

A Theological Assessment of the Influence of Youths' Perceptions of Work on Their Lives in Machakos County, Kenya

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Abstract

Work plays a central role in human wellbeing, identity, and social integration; however, youth unemployment remains a persistent global and local challenge with far-reaching consequences. This study provides a theological assessment of how youths' perceptions of work influence their lives in Machakos County, Kenya. Grounded in the understanding that work is both a human responsibility and a divine calling, the study used a qualitative design and the Pastoral Circle approach. The study collected data through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with unemployed youth aged 18–34 years. The findings reveal that unemployment has profound physical, social, economic, and psychological effects, including stress, poor health, social exclusion, dependency, and diminished self-esteem. Despite these challenges, youths demonstrate resilience through hope anchored in faith, perceiving God as a provider and sustainer during periods of uncertainty. The study further establishes that prevailing perceptions of work, largely limited to paid employment, constrain youths' agency and contribute to negative life outcomes. Theologically, work is understood as a cooperative engagement between humans and God, extending beyond formal employment to include all meaningful and productive activities. The study concludes that addressing youth unemployment requires a holistic approach that integrates spiritual, social, and economic dimensions. It recommends that the church, policymakers, and development actors promote a broader theological understanding of work and implement participatory, youth-centered interventions that foster dignity, purpose, and sustainable livelihoods.

Keywords: *Youth unemployment; Theology of work; Youth perceptions; Work and wellbeing; Machakos County; Faith and employment; Holistic development; Informal work*

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1. Introduction

Work plays a significant role in our well-being, a fact that concerns policymakers and governments. Applebaum asserts that “work is like the spine which structures the way people live, how they make contact with material and social reality, and how they achieve status and self-esteem. Work is basic to the human condition, to the creation of the human environment,

and to the context of human relationships.”¹ The United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights articulates that “everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.”² The eighth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) aims to ensure full and productive employment and decent work, which entails improved youth employment prospects, as young people are disproportionately affected by decent work deficits, unemployment, and low-quality jobs.³ The 2005 Iberoamerican Convention on the Rights of Youth reaffirms the right to work for the youth, and the 2006 African Youth Charter recognises young people's right to gainful employment.⁴ Reaffirming the youth's right to employment, Pope Francis, the 226th Pope of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) stated, “Work is not a gift kindly conceded to a recommended few: it is a right for all ... and in particular, the young must be able to cultivate the promise of their efforts and their enthusiasm, so that the investment of their energies and their resources will not be useless.”⁵

However, though work plays a significant role in our well-being, O'Higgins laments that youth unemployment is a global epidemic, one of the greatest tests and a serious policy challenge for governments, presented with varying degrees of urgency and often as a full-blown crisis. O'Higgins further notes that the epidemic hardly hits developing countries, for unemployed youth are living in poverty with their only access to work being informal or under indecent employment conditions; this has dashed their vigour, the will to work and legitimate hopes of getting employed.⁶

Global, regional, and local statistics on youth unemployment give us a clear picture of the gravity of the situation. In August 2004, the ILO reported that youth unemployment was at an all-time high, with half the world's jobless population aged 15 to 24. By 2009, the youth unemployment rate in the developed economies was 17.7 percent. By 2010, the European Union youth unemployment rate was 21 percent. The ILO's 2012 conference underscored that youth unemployment was worsening, as youth (aged 15-24) were three times more likely than adults to be unemployed or underemployed.⁷ ILO further projected that the global youth labour force will increase by 41.8 million people between 2017 and 2030. By 2018, only 37 percent of the world's youth were employed, and 42 percent were unemployed.⁸ By 2019, one-fifth

¹ Herbert A. Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (New York: Suny Press, 1992), 1.

² United Nations. “*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*” (2015), 48.

³ ILO, *Guide to International Labour Standards and Rights at Work concerning Young People* (Geneva: ILO, 2017), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵ Leonardo Salutati. What’s the Church Say on Unemployment? A Lot Actually May 15, 2016, special to crux. <https://cruxnow.com/church/2016/05/whats-the-church-say-on-unemployment-a-lot-actually/>

⁶ Niall O’higgins, “Youth Unemployment and Employment Policy: A Global Perspective,” *O’Higgins* (np. 2001), 9.

⁷ ILO, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2017: Paths to a Better Working Future* (Geneva: ILO, 2017), 75.

