

Youth: The Right to a Place in the Sun?

Introduction by *Ali A. Abdi, Candido Alberto Gomes, Célio da Cunha & Ranilce Guimarães-Iosif* (Editors)

One of the most crucial issues today is that of economic growth without a corresponding increase in jobs, especially jobs for youth. The problem is especially acute in countries still affected by the 2008 economic crisis, whose already waning economies have been exacerbated by substantial government and company job cuts. The unemployment queues naturally include a large number of younger people. Yet even when the economic climate was more favourable, young people had already come to realize that securing employment was not only difficult, but often impossible.

As a result, today's youth have begun to realize that the investment both they and their parents made in their education is unlikely to produce a corresponding financial return. What we have now, therefore, is a high percentage of young people who are not studying, training or working.

With the above-mentioned scenario as a backdrop, this issue of *Sisyphus* focuses on today's global youth, with special emphasis on youth education and employment. As the cross-disciplinary literature reveals, the world's population is rapidly ageing – a fact that will undoubtedly give rise to a series of demographic, economic, social and educational changes. It is noteworthy, for example, that this is the first time in history that population dynamics are playing, – and will continue to play – such a dramatic and pivotal role in such a short period of time. Population growth in many parts



of the world (with average life spans increasing even in the least developed countries), together with a number of other factors (economic crises, etc.), jeopardizes young people's hopes of assuming their roles as parents, active citizens, and, above all, productive members of the work force. In other words, their hopes of finding a place in the sun have begun to dim.

From childhood, today's youth have been encouraged to play a leading role in modern society. Adolescents, both in school and outside school, have developed their own cultural patterns which, to a large extent, have been influenced by market interests. Utopian and pragmatic expectations of earning a place in the sun, arguably a basic human right, have consequently risen during this second decade of the 21st century.

In many countries, this is the best-educated generation ever, since it has benefitted from ideals that espouse education-for-all in terms of access, quality, and equity. Paradoxically, however, today's youth have become synonymous with unemployment and poverty, especially youth in the developing world. The collective forces of the market, society, and politics have seemingly shut out – and often stifled – youth's hopes, expectations and ambitions, even though countries urgently need to prepare their youth for the difficult challenges of a rapidly ageing population. The generational transition could well be threatened by the widening gap between a burgeoning group of people who are likely to live much longer, and a restless younger generation that has been denied its rightful place in society.

There are few solid prospects in view when it comes to ameliorating the current situation, which is why the challenges must be heeded by policy makers, educators and other stakeholders. The academic world stands to play an important role in this debate. It is in this spirit that *Sisyphus – Journal of Education* has devoted this issue to youth and the many challenges it faces.

This issue contains four parts. Part one features two wide-ranging articles: Gomes traces the major demographic, economic and educational obstacles facing youth, while Cowen, with his ecumenical experience, discusses the principles and objectives of today's changing universities. While higher education is still seen by many as the key to social mobility and personal development, it is now often becoming a disappointment to young people, who find that the stairway to upward mobility is often long and arduous.

The articles in part two defy current stereotypes that portray today's youth as alienated individuals who show no interest in politics and prefer to worship at the altar of consumerism. The papers on citizenship and social participa-

tion by Abdi and Shultz, Mutch and Zyngier shed considerable light on reality, helping to dispel many of the myths. Abdi and Shultz focus on Canada, while Mutch discusses youth participation during the 2010-11 earthquakes in New Zealand. Continuing the world tour in the Southern Hemisphere, Zyngier addresses educators' beliefs directly by exploring the motives and beliefs of future teachers in relation to citizenship and democracy in Australia.

Part three follows the same topical line as part two, but broadens the scope to include the critical issues of education and employment, i.e. preparation for and attainment of adulthood, and how achieving full adulthood is seriously constrained nowadays by a lengthy waiting time. In this vein, Law and Xu present a picture of the People's Republic of China and the changes taking place there. Still further westward, Ashraf, Ali and Hosain examine the relationship between youth and education in one of the most geopolitically sensitive areas of the world – Pakistan. Swanson, in turn, focuses on a populational group in which hopes and disappointments coexist: the unemployed youth of post-apartheid South Africa.

The fourth and final part centers on Brazil, the largest and most populous country in Latin America. Pastore opens with his views on education, employment and development. Although he focuses primarily on his own country, the content of his article is nevertheless of more wide-ranging importance. The last part also includes an article by Cunha and Guimarães-Iosif on the same topic, and another by Castro, Torres and França on the secondary school crisis and its victims. While the papers draw on Brazilian data, they also induce us to consider the role of schooling in general and the way in which, in unequal societies, school can turn out to be a perverse socio-cultural filter.

The provocative viewpoints of the authors, who hail from five different continents, urge us to reflect on the issues and problems facing youth that must be addressed here and now. It is clear that with respect to youth – to use a metaphor – we can no longer speak of sowing good seeds (policies in favor of younger children) in order to reap a bountiful harvest (a productive, fulfilling adulthood) because in adolescence, the maturation process is constantly beset by storms and blights that could decimate the harvest at the end of the day. The challenges go far beyond electoral cycles, although these do play a part.

Failing to respond adequately to the many challenges may endanger both present and future generations. Indeed, the price that will be paid for the errors and omissions we commit today could be extremely high.

