Foreword

The youth employment issue has been a sharp focus of policy and research since the 2008–09 global financial crisis unfolded its devastating impacts on labour markets and, in particular, on young people. The youth in the Arab uprisings of 2010, exploding with their blended demands for decent jobs, aspirations for democratic participation and a quest for more inclusive development models, were the first glimpse of what would come.

Complex dynamics underlie youth integration into the world of work and society in general.

Comprehending the unprecedented "youth employment crisis" requires a range of unconventional indicators beyond the unemployment rate. Wage deflation, informality, uncertainty in access to decent jobs and instability in holding on to them and short-term contracts, including for young overqualified workers, have become typical features of the new fragility in labour markets around the world.

Analysis of the trends over the past decade from the standpoint of these indicators clearly points to a deep structural transformation in the terms and conditions of youth integration that cannot be entirely explained by the cyclical fluctuations of economic growth.

This new persistent vulnerability in youth transitions has been laid bare once more with the COVID-19 pandemic and its massive socio-economic impact. The unfolding implications for the education, training and access to jobs of young people are significant and further aggravating the risks of poverty and inequality in opportunities.

The youth employment crisis has global reach. It spares no region, despite the great diversity of situations of the youth in different countries and local contexts and even among themselves: Almost everywhere, the realities of young women and men remain below their aspirations and their potential.

It can be stated that what the present generation of youth now experience is not due to the standard vulnerability that comes with their young age and associated lack of experience. Rather, they are entering the labour market at a time of significant and multiple transformations in the global economy, in the production processes, in the sourcing of resources, in the environment and in technology.

The youth are taking the full blow of the winds of change. They can no longer use the compasses and markers of the previous generation – those of their parents. And their parents' generation is dismayed to find that social progress is not linear and that acquired labour and human rights may not be a descendant legacy.

The crisis is a generational one and is not confined to the situation of the most disadvantaged among young women and men.

Three factors bind and divide this present, and likely the ensuing generation of youth, in the new context: One, this generation of youth shares an awareness of the competitive pressures at all stages in their journey and the uncertainty of outcomes. Competition among educated youth for the scarce number of qualified and good-paying formal jobs, strongly impacted by gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background and other variables, is leading to multiple layers of intragenerational inequalities, polarization and frustrations.

Two, with increasing digitalization access and exposure to global social media, there is a convergence of ideals and aspirations among young people of diverse social and economic backgrounds and living in different locations. These global representations often contrast with young people's everyday realities and opportunities.

Three, this generation of youth faces policy discourses that stress individual responsibility for creating their own job or business; for equipping themselves with a range of hard and soft skills; for continuously investing to upgrade these skills to keep up to date with the changing technology; and for showing flexibility and mobility. In short, roles and responsibilities that once were the shared duty of the State, the private sector and education and labour market institutions are increasingly transferring to the youth. In numerous circumstances, due to their limited access to resources, decision-making or to cushioning protections and rights, young women and men are relying on overstretched family and other solidarity networks.

Young people certainly do not shy away from responsibility or their agency in shaping the world around them. The present generation of youth is no exception. Their global mobilization for the environ-

ment and saving the planet from climate change is a remarkable case in point.

The versatility of youth for adapting to change and for creative and innovative solutions, however, should not be interpreted as an open invitation for unlimited risk-taking and for continuous job churning. Poll after poll shows that what youth aspire to foremost is decent, purposeful and stable job prospects. They also view their school-to-work transition experience as the fundamental pillar facilitating all other transitions in their lifetime. Motivated by values, justice, rights and purpose, they are ready to occupy spaces that offer them the means and opportunity for meaningful participation and contribution. But they also look to policy leaders and institutions, public and private, to deliver on their responsibilities.

Policies and programmes prioritizing youth employment have increased in number and scope in different parts of the world. This is a positive development, considering that in the wake of the 2008–09 financial crisis, countries with the most elaborate range of labour market policy instruments found themselves ill-equipped to respond with conventional measures and at the scale needed.

The announced recovery and stimulus packages to deal with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic often include targeted action for youth.

Not all policies that are adopted are implemented in full. Some of them lack the scale, resources and coherence to reach the intended objectives and are hampered by lack of clarity in institutional responsibility and/or weak capabilities. But then, few impact evaluations have been carried out to assess the impact and effectiveness of the various approaches.

There is a need for greater accountability and transparency in policy interventions. In the fast-changing landscape, the space for experimentation of new policies and learning from them is amazingly limited.

On the content of policies, two issues have yet to be resolved.

First is the management of demand in the overall economy. The post-crisis consensus that the slump in labour demand was a major factor behind the scarcity of quality jobs – which was reflected in the 2012 International Labour Organization's call for action on the youth employment crisis – has not translated into massive and large-scale productive investments.

There is strong need and potential in different countries and regions for investment in infrastructure, in greening the economy, in digital transformations and in services. These are the types of investments that, inter alia, can create quality job and income opportunities that exploit the range of skills possessed by the best-educated youth generation the world has ever known. Youth entrepreneurship and start-up schemes, which have multiplied, are not significantly increasing market share or job opportunities. The majority of policy interventions include supply-side initiatives and intermediation programmes that have no impact on demand but further increase the competitive pressures.

And second, education and work remain a conundrum. Increased access to education and increased school attendance in all regions in the past two decades no longer guarantee the expected return in labour markets. The phenomenon of graduate unemployment is a serious concern in many emerging and developing economies. Student debt is becoming a major burden in numerous countries. And the policy debate on skills mismatches is far from settled.