⁸ Rosina Gammarano, “Labour Market Access: A Persistent Challenge for Youth around the World,” *International Labour Organization* (Geneva, 2019).

(22.2 percent) of youth worldwide fell into this category, and those employed were in poor-quality jobs.⁹

Africa, too, shares the globe's demographic reality. By 2015, Africa was home to 226 million youth (aged 18-35 years, according to the African Union). According to an African Development Bank (AfDB) publication, this number doubled in 2016, with nearly 420 million either unemployed or vulnerably employed. A 2017 study on youth unemployment by the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) indicated that Africa's youth population is set to double to over 830 million, representing 29 percent of the world's youth by 2050. At the April 2018 Think Tank Summit, Ken Ofori-Atta lamented that of the 10-12 million youth in Africa who enter the workforce each year, only 3.1 million get employed.

Kenya, too, reflects Africa's demographic reality; based on UN (2015) estimates, the youth population was over 9.5 million, more than 20% of Kenyans. According to the 2015/2016 Household Survey, youth (aged 18-34) constituted 32% of Kenya's population;¹⁰ However, most were unemployed. By 2016, the youth unemployment rate was 22%. In 2017, a World Bank report indicated that Kenya's youth unemployment rate among East African countries was 17.3%, compared with Tanzania and Uganda at 5.5% and 6.8%, respectively.¹¹ Census data released on February 19, 2020, show that 38.9% of Kenyan youth are jobless.

2. Literature Review

Given the centrality of employment and the significance of work in people's lives, unemployment is traumatic, not just a statistical or economic problem, but an issue of human well-being. According to Kapuvari, unemployment has many consequences, such as material effects, changes in the daily routine, psychological effects, addictions, and mental effects, leaving undeniable economic, social, political, physical, psychological, and spiritual scars.¹²

Youth is a transitional period from childhood to adulthood, bringing physical, social, economic, political, and spiritual responsibilities. Literally, "Transition into early adulthood is about the first of a series of changes that will intersect our lives as we make pilgrimage through life. Work and career necessarily mean that we consider how the diverse chapters of our lives reflect new challenges, opportunities, and circumstances."¹³ This period develops work-related skills and autonomy and involves assuming family and work roles. These roles are intertwined; in some work roles, family roles are tied to economic subsistence, and by carrying out these roles, youth become responsible and productive.¹⁴ Youth is also a period of individual and collective

⁹ Governing Body 340th Session, Geneva, October–November 2020 Policy Development Section Employment and Social Protection Segment (12 October, 2020), 3-4.

¹⁰ Ministry of Public Service, *Youth and Gender State Department for Youth Kenya Youth*, 4.

¹¹ Neville Otuki, [Kenya's youth percentage among the highest globally - Business Daily \(businessdailyafrica.com\)](https://businessdailyafrica.com) (2017).

¹² Virag Kapuvari, "Psychological Effects of Economic Recession and Unemployment," *European Journal of Mental Health* 6, no. 1 (2011): 88.

¹³ Gordon T. Smith, *Courage and Calling: Embracing your God-given Potential* (InterVarsity Press, 2011), 11.

¹⁴ Helmut Fend, "The Historical Context of Transition to Work," 77.

identity construction, when young people learn to be citizens, a period of ‘citizenship-identity construction.’¹⁵

Therefore, because youth is a transitional period, unemployment has a grave impact on young people. It has “scarring” effects on individuals, their families, economies, and the entire nation.¹⁶ It deprives youth of opportunities to develop the socio-emotional skills needed for economic and social integration and active citizenship; it interrupts their development toward responsible citizenship.¹⁷ Unemployment seriously exacerbates problems of transition to adulthood; excessive retardation of personal development leads to unhealthy patterns of dependence, especially on family members, resulting in an even slimmer possibility of becoming independent, responsible, and stable adults.¹⁸ It denies youth opportunities for personality and identity formation; when youth are unemployed and unable to meet their aspirations, they feel incompetent, vulnerable, inferior, useless, and worthless. The aftermath is usually low self-esteem or loss of identity, depression, and anxiety; this robs youth of the opportunity to lead a fulfilling life.¹⁹ Therefore, unemployment has economic, social/political, physical/psychological, and spiritual costs and consequences, which are interrelated, but each is significant in its own way; they are cumulative, and they act individually and jointly to undermine and subvert the lives of youth and societies.

