



## Learning Forum

25-26 NOVEMBER 2013  
JOHANNESBURG

National Youth Service,  
Employability, Entrepreneurship  
and Sustainable Livelihoods

National Youth Service Programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa:  
Strengthening National Youth Service as a strategy for youth  
employability, entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods

## The Case of Kenya Executive Summary

15 November 2013

This country profile was compiled by John Mang'ana under guidance from Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa (VOSESA) and Innovations in Civic Participation (ICP), in partnership with The MasterCard Foundation

## Executive summary

---

African governments are increasingly seeing National Youth Service (NYS) as a strategy for fostering human capital development among young people with the aim of promoting youth employability, entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods.

Unfortunately, little is known about whether NYS programme design and implementation in the region is sufficiently aligned with the aims of promoting youth employability and sustainable livelihoods. This is particularly true in the African context where research and information on the nature, forms and impact of voluntary service, including NYS, are generally lacking. The little that is known suggests that the ability for NYS programmes to successfully link young people with employment and livelihood opportunities could be greatly enhanced with greater information on the current status of programmes.

The MasterCard Foundation commissioned Innovations in Civic Participation (ICP), in partnership with Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa (VOSESA), to conduct a study on the extent to which NYS programmes in the region provide young people with a pathway to employment, livelihoods and entrepreneurship opportunities. This case profile on Kenya is one of three case profiles aimed at providing insight into NYS programme design and implementation in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study incorporates a desk review, which commenced in April 2013 and a field study conducted in Nairobi between April 2013 and May 2013.

### **The status of youth in Kenya**

Recent estimates indicate that the country's population is currently around 43.18 million (World Bank 2013). A 2010 report by the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) in collaboration with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung indicates that 78.31 per cent of Kenyans are younger than 34 years, while the UNDP (2013) estimates that nearly 80 per cent of the Kenyan population is younger than 35 years.

While Kenya's youth statistics presents great economic potential for the country, it is emerging as a cause for grave concern to the government and society at large, given the enormous social, cultural and economic challenges facing young people. Of the challenges facing youth, unemployment is the most acute. Kenya's unemployment rate has increased to 40 per cent, with young people particularly affected. The latest labour statistics indicate that youth unemployment is at 70 per cent, almost double the national level.

Young people remain on the periphery of the country's affairs and are excluded from the design, planning and implementation of programmes and policies that affect them. The youth are under-represented in politics and in the economy despite their large numbers. This is largely due to

prevailing social and cultural attitudes that view young people in a negative light. Additional barriers experienced by young people include insufficient access to financial capital or alternatives, inadequate organisation amongst youth, and the pervasive poverty affecting a significant proportion of the young population.

Many health-related issues affect young people, including malnutrition, HIV and AIDS and sexually transmitted infections, and poor access to health services. Kenya's education sector has been underfunded for a number of years and this has undermined the quality of public schooling. Many young people also lack the skill or technical knowledge to be able to participate in informal sector. Unfortunately, many of the former mid-level tertiary institutions that provided much of the craft and artisan training have either collapsed due to lack of funding and government support or, like most of the technical colleges, been converted into universities.

Young people also often have to contend with poor housing conditions and have limited access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), which is increasingly a critical tool for sustainable livelihoods in Kenya.

The government has over the years attempted to address the challenges facing youth through various policy initiatives. The National Youth Service Act, which created and regulates the operations of the NYS, is perhaps one of the earliest policy responses and is becoming increasingly relevant within the current context of youth unemployment in Kenya. Some of the other notable policy initiatives implemented over the last two decades aimed at supporting youth include Sessional Paper Number 2 of 1992 on Small Scale and Jua Kali (informal sector) Enterprises, the Development Plan (1997-2001), the Poverty Eradication Plan (1999-2015), Sessional Paper Number 4 of 2005 on youth development, and the Kenya National Youth Policy (KNYP) aimed at ensuring that the youth play their role in the development of the country.

More recently there has been the new Sports Act, envisaged to transform the management of sports in the country to make it a profitable venture for young people and develop sporting talent among youth; Vision 2030, particularly its youth agenda, expected to improve livelihoods through employment and entrepreneurship; and the National Youth Council Act of 2009, aiming to empower the youth economically and socio-culturally.

