

ELECTION BRIEF – THE YOUTH VOTE

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Introduction

South Africa like most developing nations has a high proportion of its population falling into the category of ‘youth’. Although, young black South Africans played a significant role in struggle against apartheid, subsequently their role in shaping socio-economic and political outcomes has diminished. This year, the ‘youth’ of South Africa have elicited considerable attention because of their high rates of voter registration and the potential impact they may have on determining the outcome of the elections. Moreover, the increasing power of the youth league within the ANC, particularly the role they played in ensuring the ascension of Jacob Zuma to the presidency of the ANC has highlighted the need to acknowledge and understand the role that they play in South African politics. Globally, the Obama campaign's success at attracting the youth vote resurrected the constituency's importance in determining election outcomes.¹

In the following sections we present a global view on the ‘youth and the issues affecting them. We then analyse both the socio economic issues affecting the youth in South Africa and the role they might play in the upcoming elections. Moving beyond the current election related fascination with the youth, this is a segment of the population that needs sustained focus and development. State led institutional efforts such as the National Youth Commission and the South African Youth Council have failed to adequately capture, inform or remedy the major issues affecting the youth in South Africa. Suggestions by the government to consolidate these organisations into a single body which will centrally organise and implement strategies around youth development is only viable if it is coupled with creating capacity within such a body for implementation of programmes and empowering the body to enforce departmental compliance within government that will deal with addressing the key issues of poverty, unemployment and inequality facing the youth of South Africa.

The youth can play a significant role in the growth and development of South Africa. A youth that is educated, skilled and employable, contributing to the productivity of the nation is a powerful factor in development. Conversely, a large population lacking education, skills and facing endemic unemployment will only re-enforce existing patterns of inequality, poverty and unemployment and eventually contribute towards civil unrest.

The Global Speaks to the Local

According to the United Nations the world population is experiencing an unprecedented increase in the proportion of young people. Almost 50% of the world's population (3 billion) are under the age of 25. Of these 3 billion 1.2 billion are under the age of 15 and 1.8 billion fall into the youth category, which the UN classifies those people that fall between the ages of 15 and 24. Up to 85% of the world youth population live in developing countries and 70% of youth in the developing world live in Asia. The trend among nations is that the poorer and less developed a country is, the larger the proportion of ‘youth’ in its population.² Urbanization is also an important facet of understanding the development of the youth. By 2008, almost 3.3

¹ The 2008 American elections saw an increase of 2.2 million youth voters and as a group 68% percent preferred Obama over McCain, 30%. Additionally, young people were energised and became involved in the Obama campaign by volunteering their time. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27525497/> Moreover, greater involvement by the youth in the democratic primaries gave Obama the edge to beat Clinton in the Iowa primaries. <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1700525,00.html>