Economically, youth unemployment reduces economic well-being and lowers output. Sen narrates that unemployment involves the wastage of productive power since a part of the potential national output is not realised; it cuts down the national production and increases the share of the output that has to be devoted to income transfers.²⁰ It robs youth of the opportunity to contribute to society economically, and their failure to participate in the labour force translates to a loss of tax revenue and their exclusion from responsible citizenship.²¹ It also erodes human capital; when youth remain unemployed for long periods, their skills become outdated as technology and the job market change rapidly.²² Celik highlights that “with a job, there is a future; without a job, there is a slow death of all that makes a man ambitious, industrious, and glad to be alive.”²³ In the long run, this translates to dependency syndrome, the “*serekali saidia*” (plea for government help) mentality in the Kenyan context.

¹⁵ Kezban Çelik, “Unemployment Experience of Youth in Ankara and Şanlıurfa,” 40.

¹⁶ Peter Vogel, *Generation Jobless? Turning the Youth Unemployment Crisis into Opportunity*, 5.

¹⁷ James Sumberg, Louise Fox, Justin Flynn, Philip Mader, and Marjoke Oosterom, “Africa’s Youth Employment,” *Development Policy Review* 39, no. 4 (2021): 623.

¹⁸ Thomas Kieselbach, Kees van Heeringen, Michele La Rosa, Louis Lemkow, Katerina Sokou, and Bengt Starrin, eds. *Living on the Edge: An Empirical Analysis on Long-term Youth Unemployment and Social Exclusion in Europe*. Vol. 11 (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013): 32.

¹⁹ Laura E. Hess, C. Petersen & Jeylan T. Mortimer; “Youth, Unemployment and Marginality: The Problem and the Solution,” 15.

²⁰ Amartya Sen, “Inequality, unemployment and contemporary Europe,” *Int'l Lab. Rev.* 136 (1997):160.

²¹ Enrico Marelli, Misbah T. Choudhry, and Marcello Signorelli, “Youth and Total Unemployment Rate: The Impact of Policies and Institutions,” *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali* 121, no. 1 (2013): 63-64.

²² Ibid.

²³ Kezban Çelik, “Unemployment Experience of Youth in Ankara and Şanlıurfa,” 37.

Socially, youth unemployment leads to social exclusion. Kieselbach et al. identify four dimensions of social exclusion: exclusion from the labour market, economic exclusion, cultural exclusion, and spatial exclusion.²⁴ Based on these dimensions, we can conclude that once youth are excluded from the labour market economically, culturally, and spatially, they are deprived of the opportunity to build social networks essential to building necessary skills, experiences, work values, and ethics. Therefore, when youth are unemployed, working with others builds social networks that contribute to a sense of belonging; without them, they tend to develop cynicism about the fairness of social arrangements and social exclusion. Additionally, loneliness and stigma creep in, rippling through the youth's social network; children and spouses of the unemployed are at particular risk of poor academic performance and divorce, respectively. This means that as unemployment rises, more people in social networks are affected, potentially harming many individuals.²⁵ Sen argues that unemployment deteriorates family life and increases grievances and cynicism, which may explain the supposed link between unemployment and crime.²⁶ Social exclusion ultimately translates to social instability; it predisposes youth to delinquent behaviour, including crime, robbery, prostitution, and abuse of drugs and alcohol. Hess et al. indicate that whenever youth are alienated or marginalized in such a way that they cannot assume active, meaningful, and productive roles in adult society, they feel alienated and engage in delinquent behaviour and use of substances.²⁷

Beyond social instability, youth unemployment also fuels political instability. Ayittey notes that it is more likely that the unemployed are politically alienated and express their alienation in vandalism and conflicts with the police. He further states that discontent with political leaders leads to protests, strikes, sabotage of government machinery, riots, coups d'état, and revolutions.²⁸ Agreeing with Ayittey, Mader asserts that "unemployed youth who lack economic livelihoods and employment opportunities may be prone to become attracted to illicit sectors, organized crime and gang associations or piracy" as well as "ideologically-driven groups associated with radicalization, violence and extremism."²⁹ Additionally, youth unemployment makes youth vulnerable to manipulation by individuals and politicians seeking to gain personal interests.