### **The Kenya National Youth Service Programme**

The National Youth Service (NYS) is a voluntary programme that was established on 1 September 1964 to create a pool of trained, disciplined and organised youth through training and participation in national socio-economic programmes. Its primary roles are nation building through volunteerism and service in the military during a state of war or public emergency.

The programme has undergone significant transformation since its inception. Up to the late 1980s, it was a compulsory pre-university programme targeting graduates of the Kenya Advanced

Certificate of Education (KACE) for a six-month training. The objective of the programme was to inculcate in students the right attitude towards work and instil a culture of tolerance and nationalism. However, this programme was discontinued in 1990, largely due to sustainability issues. Since then NYS training has been voluntary with a market-driven focus. Its fundamental goals are alleviation of youth unemployment and creating national cohesion.

Following the passing of a new law by the Kenya Senate in July 2013, all high school graduates will be required to sign up for a mandatory two-year pre-university national service scheme that is expected to be rolled out in each of the 47 counties across the country from 2014. The programme will seek to give young people vocational training, instill patriotism, and empower them to help safeguard the country.

The current NYS Programme is designed to offer basic paramilitary training, volunteering opportunities, and vocational training to participants. Furthermore, it has considerable reach and spread, with these activities occurring in various satellite stations in different parts of the country.

The NYS, previously a department under the disbanded Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MOYAS), was relocated to the Office of the President (OP). Some respondents feel that this act may reverse the gains made in the struggle for youth recognition in Kenya since 2002, when a dedicated youth ministry was established. Others believe that the NYS is now likely to have more clout as a department under the powerful OP.

Under the current voluntary programme, NYS membership is open to interested applicants from all over the country. The institution conducts recruitment drives once or twice a year depending on funding and the availability of physical space at its various facilities. The current programme enrolls around 5 000 recruits annually. However, this is set to increase in 2014 with the new law requiring compulsory participation by all high school graduates in the NYS Programme.

Applicants must be between the ages of 18 and 22. Men should be taller than 5ft, 6 inches and women should be taller than 5ft, 3 inches. All applicants must be medically and physically fit, unmarried and without dependents. Finally, applicants must have scored a minimum D+ (D Plus) in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). Preference is generally given to applicants from orphaned and destitute backgrounds. Of the 5 550 recruits in the 2013 group, 33 per cent were drawn from orphaned and destitute backgrounds. The stringent qualification criteria relate to the unique status of the NYS as a reserve force of the armed forces with the expectation that NYS participants should be ready in defence of the country.

### **Programme governance and resourcing**

The NYS is a disciplined entity that is headed by a director-general (DG) who is supported by a deputy director-general (DDG). There are four senior deputy directors who are in charge of departments that are responsible for service activities spread across the country. These service

activities are co-ordinated through field units that are headed by commanding officers. Principals head the training institutions. There are two distinct lines of operation within the NYS under the DG – the uniformed and the non-uniformed lines. Uniformed officers consider their role as executing institutional command in conformity with the status of the NYS as a disciplined entity – a role that they perform with much pride. The non-uniformed line is mostly limited to administrative functions including managing the vocational training institutions.

The NYS Programme consists of three core components: six months of basic training, depending on availability of space at the various training institutions; one to two years of nation building; and finally, depending on choice of qualification, vocational training that lasts anywhere from six months for a craft or artisan qualification to three years for a diploma qualification.

As a youth transition institution, the NYS has adopted four broad strategies that are expected to result in opportunities that maximise the potential of young people. These include empowering youth to engage in productive activities, providing youth with the necessary financial support and market linkages, moulding youth character through training, and strengthening programmes that advance youth health and well-being.

The NYS is mainly financed through a national budgetary partition, with additional resources coming from the programme's commercial ventures, and to a limited extent, external funding from various development partners.

### **Perceptions of the NYS among respondents**

The respondents expressed varying perceptions of the NYS when asked about their impressions of the programme and its relevance within the current social and economic context, including in relation to the circumstances of youth.