² The United Nations

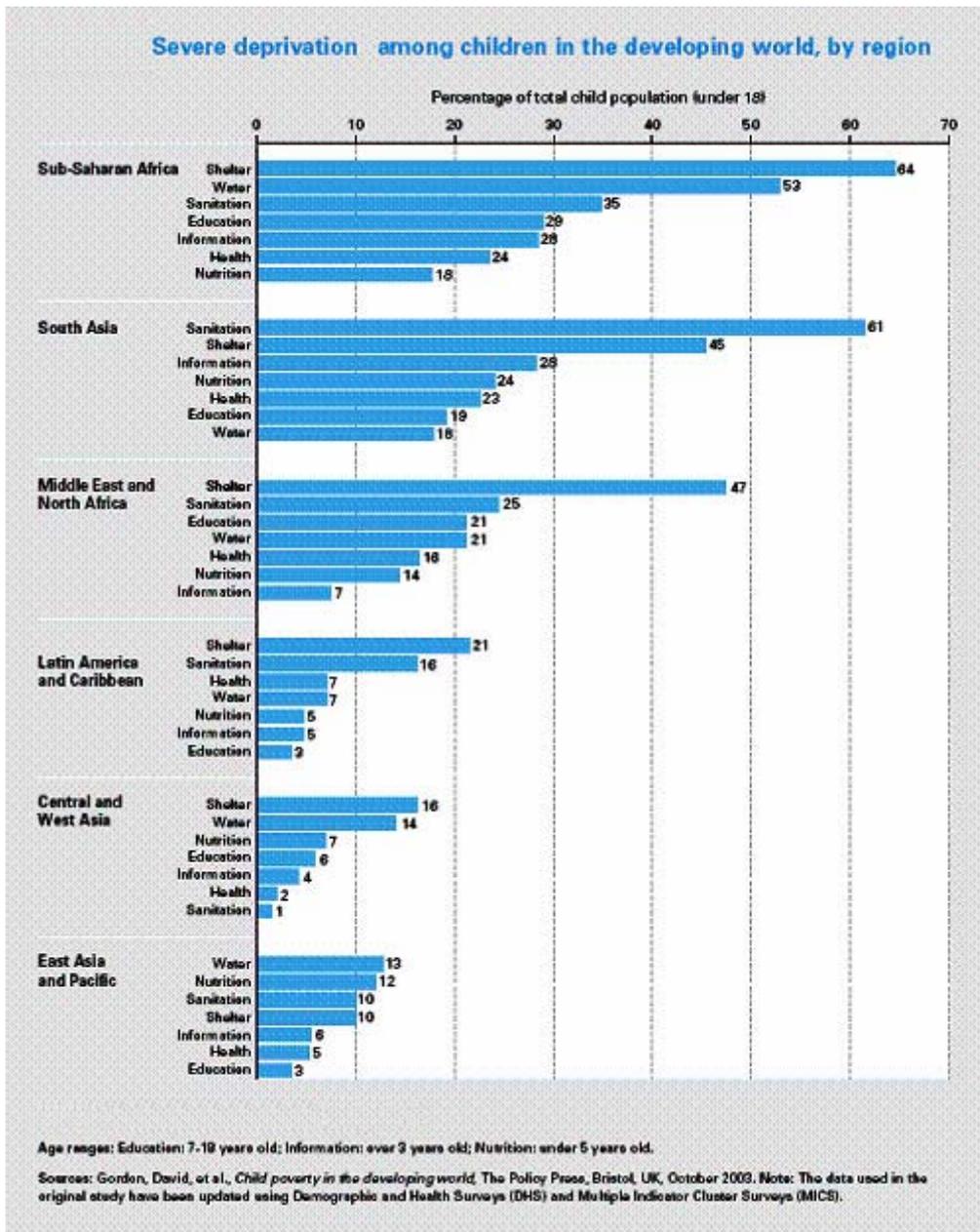
billion people will live in urban areas and by 2030 this number will be 5 billion. The co-existence of a large urban unemployed youth facing poverty is one of the major issues facing developing countries.³

Poverty is major issue affecting the world youth as 500 million worldwide live on less than \$2 a day and 232 million or 22.3% of these youth live in abject poverty on less than \$1 a day.⁴ Furthermore, poverty and its consequences will result in almost 100 million young people dying before they make it to adolescence. Hence the problems effecting the youth need to include a look at the problems affecting children and the young populations such as malnourishment, access to education and shelter, HIV/AIDS etc. as they are the next generation of youth in the world. The table below shows the high rates of deprivation facing children worldwide. For example 64% of children in Sub Saharan Africa lack shelter, 52% lack water, 29% lack access to education etc.

Table 1. Child Deprivation in Developing Nations 2005.