This phenomenon was evident in the uprisings that swept North Africa and the Middle East in 2011 and Kenya's 2008 post-election violence, which left approximately 1,133 people dead and 650,000 displaced from their land. Unemployed youth who were politically and economically vulnerable demanded their right to a more dignified life violently. According to Margaret Wamuyu, Programs Manager for Kenya's University of Nairobi Center for Human

²⁴ Thomas Kieselbach et al., *Living on the Edge: An Empirical Analysis on Long-term Youth Unemployment and Social Exclusion in Europe*, 31-32.

²⁵ Esteban Calvo, Christine A. Mair, and Natalia Sarkisian, "Individual Troubles, Shared Troubles: The Multiplicative Effect of Individual and Country-Level Unemployment on Life Satisfaction in 95 Nations, *Social Forces* 93, no. 4 (2015): 1632.

²⁶ Amartya Sen, "Inequality, unemployment and contemporary Europe," 163.

²⁷ Laura E. Hess, et al., "Youth, Unemployment and Marginality: The Problem and the Solution," 3-4.

²⁸ George Ayittey, *Africa in Chaos* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), 71-79, 206-209.

²⁹ Philip Mader, "Better Jobs and Livelihoods for Young People in Africa—a Spotlight on Demand," *K4D Emerging Issues Report* (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2018): 2.

Rights and Peace, unemployment made youth vulnerable to manipulation by individuals and politicians seeking personal gain at great human cost. She further notes that youth who committed such atrocities were paid as low as US \$6.³⁰

Physically and psychologically, work is linked to different aspects of human rationality. Work can help us perfect ourselves by developing and exercising our rational potential in worthwhile ways.³¹ Kapuvari identifies three stages in the psychological response to unemployment: first, shock and an active job search; in this stage, youth remain optimistic and tend to maintain an unbroken attitude. The second stage is that of pessimism, anxiety, and distress due to their failed efforts in stage one. The final stage is fatalism and adopting a new state of brokenness.³² Each of these stages comes with psychological devastation, which induces physical and emotional pain and suffering. According to Sobrino, this is a silent mental health epidemic leading to poor health and immunity, slow deaths, complete inequality of opportunity, oppression with physical ill-health and, in some cases, suicide.³³

Citing international research studies, Kieselbach notes that youth unemployment leads to severe health impairments and can have an enormous impact on the overall psycho-social development of the affected youth. It can lead to depression and anxiety, clinically identifiable illnesses, and higher rates of mortality and suicide.³⁴ Cholbi observes that these psychological effects lead to increased unhealthy behaviours such as substance abuse, poor diet, lack of exercise, and other health-related behaviours.³⁵ In a nutshell, when youth are unemployed, their physical health deteriorates. This suggests that joblessness harms individual well-being; for many, work matters beyond a paycheck. As Sen articulates, the hardships of unemployment extend beyond income loss to include far-reaching adverse effects on self-confidence, work motivation, basic competence, social integration, racial harmony, gender justice, and the exercise of individual freedom and responsibility.³⁶

Spiritually, youth unemployment raises many theological issues and concerns, such as purpose and meaning of life, theodicy, suicide, stewardship, etc. Youths' sense of worthlessness and rejection lead some to conclude that God has rejected them. Feelings of worthiness relate to questions of identity and purpose; feelings of worthlessness question God's creation and his redemptive work in Christ Jesus. Stott observes that the spiritual grievance of being allowed no opportunity to contribute to the community's general life and welfare places enormous

³⁰ Margaret Wamuyu Muthee, "Hitting the Target, Missing the Point: Youth Policies and Programmes in Kenya," 1.

³¹ Michael Cholbi, "Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labor," (2022).

³² Virag Kapuvari, "Psychological Effects of Economic Recession and Unemployment," 86.

³³ Jon Sobrino. *The True Church and the Poor*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 234

³⁴ Thomas Kieselbach et al., *Living on the Edge: An Empirical Analysis on Long-term Youth Unemployment and Social Exclusion in Europe*, 32.

³⁵ Michael Cholbi, "Philosophical Approaches to Work and Labor," (2022).

