the poor thereby increasing community Balkanization and rapid loss of community cohesion in some parts of the country. Many young people too are now finding it difficult to identify themselves with a community, let alone being accepted by one, as none seemed to be found wanting for an increasing number of them, particularly those come from cross-cultural marriages. They are constantly being disoriented from their roots of origin hence language and cultural identity.

It has also widened gaps in education, skills transfer as well as income and wealth generation opportunities for the majority young people with greater emphasis placed on meeting the needs of the global market economy and facilitate investor confidence.

The formal education system which was inherited at independence has proven to be of less employment benefits to the great majority of young people. By the turn of the century, only about 15%-20% of them were able to find jobs in the formal sector (NSO, 2011).

Modern technology has also placed many more people out of jobs worldwide and PNG is no exception. Unlike 20 years in retrospect, a government department which employed ten secretaries and typists can today employ only five because the computers can double the manned hours as well as the amount of workload required compared to the ordinary typewriters in the past.

- *PNG Context*

Papua New Guinea is proclaimed by many as a unique country rich in language and cultural diversity, and yet remain unified as “*one nation, one country and one people*”. It is sometimes confusing for an outsider to fully understand and comprehend some of the cultural behaviour and attitudes of people from that perspective, especially when some of such have now been integrated into the workforce and blended as acceptable work place behaviours and practices.

At the upper rung of the leadership scale, the nation’s leaders pass legislations and create policies, much of which do not necessarily control and regulate the citizens’ lives in a strict and rigid way as one would normally find in well structured modernized societies. Neither are the implementors fully committed to seriously implement the policy decisions to realise the anticipated outcomes, let alone policies on youth employment and unemployment.

In that context there has been so much rhetoric on the creation of youth employment opportunities as preventive measures to alleviate escalating law and order issues since the 1980s. The reality has been a very slow progress, often passing on the burden to the corporate and private sectors as well as churches and NGOs to find the answers.

Government agencies which are responsible for youth matters seemingly take a backseat and expect the former to implement those youth policies and plans on their behalf, rather than to be at the forefront and taking the lead. The prevailing excuses of “*lack of funds*” seemed to be unceasing and has found a permanent place in our modern workforce.

Such “*taking the back seat*” approached are often reflected in instances when, if there is a crime associated with youth, everyone in the society becomes emotionally involved in the debate on the types of measures (including youth employment programmes) that should be taken to deal with the situation in the spur of the moment. As days, weeks, months and years passed by the whole subject becomes a non issue until it occurs again.

Responsible state agencies often align with the law enforcing agencies to address it as a law & order matter without attempting to investigate the underlying issues that compels the young people to resort to such actions. Reactionary measures also continue to prevail in other areas such as domestic violence, violence against

women and girls, and white-collar crimes, regardless of the relevant laws that are already in place to create and enforce proactive measures.

In fact, every other form of expression has now become a police matter, tightly controlled and restricted to safeguard the interest of the government of the day. Even public gatherings and expression of public opinions as people's participation in what was once a "free-flowing democracy" has now been suppressed and sanctioned by a seemingly authoritarian government that is so adamant to stay in power for whatever it takes.

The young people have no space at all in such "*controlled rooms*" to express their desires and expectations as equal players in the nation's playing field on matters of development and progress in so far as their interests are concerned.

Traditionally, young people in PNG are not resource owners and decision-makers without the consent of their parents, clan members or community leaders. They find it very difficult to make independent decisions on the use of resources such as land, material and even youth labour to perform self-help, self-employment activities without parental or community approval.

Their image in the society's social structure has also been tainted by the criminal activities of a few over the years. Generally, they cannot be trusted by many potential employers hence get turn down mostly on unskilled jobs which they are more than capable of performing.

The government and the society as a whole are not keeping pace with the changes which are affecting the lives of the youth of today. Their values, preferences and expectations towards modern lifestyle are changing so rapidly which makes it even harder for the policy makers to make the right choices on their behalf.

For instance, they cannot be forced by the government's "*rural shift*" policies to return home to till their land after completing their university studies when their colleagues could find white collar jobs in the formal sector and live a decent life in the urban environment. This could only happen when the employment conditions as well as the general lifestyle in the rural areas had been improved.

At present the young people have no forum to collectively raise issues and concerns affecting their lives in the country. The National Youth Council has not been revived for almost three decades now, although they are required by law to have that body representing them.

In PNG there is no way of determining the linkage between education and employment in both the formal and informal sectors. Young people who undertaking various courses do so with the hope that they will manage to find a job somewhere, somehow when they graduate. There is very little or no data currently available which indicates the creating of new jobs in the labour market for each profession, be it for accountants, lawyers, architects, social workers, doctors, teachers, so on and so forth.

The other common obstacle confronting the young people who leave school each year is the inherent employer culture which generally regard them as having lack of experience to perform to their expectations. Almost 99/100 times the potential employers would mention "*previous experience*" in the job advertisement which immediately turns off an applicant's interest.

4. CONCLUSION

The issue of youth employment or unemployment (and underemployment for that matter) has been top on the list of government concerns and debates over the years. Much of it were just mere rhetoric without constructive actions.

Whilst there have been some positive responses in terms of legislations and policies, reforms these are mostly about general aspects of youth development work. They act as governments guidelines for other sectors to refer to as the point of reference for youth development work.

There is at this stage no specific employment scheme or programme in PNG which are targeted at the young people alone. They have to compete with the adults in the open job market which has proven to be to their disadvantaged in most cases.