³ http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/presskit/docs/press_summary_eng.pdf

⁴ http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts_adolescents.htm#ftn1

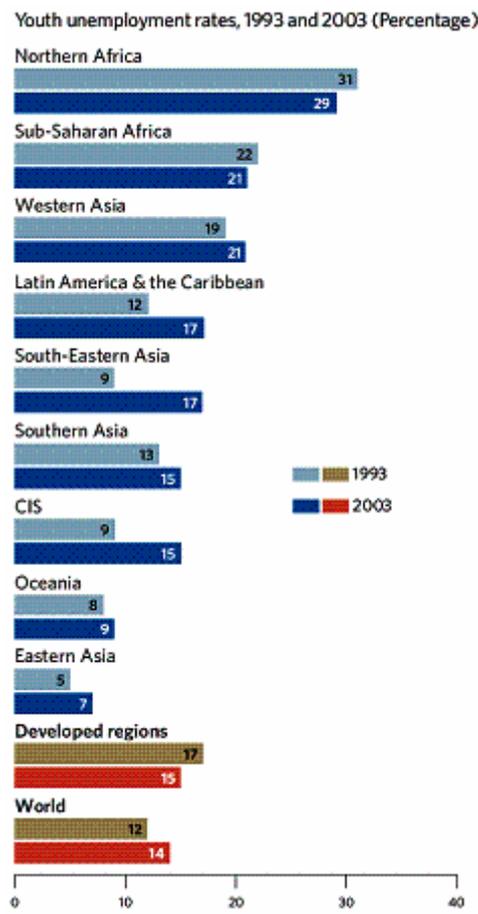


Source: *The State of the World's Children, 2005*. New York: UNICEF.

Unemployment is a major issue in every developing country, with the youth being particularly vulnerable. In 2007, global youth unemployment at 13.5% was almost double the overall unemployment rate of 6.4%, and the adult unemployment rate of 4.5% which makes youth unemployment 2 or 3 higher than adult ones.⁵

Table 2. Youth Unemployment 1993 and 2003

⁵ HSRC, 2007, "Youth Policy Initiative Round Table 3: Entry into and expansion of livelihood strategies".



Source: United Nations. 2005. *The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2005*. New York: United Nations.

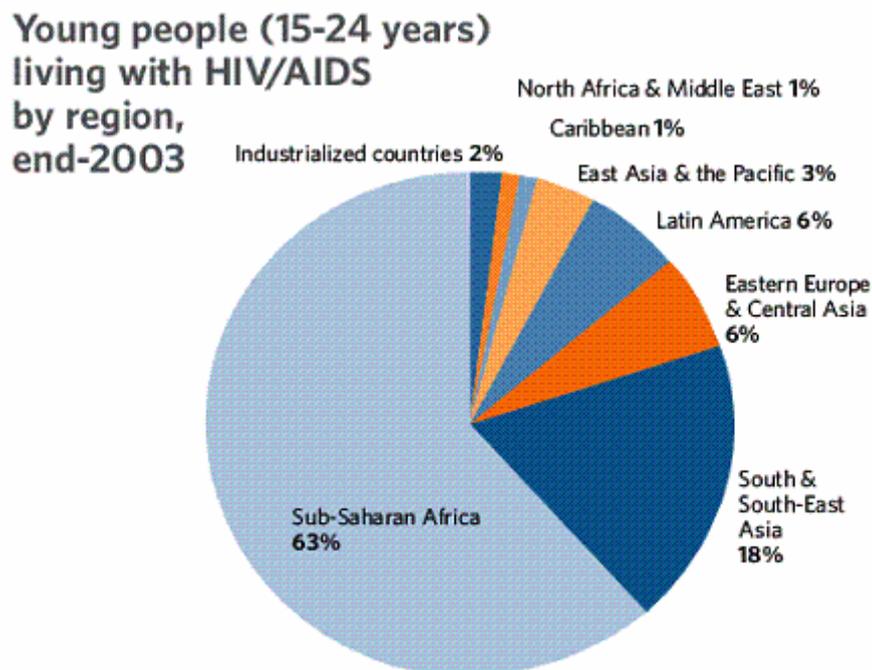
Dealing with youth unemployment is encumbered by the fact that there are increasingly more youth entering the labour force every year. The UN in 2005 estimated that there were almost 93 million unemployed youth in the world and they make up 50% of the total unemployed. Moreover, some of those that do have employment work in dangerous and hazardous employment. In 2000, of the 352 million people between the ages of 5 and 17 employed, 171 million were working in hazardous situations.⁶ Often young people are trapped in a low wage and low skill employment, which offers little prospect for advancement.