Many advanced countries experience skills mismatches characterized by overeducation, whereby overqualified youth occupy jobs that do not require the scope of skills that they have. They are pushing down or out of the labour market the low-skilled or semi-skilled youth, who, a couple decades ago, would have found matching jobs. The high incidence of informality among educated youth in the emerging and developing economies indicates the difficulty in accessing formal labour markets and the serious risk of skills underutilization and depreciation.

Greater recourse to quality apprenticeships, encouraging tertiary education in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines and increasing life-cycle opportunities for continuous training are only partial solutions. Actually, given the time lag between education reforms and outcomes for the labour market and society, such one-sided policies can have disturbing downside effects. Imagine if, hypothetically, all youth opting for tertiary education chose a discipline in science, technology, engineering or math – what would the world look like with the ensuing deficits in the humanities and social sciences? Who would do the critical thinking in defining the goals and patterns for sustainable and inclusive development or for putting ethics and humanity at the helm of technological transformations and environmental transition?

Comprehensive solutions have yet to be developed that better handle the education-work nexus, such as the rights and responsibilities of the State, enterprises, individuals and their families for financing,

regulating, reskilling and upskilling while ensuring inclusiveness, quality and effectiveness.

All this suggests that youth should remain a priority focus of policies, innovation and development financing. Interdisciplinary policy research on multiple aspects of youth transitions should be expanded.

Some policymakers, researchers, social partners and so on might question this proposition. After all, if changes are structural and affect all generations eventually, why should we focus on youth? Would not the problem take care of itself in the medium term, with demographic transitions and population ageing that are under way everywhere?

The answer lies in the question. Youthfulness is a transient stage in an individual's life as well as in terms of the demographic structure in any given country. How every generation of youth fare has long-lasting impact on their life trajectory and the economy, the polity and society at large. For all societies, whether experiencing advanced ageing or a youth bulge, this is a one-time opportunity, with limited possibilities of redressal, to value and enable their young generation, which is currently more than a billion young women and men – the largest the world has ever known.

We should look at youth employment policy from the macro and micro perspectives and at the convergence of both. More than ever, this attention must be cast within the broader challenges of inequalities, the future of work and the environmental transition.

From a macro perspective, taking advantage of the youth dividend in sub-Saharan Africa and in the Middle East and Northern Africa is time-bound, as it was for the youth dividend that contributed to the remarkable rise of the East Asian so-called "tiger economies" in the second half of the previous century. Although historical comparisons have their limitations, an important lesson to be drawn from the East Asian experience is that it took a range and large scale of supporting industrial strategies and education and training policies by the State to enable the fruition of that youth dividend. In today's silver economies, proactive policies are urgently needed to prevent the peripherization of the youth and to help redefine their roles.

Regardless of the type of demographic challenge societies are experiencing, policies must prevent intergenerational inequalities, which are becoming a significant dimension of the rising global inequalities, from deepening and settling in.

From a micro perspective, individual youth pathways and behaviours are determined by the intersection of aspirations and opportunities and the gap between them. In today's world, few options are available for young women and men who cannot access the small number of formal and stable jobs with decent pay and an upward mobility prospect. The majority of youth in developing and emerging economies find their way into the informal economy and its diverse segments of casual, irregular or undeclared salaried employment or informal own-account work and businesses, the so-called "entrepreneurs of necessity". Unfortunately for many, this turns out not to be a temporary stepping stone but a trap affecting their future prospects of progression and benefits.

For persons in the composite group who are not in employment, education or training, the time span of wait and see can lead to loss of self-confidence and trust in institutions and sometimes to more drastic forms of disconnect from their society.

Young women and men in search of better opportunities and prospects opt to migrate, either moving from rural homes to urban centres or to more dynamic development poles and areas within a country. Or they cross back and forth across the borders to neighbouring countries or attempt a new start further abroad and sometimes through dangerous journeys. But the desire among the youth to migrate is far more prominent than the actual opportunity to realize it.

There are many indications that these fragilities are transcending into the new spaces created by the technological transformations, such as in the digital economy. Within each option and any given youth cohort, the dynamic interaction of aspirations and opportunities is affected by endogenous and exogenous factors, such as socio-economic background, gender expectations, education, skills, geography, network, mobility and others.

These dynamics vary from one generation of youth to the next, hence the tendency to characterize the different X, Y (millennial) and Z generations with specific attributes, vision and expectations that cross the boundaries of intersectionality and geography.

Policies and institutions matter in helping or hindering these multiple transitions. They must simultaneously address the macro and the micro perspectives, understand the individual and generational dynamics. And then they must innovate.

More than ever, the fluid and fast-changing landscape requires expanding policy-relevant research

and increasing resources devoted to social innovation and experimentation. Improving the uptake of evidence in policymaking and the valuation of applied research by academic communities in the global North and South will be indispensable but are currently insufficient to sustain democratic dialogues in such a dynamic context.

Last but hardly least, we need to dissociate the development and security policy narratives regarding youth. The amalgamation that has become mainstream in this decade, at the national and global levels, has not helped to advance either agenda. It has simply stereotyped and alienated millions of youth who are unemployed, poorly employed or in constant transition between these states and millions more who are trapped in or fleeing from fragile situations of conflict and violence. Positive and constructive approaches to the multidimensional insecurity that the youth are experiencing and building trusted space for their participation in political and civic spheres are called for.

The future of the planet, of work, of innovation and of equality and justice will depend on how today's youth find their rightful place in society.

Azita Berar Awad