³⁶ Amartya Sen, "Inequality, unemployment and contemporary Europe," 163.

responsibility on the Church.³⁷ Pope Francis asserts that unemployment damages the spirit, just as the absence of prayer damages practical activity.³⁸

In short, work and employment affect all ages, but the implications are especially significant for youth. This is because “Being unemployed is not only a question of being left outside of wage earning; it also means continuing a dependent lifestyle. Being dependent and an adult at the same time is difficult. It means loss of self-confidence, motivation, basic competence, social integration, and the application and use of individual freedom and responsibility.”³⁹ Thus, unemployment seriously interrupts youth's transition toward becoming responsible adults.

3. Methodology

The current study adopted the Pastoral Circle (PC) method, which is a social transformative theological approach geared towards social action that is holistic and contextual, with God as its centrepiece. The study was conducted in Machakos County, whose population is about 1,421,932 and is projected to reach 1,851,106 by 2050. Youth make up 39% of this population; as in other counties in Kenya, youth unemployment is rising. The study considered the experiences of these unemployed youths. Participants were identified through sampling; that is, youth from the county were engaged. The study used purposive sampling to select participants. The study used purposive sampling because it focuses on population segments that can provide the most meaningful information.⁴⁰ The study used inclusion and exclusion criteria for sampling. Based on the inclusion criteria, participants were unemployed youth who are permanent residents of Machakos County aged between 18 and 34 as per the Kenyan Constitution 2010.

The research targeted 81 participants for both the semi-structured interviews and FGDs. However, this target was not met: only 36 people participated in the FGDs, and 24, instead of 45, participated in the semi-structured interviews. This constitutes 75 percent of the target population. The target was not met because unemployed youth thought I was offering them jobs; some came with their CVs. Coming out of a campaign season, participants also expected handouts. For this reason, I could not continue with the semi-structured interviews. I used Participatory Action Research (PAR) tools and techniques to collect data because they engage participants in dialogue and empower them to analyze their situation and plan action. Data were analyzed in terms of their structural and social relationships. The study adopted an inductive qualitative data analysis approach. Through inductive analysis, the study generated themes and patterns from the FGDs and interviews and used thematic analysis. Nowell et al. define thematic analysis as a qualitative approach that identifies, analyses, and interprets themes; it assists in identifying patterns that result in recognition of the main themes of the collected data, making it easier to analyse qualitative data.⁴¹

³⁷ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 163.

³⁸ “Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’. On Care for Our Common Home,” *Libreria Editrice vaticana* (2015). Par. 127.

³⁹ Kezban Çelik, “Unemployment Experience of Youth in Ankara and Şanlıurfa,” 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Nowell, Lorelli S., Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules. “Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017), 2: 1609406917733847.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Hope and Unemployment

Lazarus posits that hope means believing in something positive that does not currently apply to one's life but could still materialize, causing us to yearn for it. Hope, unlike desire or motivation, is cognitive as it requires belief in the possibility of a favourable outcome. You cannot speak of hope without also speaking of hopelessness, despair, helplessness, and depression.⁴²

Hope includes the process of waiting, and it is in waiting that one is likely to feel helpless and hopeless, leading to despair and, in some cases, depression. Some research participants expressed hopelessness and gloom about being unemployed, but all were hopeful that God cared and that, in his time, he would provide job opportunities. The following are some of the sentiments that depicted helplessness and hopelessness as articulated by some of the research participants:

Being unemployed makes you feel as though God doesn't answer prayers. Sometimes, we feel God doesn't care; if he cared, he would have provided work for us. (FGD Machakos Town)

Being without work makes us uncomfortable, especially when we go out hoping to get a job but in vain; for instance, when we wake up in the morning and get to a construction site, and there is no work, we waste that day. This troubles our hearts, for we have families to feed and clothe . . . It is quite discouraging because we want to work, and there is no work, and so we end up being bored or idle. . . (FGD Kangudo)

I know God is concerned, but at times I feel that he is far removed from my situation (Mbula, 28)

Therefore, the affective nature of hope makes it possible for individuals to look forward to a favourable outcome and push themselves to do better. Hope enables individuals to rely on God and trust in his promises, and it is crucial to their hope that things will turn out differently. Regarding unemployment, the research participants asserted that prayer is central to their hopes for a better tomorrow. They believe that God will answer their prayer as they keep hoping and working towards their ideal job and other life goals, as reflected in the following narrations:

