

## **Optimizing the power of youth in enabling Africa countries harness the demographic dividend and achieve the SDGs**

By Eliya Msiyaphazi Zulu (PhD.) - African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP)

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has been dubbed the African Century to signal the need for the continent to decisively address its pervasive development challenges. The relatively high rates of economic growth that most African countries enjoyed over the past decade or so gave hope that the continent would finally join the emerging economies of the World. However, despite this growth, poverty levels have remained high mainly because the economies have not been able to produce ample quality jobs for its rapidly growing population. Africa's population of 1.2 billion people is projected to grow to 2.5 billion by 2050, 3.3 billion by 2070, and 4.4 billion by 2100. The continent's heavy child dependency burden, whereby 41% of the total population are dependent children below age 15, is widely considered a key development bottleneck. Youth can be critical agents for positive socioeconomic change if appropriate investments are made to unleash their power to innovate and become productive citizens. However, a large population of unskilled, unemployed, and disillusioned youth can create a rich reservoir for escalating social unrest, crime, violent extremism and terrorism not only in Africa but globally.

The phenomenal socioeconomic development that the East Asian Tigers have achieved is motivating African countries to explore and unleash the potential of the demographic dividend in achieving their open long-term socioeconomic transformation aspirations including the achievement of the SDGs. It is estimated that between a quarter and a third of the impressive economic growth that the Asian Tigers achieved between 1970 and 2000 could be attributed to the demographic dividend. This refers to the accelerated economic growth that high fertility countries can harness as a result of the change in the age structure from one dominated by dependent children to one dominated by working age adults. The change in age structure is brought about by rapid decline in fertility and mortality rates, and the magnitude of the demographic dividend can be optimized through investments in transformative education and skill development, public health, inclusive economic growth focused on creating mass quality jobs for the youthful working age population, and good governance to ensure accountability in use of public resources and in service delivery.

In this presentation, Eliya Zulu will explore the key challenges and opportunities that African countries face in actualising their growing interest in turning their youthful populations into a force for socioeconomic transformation and attainment of the SDGs.

Eliya Zulu, ED Afidep, biography: <https://www.afidep.org/?staff=eliya-msiyaphazi-zulu-ph-d-executive-director>