Some private sector respondents suggested that the NYS has great potential but is undermined by its military orientation and rigid style of operation. Another respondent noted that while the NYS is a good programme, government bureaucracy, poor administration and inadequate funding undermine its effectiveness. The view of the NYS as a place that simply 'dishes' out discipline to otherwise unruly youth or is some sort of a military 'bootcamp' is quite pervasive. This negative view of the NYS sometimes overshadows other positive aspects of the NYS.

A number of respondents believe that the NYS enjoys close proximity to the government, which is an accurate assessment, having been relocated to the OP. However, this association is not necessarily considered an advantage for the NYS by many of the respondents, especially among the private sector participants.

Many consider the NYS a link between school/tertiary institutions and the workplace. Its main role in this regard is to develop in young people certain soft skills that are critical to the workplace that may not be taught at schools or tertiary institutions.

### **Programme impact**

The potential impact of the NYS Programme appears to be blunted by a combination of factors inherent to the institution, including an outdated legislative framework, a pervasive culture of bureaucracy and red tape arising from close affiliation to the state, an ineffective organisational structure, and years of poor strategic leadership.

The NYS does not have in place a mechanism to monitor the participation rate of its alumni in the formal and informal economy, so the institution has no knowledge of where its alumni are and the nature of economic activities that they are engaged in. It does not have an alumni association and it does not maintain any links with its alumni once they leave the institution.

Many young people join the NYS hoping to use it as a bridge into formal employment. However, besides those that are recruited by the armed forces and other security organs and youth that are retained in service, the NYS does not assist its members to obtain formal employment.

Most of the NYS alumni in the focus group discussion indicated that while they may not have obtained formal employment as a direct result of their participation in the NYS Programme, they derive value on an ongoing basis from the skills that they acquired. Promotion of entrepreneurship has previously been attempted by the NYS, but it failed, mainly due to lack of funding. However, a new programme planned for 2014 demands that entrepreneurship and computer skills be taught to all students who go through vocational training.

There is no evidence of financial or market linkage support by the NYS to those in service or those who have completed the programme. But the idea of financial support to NYS servicemen and women to start small businesses has been considered previously under the proposed entrepreneurship programme that failed to take-off. A self-employment promotion unit (SEPU) has been suggested to serve as an exit strategy for NYS graduates who opt for informal employment. Under this scheme, a revolving fund is proposed to offer soft loans to service graduates who start small-scale business enterprises.

The NYS has a well-developed reputation in the market for churning out highly disciplined and well-groomed individuals with outstanding work ethic. NYS-trained drivers for instance are much sought after by private individuals and by companies.

The NYS runs a programme that sensitises members and surrounding communities on HIV and AIDS with the intention of promoting behaviour change. This initiative is linked to attempts by the institution to encourage members to participate in various sporting codes. Community service is



a key activity that is promoted as part of holistic development of the individual. This involves participation in activities such as cleaning of the environment and planting of trees.

### **Lessons learned and promising practices**

**Access to resources.** Given its extensive resource base including trainers, training facilities and funding, the NYS is able to handle diverse operational and training issues. This advantage affords the institution great flexibility in addressing a wide range of youth economic challenges. Internal sources of revenue also play a significant role in the institution's financial stability. The NYS generates additional income from various commercial ventures such as agriculture and building of infrastructure including roads, bridges, dykes and irrigation canals. It is evident from the interviews that there is significant scope to up-scale such avenues, even though the strategic leadership to implement this has been lacking. Furthermore, the institution produces its own food from its various farms to feed the volunteers.

**Corporate image.** From the interviews, it is apparent that the general public and other key stakeholders view certain aspects, like the disciplined and well-trained cadres of the NYS, positively. Despite this, the institution is obliged to manage aspects of its corporate image that are misunderstood like the widely held view of the NYS as some sort of a 'bootcamp' to straighten out wayward youth. A positive image makes the institution more appealing to potential employers and to aspiring volunteers.

**Quality and effectiveness of the programme.** According to the respondents, an effective youth empowerment programme should focus its curriculum and training initiatives on addressing market needs. This is the only way of ensuring that the programme remains relevant at all times. Some qualifications from the NYS, such as the driving qualification, remain highly rated. However, some respondents felt that some courses are outdated and not relevant to current market needs.