God is concerned because he woke me up, and I do not know why he did so even without money; this means he does not want my money but my life. Though I am often unsure what the day will bring, God miraculously opens doors for me. Therefore, I hope things will change someday since he has given me life. So, this soul that he woke up with, without money, he knows everything about it. I leave the rest to him. (Mutua, 34)

God is very concerned about my situation; I ask him daily to guide and provide for me. When I get home in the evening, I also thank him for that day's provision. Since I am

⁴² Richard S. Lazarus, "Hope: An Emotion and a Vital Coping Resource against Despair." *Social Research* 66, no. 2 (1999): 653–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971343>

hustling, I cannot guarantee I will get anything; whatever little I get from my hustles, I acknowledge is by God's grace. (Ngao, 34)

God is concerned; it is a matter of timing; when the time comes, he will open doors for me. (Kinyungu, 21)

God is concerned; he gives me strength and opens doors whenever I pray. For example, when I had my baby, I had no job; I was at home, and since I am a salonist, God brought customers to my home. (Muthike, 26)

God is concerned, and maybe through this unemployment experience, God wants me to trust him more and see him more clearly. Maybe he wants to teach me perseverance and to trust him that good things don't come overnight; it takes time, and everything is in his hands. (Ndanu, 27)

God is concerned, but getting a job is not easy; endurance is key because you have to endure challenges even after you get it. And God sustaining me for a whole year means there is something good ahead of me; if I had not been destined for what is ahead, I would not have come this far. God is still keeping his promises even though it takes time. (Nthenya, 26)

From my perspective, I believe God cares about our affairs; it is only a matter of time before he grants you work. Maybe during the waiting period, God is teaching me to be patient so I can be a good steward once I get the job. (Mukonyo, 25)

God cares about everyone; it depends on how you see it. If he weren't concerned about me, I wouldn't be alive; I wouldn't thrive even though I am unemployed. I wouldn't get something to eat at the end of the day, even if I didn't have a job. I think God plays a significant role in our lives. (Mueni, 31)

God is concerned, for he has given us all the resources we need to achieve everything, including food and even paper to make money. God has invested in us and wants us to work. (Mbatha, 27)

I am still holding to my faith and praying. I know God's timing is the best. I know God is concerned, and I am still waiting on him. (Kalekye, 32)

God is very concerned; we did not create ourselves; we belong to him, and he knows best. That is why, when we go out to hustle, he opens doors and miraculously provides opportunities for us, even at the last hour. (FGD Kangudo)

Yes, we still hope he will open doors for us because we depend on him for job opportunities. He wants us to be patient, "siku ya kuomoka itafika." (FGD Machakos Town)

God is concerned about our situation; though we are unemployed, we still eat, sleep, and dress, and he is the one who provides for us. So, we cast all our cares and problems on him. God gives us ideas on what to do. (FGD Mavoko)

Amid unemployment, research participants narrated that God cares about their lives, guiding and providing for them. They acknowledged that God grants them every opportunity to fend for their families. As a result, they do not take their daily hustles for granted but see them as a blessing from God. For some, unemployment allows them to trust God more and not lean on

their own understanding (Prov 3:5–6). They also acknowledged that God gives them the strength to get through daily struggles.

This acknowledgment ties in with the biblical cooperative nature of work: we collaborate with God. Psalm 127:1–2 records that God labours even when humans are still asleep. For example, a farmer tills the land and sows the seed, but God provides rain at the right time so that people can “thresh until vintage time and gather grapes until sowing time (Isa 55:10; see Mk 4:26–29, 1 Cor 3:7–9). The same applies to all types of work; the mason in Psalm 127 does not build the house alone, nor do the watchmen guard the city alone.

This cooperative nature of work implies obedience, as Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 record. The obedient will be blessed, whereas the disobedient will be cursed. Though in their labour, people depended on God (Ps 107:23–31, 35–38), the yield of their labour is actualized through their efforts as they rule, subdue, cultivate and take care of creation.⁴³ Thus, youths’ faithfulness to God can be seen in their ethics in life and work, determining the fruitfulness of their labour and their consequent prosperity or poverty. However, even though youth maintain hope amid unemployment, being without work negatively affects youth physically, socially, economically, politically and spiritually.