With the government's "downsizing and streamlining exercise" during the beginning of the new millennium, particularly under the public sector reforms, there was an indefinite freezing on the creating of new jobs right across the board. Only the private and corporate sectors are still creating some job opportunities for the new entrees into the labour force. The nation has experienced a long period of recovery from then on until now to

cerate something tangible and constructive for the youth population in terms of employment opportunities, particularly in the formal sector of the economy.

In a small economy where the employment growth rate is just beginning to pick up at a slow rate of 3% in the four years since then, only a handful of industries such as mining, logging, fisheries, canneries, security services and the building industry seemed to be creating new job opportunities for the labour market.

Even then there is insufficient data readily available to justify and confirm the actual number and rate of job creating per sector or industry at this stage. A more comprehensive study is overdue to provide updated information on the youth employment situation the country. The recently completed NSO data from the national population census (2024) has yet to be processed for public consumption.

The government's commitment to spend over PNGK346.9 million on Income Earning Opportunities alone during the years between 2005-2007 initiative was aimed to boost employment rate as well as the overall GDP to higher levels in the medium and long term if the economy growth continued to remain steady at its current level (MTDS 2005-2010).

Again, such initiatives are not targeted specifically at the youth population but on the wider labour force. The young people will continuously be placed at the disadvantaged position due to lack of experience and general lack of trust from the potential employers.

Other factors such as lack of consultation by line agencies such as the National Youth Development Authority and the Department of Labour & Industrial Relations regarding employment related matters for young people must also remain as a concern for now. They must work together to find or create such opportunities within the small and very competitive job market, and more so in the informal sector of the economy.

The National Youth Development Authority has been silent for nearly two decades which has a trickled-down effect on the youth population throughout the nation. Policies are been repeatedly developed and procrastinated over the years with no tangible benefits to the young people of the nation. There is currently no linkage or connection between policy-making and implementation at the ground level. The policies are just floating as political propaganda for the Youth Development Authority and its collaborators at the national level. The greatest danger is that, the longer we procrastinate, the harder it will become for the nation and the society as a whole to catch up or cope with the ever-changing needs of the youth population in the years ahead.

5. PROSPECTS AND OPPORTUNITIES GOING FORWARD

The modern economy and general trend in the global movement of changes have created much broader and wider scope of opportunities as well as prospects for the unskilled and semi-skill youth to be gainfully engaged in the labour market at various levels and sectors of society. And in that context, PNG is no exception.

The following employment opportunities are recommended for the out-of-school in this country going forward;

5.1 Reintroduction of the NYMP Model of Youth Development

An NYMP-type youth development model should be devised to suit the current and changing needs of the youth population. More so, the Youth Council Network must be reactivated and re-established to provide legally safe avenue for the young people to make decisions, plan and perform various activities of interests to them. They need a space to congregate, share issues and concerns of common nature, and express such collectively to the leaders of the nation.

The commonly expressed rhetoric of *"youth of today and leaders of tomorrow"* will only materialize when such avenues are provided for the young people to practice their leadership skills today.

The currently held *"3rd Youth Parliament"* (EMTV News 15th December 2025) is a foreign concept which can find its proper grounding if a home-grown forum exist to facilitate is long-term survival. PNG cannot continue to rely on outsiders to clean up its backyards. The practices of *"here today and gone tomorrow"* must ceased completely in the next 50 years.

"Conventional youth policies and approaches undertaken to date (especially by outsiders) have proven to be ineffective to address the vast needs of this group" (Sonya Woo, quoted by Gedion Timothy in <https://www.developmentaid.org/news>).

5.2 Youth Brigades

Security Services is a booming industry in PNG today. The government through its agent the National Youth Development Authority should reintroduce the concept of “Youth Brigade Scheme” and engage the disciplinary forces to train the young people and deploy them in soft controlled environments such as at schools, hospitals, and individual households. An advantage here is that, they know their own kind and the respective networks, hence can deter any potential criminal activities that are being orchestrated by the criminal elements of society. Through peer group relations and influence, such gangsters may eventually be co-opted into the youth brigade scheme as well.

5.3 Youth Farming

Through collaborative engagements by relevant stakeholders (NYDA, Department of Agriculture, Land Owners, and the Development Partners (both national and international), unalienated customary land can be freed up by the clans for youth in their respective villages and communities to be engaged in vegetable farming and livestock projects.

With basic farming knowledge and skills transfer, farming tools and marketing outlets provided, there is a huge potential for the youth to tilt their land and live-off its potential income-generation benefits.

5.4 Youth Engagement in Incorporated Land Group (ILG) Registration

The Incorporated Land Group (ILG) registration is now becoming a mammoth task for many Members of Parliament and their electoral officers. Young people who have completed their grades ten and twelve can be easily trained and engaged to perform that task with the close supervision of the relevant government officers or proxies of the government.

Such initiatives are suitable for the youth who originated from villages and rural communities that have direct contacts with their respective land owners and clan leaders. They can easily communicate with them and complete the required forms on behalf of the local MPs or the office of the Registrar of the ILGs in the country.

5.5 Seasonal Workers Scheme (Australia and New Zealand)

Priority for the Season Workers Scheme under the bilateral arrangements with the governments of Australia and New Zealand should be given to the out-of-school youth. They have untapped energy, enthusiasm and thrive to be engaged in such ventures. Many of them may not have started families of their own to tie them down, are free and flexible to stay committed to such employment opportunities.

Most importantly, they still have a longer life cycle wherein they can share and impart the knowledge and skills acquired under such exposure with fellow youths as well as to apply them in community and nation-building when they returned.

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