**Reach of the programme.** The NYS is considered to have the ability to reach a wide network of youth through its diverse geographical units spread across the country. It has 16 training institutions with a capacity to accommodate 10 000 to 15 000 trainees at any given time. The new law on compulsory service for high school graduates requires the government to expand existing NYS facilities in order to accommodate the expected influx of young recruits. This reach is critical for the programme to have the desired effect among the huge population of young people. Another dimension to reach is admission criteria. The NYS for instance takes youth with lower grades compared to a number of available youth programmes that require a minimum form four certificate. This ensures that youth who would in other instances not have anything to do are given an opportunity.

**Sustainable livelihoods.** The majority of the NYS alumni who participated in the focus group discussion, and who also happen to be self-employed, indicated that they are pursuing economic activities that are unrelated to the vocational training that they received at the NYS. Many are

involved in informal trade in the markets within the city. Those in formal employment also indicated that their training at the NYS either has no bearing on their current roles and responsibilities, or is totally unrelated. Even so, they all credit their resilience and resourcefulness to the training received at the NYS. The outcome seems to be more positive for those who acquired hands-on or practical vocational training courses such as masonry, carpentry and driving.

### **Conclusion and potential for change**

There appears to be general consensus among research participants that the NYS Programme has largely failed to live up to its potential as a bridge for Kenyan youth to formal employment or self-employment, including entrepreneurship. The overwhelming verdict is that the NYS Programme has been ineffective as a transition institution for the youth.

Also, there is no evidence that the institution has had any significant impact on other aspects of challenges facing the youth such as health, education etc. Part of the challenge is that the NYS lacks a credible mechanism to monitor, evaluate and report on its activities. Even more concerning is the fact that the NYS neither has an active alumni association nor maintains links with members who leave the service upon completion of their individual programmes.

Respondents indicated that an outdated policy framework underpins the NYS Programme, which, to to an extent, undermines its relevance within the prevailing social and economic context. There is a pervasive sense that the NYS today is no different from what it was at inception in 1964, despite significant shifts in the socio-cultural, political and economic context. Fortunately, the need to review the NYS Act to bring it more in tune with the current times is recognised within the institution itself and externally.

Most respondents agreed that the NYS Programme should be compulsory for all young people. A compulsory NYS Programme is viewed as potentially providing career guidance to the youth, inculcating in young people a culture of citizenship, a means to sustainable livelihood, and a post-school transition programme that would positively socialise the youth. However, to have a successful compulsory NYS Programme respondents suggested eliminating the current military orientation of the programme, de-centralising the programme by establishing more outposts, and focusing more on vocational training and development of technical skills.

Given the infrastructure and capacity challenges at the NYS, the question of funding is critical. The programme is currently almost exclusively funded by the state, with minimal but important contributions coming from internal sources and external donors. Close links between the NYS and government is blamed for what is perceived as a pervasive culture of bureaucracy and red tape within the institution. This by extension is seen as being the key factor behind the institution's lacklustre approach to strategic planning and execution. Delinking the programme from the state should be considered as a strategy for enhancing the programme's strategic approach and implementation going forward.



There are a host of strategic issues that the respondents felt should be reviewed within the NYS Programme. It is clear that the organisational structure needs to be reviewed to ensure that the institution is configured to be able to respond to the changing demands of society and the economy. There is a need to review the curriculum to bring it in line with current market needs. Some respondents suggested that this may require the involvement of the private sector to ensure that the programme offers market-oriented programmes. Despite the obvious potential for meaningful partnerships in several NYS operations, progress has been hampered by the absence of a legal framework to provide clarity or much needed guidelines on the form that such arrangements should take.

Finally, there is also an obligation for the NYS to seriously reconsider its role as a transition institution for young people and adopt a more strategic approach to executing this mandate. This may involve establishing deliberate partnerships with various players, especially the private sector, to provide economic and career development opportunities to successful graduants. The NYS may also utilise its internal resources and capacity to absorb those who are unable to access opportunities outside the service.