4.2 Effects of Unemployment

Having examined the perceptions of work and the feelings towards work as articulated by the research participants, it is evident that unemployment has far-reaching impacts, much more than what meets the eye in looking into the effects of unemployment, the social, political, economic, physical, and spiritual aspects were highlighted during the interviews and FGDs. In this section, this study highlights the physical, social, and economic effects of unemployment and incorporates the political and spiritual impacts by discussing the government and the church as stakeholders in the work discourse and the correlation between work and spirituality, respectively.

Physically, unemployment takes its toll on the individual's health because they cannot afford balanced meals, yet most do strenuous work that requires good health. In this regard, Mbula narrated, “I cannot get a balanced diet, and even what is there is not enough.” A poor diet translates to poor health. As Ndanu, one of the participants, testified, “As our health deteriorates, we are unable to get proper health care for it is costly, and only those employed can get good care for they have medical covers.” It is not only material poverty but also psychological and mental poverty, as the following paragraphs show.

Stress also comes out as a physical effect of unemployment attributed to the inconsistencies of casual labour, the uncertainty of finding work and the reality of day-to-day living. As participants in the FGD at Mavoko articulated, thinking about what you need to take care of and not having the money to do so “stresses you up, and in those cases, *“Mesilya nimavitukaa”* (you overthink and overanalyze).” Such overthinking and overanalyzing, according to some of the participants, leads to either weight loss or weight gain; either of these is accompanied by health complications such as ulcers. Due to these complications, one’s physical appearance, as narrated in the FGDs, affects the youth’s dressing and grooming, as described in the Swahili word, *“Unabeat kuliko miaka yako,”* you look unkempt; in some cases, you are unable to get soap and bathing water (especially those in an urban setting). The outcome of stress, as

⁴³ <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/the-twelve-prophets>

articulated by most of the participants, is death, for it leads to depression, the spirit of defeatism whereby one lacks the will to keep on living and opts for suicide.

Since work is a social endeavour, unemployment negatively affects the social lives of youth. Participants' narratives made it clear that unemployment leads to social withdrawal and isolation. It happens in two ways: either the individual withdraws from all associations or friends and family do not want to associate with the unemployed youth. Participants expressed strain in their personal lives, especially when it comes to relating with their peers, their family members and sometimes the church, as narrated in the following sentiments:

. . . People avoid associating with me because I have nothing to offer to them. They think I only want to get some money from them. (Muthike, 26)

People sometimes see you as a beggar; when they see you, they think you want a loan. (FGD, Mavoko)

The people I schooled with and are employed do not want to interact with me. I also can't fit into their class, so I avoid them. I isolate myself from many things because I feel I do not fit. (Mutua, 34)

Because working with others builds social networks that contribute to a sense of belonging, these sentiments translate into feeling sidelined or marginalized. With time, these feelings develop into cynicism about the fairness of social arrangements and social exclusion. Explaining social isolation, Mwendwa said, "I feel rejected by the society, I am a burden to the society, and people blame me for ills. I am excluded from community events." On marginalization and being sidelined, Muema noted, "Friends have sidelined me; I am referred to as *"mtu wa boda,"* as though they do not know my name." The FGD at Mavoko summarized social exclusion and isolation as follows:

People run away from us; we are rejected and isolated; we are sidelined; friends run away from us; and, in cases where someone was employed but lost their job, former workmates "wanakutema" (desert you). They reject you and say things like, "leave him alone," "he/she was fired," "ameishiwa," and "ndekindu."

Participants also explained that the sidelining and marginalization split people into haves and have-nots:

Unemployment splits friends into haves and have-nots; the have-nots are discriminated against or sidelined by their friends. It leads to low self-esteem; you look down on yourself to the point where you are not confident enough to air your opinion compared to those employed; they are more exposed, and you lack credibility. (Ndanu, 27)

In most cases, people we schooled with and work with sideline us, and society sometimes sees us as failures. So, our voices often go unheard. A significant gap exists between the employed and unemployed, the haves and the have-nots. (FGD Kangudo)

As the research participants explained, unemployment robs youth not only of the opportunity to build meaningful social networks through which they can develop the skills, experiences, and professional networks they need, but also of the chance to develop the work values and ethics they need.⁴⁴ Mutio stated, "Being unemployed limits my social networks ...," whereas

⁴⁴ Peter Vogel, *Generation Jobless? Turning the Youth Unemployment Crisis into Opportunity*, 41-43.

Muema explained, “My social networks are just for the hustlers ... I only identify with the unemployed, and I fit well there.” Echoing these sentiments, Mbula articulated, “I have very few friends, just hustling like I am doing. I feel I do not fit in the class of my employed age mates.” Ngao said, “I avoid mingling with certain people to avoid debts in search of fitting in their class.” Sometimes, I find myself in bad company because my friends who got employed do not want to associate with me,” Nzioka said.

Estaban et al. observe that the stress accompanying the loneliness and stigma of unemployment can ripple through youth’s social networks; children and spouses of the unemployed are at particular risk of social network strain, as indicated by poor academic performance and higher divorce risk, respectively. Therefore, as unemployment rates rise, more social network members are affected, potentially harming many individuals.⁴⁵ This is captured in the following sentiments from the research participants:

Being out of work brings enmity with people for no reason and always conflicts. People avoid associating with me because I have nothing to offer to them. They think I only want money from them. (Muthike, 26)

I do not socialize much because I feel like a burden to people. I usually have marital conflicts because I feel I contribute nothing to the family. (Nthoki, 29)

Youths delay marriage, especially men, for they have nothing to sustain their families. For those who are married, there are marital conflicts and disrespect from wives and children and even some of us are denied our conjugal rights. (FGD Kangudo)

In an economy like Kenya, where inflation has been at an all-time high for months, inflation hits hard, especially low-income earners and the unemployed. While discussing the economic impact of unemployment, the interlocutors highlighted how hard it is to make ends meet, or even meet basic needs. Nationally, they cannot pay taxes contributing to the country’s revenue because they depend on others for support. As a result, they feel unable to contribute to their communities’ and the state’s development, compounding the poverty afflicting the nation.

...dependency syndrome: you depend on your parents for food, yet you have cleared school. I have projects in mind that I can pursue, but without substantial income, my dream and vision are impossible. It kills your dream. (Mbatha, 27)

Our economy is not doing well, and I cannot stock everything I need; I stock the common goods. This means I cannot expand my business or pay taxes on the goods I purchase. It has also lowered my standard of living. (Katunge, 22)

When you are unemployed, you become a beggar; this is the dependency syndrome, and as a lady, you feel you are a bother to your parents, forcing you to look for other means, some of which are immoral. (Nthenya, 26)

You cannot get anything for yourself without assistance. This leads to low self-esteem because you cannot afford even basic things or sustain yourself in the future. You cannot afford basic necessities. (Ndanu, 27)

⁴⁵ Esteban Calvo, Christine A. Mair, and Natalia Sarkisian, “Individual Troubles, Shared Troubles: The Multiplicative Effect of Individual and Country-Level Unemployment on Life Satisfaction in 95 Nations,” *Social Forces* 93, no. 4 (2015): 1632.

Therefore, being unemployed is not only about being left outside the wage-earning sphere; it also means continuing a dependent lifestyle. Being dependent and an adult at the same time is difficult; it entails a loss of self-confidence, motivation, basic competence, social integration, and the exercise of individual freedom and responsibility.⁴⁶

5. Conclusion

This study established that youths' perceptions of work, shaped by both socio-economic realities and theological beliefs, significantly influence their lived experiences in Machakos County. While unemployment negatively affects youth physically, socially, economically, and psychologically, manifesting in stress, social exclusion, dependency, and low self-esteem, many youths sustain hope through faith in God, viewing Him as a provider and sustainer during periods of uncertainty. This reflects a theological understanding of work as both a human responsibility and a cooperative engagement with God. However, a narrow view of work as paid employment limits youths' agency and undermines their appreciation of alternative forms of meaningful work, thereby worsening the negative impacts of unemployment.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends a holistic, theology-informed approach to addressing youth unemployment that integrates spiritual, social, and economic dimensions. The church and other stakeholders should actively reshape youths' perceptions of work by promoting a broader theological understanding that values all forms of productive engagement, including informal and self-employment. Additionally, interventions should move beyond purely economic solutions to include mentorship, skills development, and psychosocial support that nurture resilience, dignity, and purpose among youth. Policymakers and development actors should also design participatory programs that empower youth as active agents, ensuring employment initiatives align with their lived realities, aspirations, and faith perspectives to support sustainable transformation.

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⁴⁶ Kezban Çelik, "Unemployment Experience of Youth in Ankara and Şanlıurfa," 6.

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