Young women are particularly vulnerable, gender based violence and sexually predatory behaviour are a major issue affecting young women. The UN believes that young and adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable; they estimate that up to 50% of sexual assaults worldwide are subjected on girls who are 15 years or younger. Large numbers of young women report that their first sexual encounter was ‘coerced’ and such sexual coercion is now a significant factor in rising HIV rates among young women.

HIV and Aids is another major issue for the youth. In 2005, almost 10, million youth were infected with HIV/AIDS. More alarmingly, 63% of these youth live in sub-Saharan Africa according to the table below. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia over 80% of the HIV population is under the age of 30. The UN estimates that everyday 6,000 youth are infected with the virus. Lack of access to information or the

⁶ http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts_adolescents.htm#ftn1

preponderance of misinformation around HIV/AIDS, lack of access to condoms and prevention programmes particularly impact young women and exacerbate the spread of HIV/AIDS Amongst the youth.



Source: UNICEF/UNAIDS 2004

The spread of HIV/AIDS has contributed to an increase in the numbers of orphans in developing nations, which shows no sign of abating. The UN estimated in 2005 that there were almost 15 million orphans in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and that this number will double by 2010. Sub-Saharan Africa has been hit hardest with the loss of one or both parents to AIDS; over a decade between 1993 and 2003 the number of children in this category grew from 1 million to 12 million. These orphans are susceptible to additional hardships:

“Children affected by HIV/AIDS often lack access to adequate nutrition, health care, housing and clothing. They are likely to drop out of school because of discrimination and emotional distress, because they cannot afford to pay school fees, or because they need to care for parents or caretakers infected with HIV, or for younger siblings. A defining characteristic of children orphaned by AIDS is that they are typically “double” orphans (meaning that both parents have died), because of the fact that HIV is sexually transmitted. This also means that they are doubly disadvantaged. On average, children in sub-Saharan Africa who have lost both parents are 22 per cent less likely to attend school than children whose parents are both alive and who are living with at least one of those parents. As the number of orphans continues to grow, it will be critical to ensure that these children are not marginalized and that all children have access to education.”

What does this global picture mean for South Africans? First, although we can be excessively inward looking it reveals that the issue of youth poverty, unemployment, gender violence and HIV/AIDS is global issue. Systemic problems of underdevelopment in developing countries like ours lead to lack of shelter, education employment and a low set of life opportunities for the majority of young people developing societies. Solutions require that we look beyond our borders but tailor any

solutions we borrow to our local needs particularly in recognising historical inequities that must be addressed. South Africans should thus feel solace at the fact that we are not exceptional or alone in these problems and most evidence indicates that the youth in South Africa (with the exception of HIV/AIDS) are better off than their counterparts in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa.⁷ Nevertheless the challenges are deep and require innovation but most a prioritisation by government not just of the youth but of early childhood development and poverty alleviation to ensure that successive generation of youth and not caught in an endless trap of poverty and unemployment.

South African Youth.

The National Youth Act of 1996 legally defines the term ‘youth’ as those falling between the ages of 15 and 35, fifteen being the age at which South Africans may legally enter the labour market. South Africa uses a broader age category for measuring the youth population which is in line with the African union measure. However, given mortality rates have dropped to 50 recently and there seems to be no explicit advantage to be classified as a youth, the government might re-consider evaluating this classification and dropping the high end and coming in line with global definitions.

In 1996, almost 40% of the South African population was classified as ‘youth’ and this trend has continued, according to the 2001 census, youth make up 41% of the population, and according to the Stats SA community survey of 2007, they constitute almost 37% of the population currently. All the current evidence indicates that not only do young people in South Africa face widespread and interrelated problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality, but that they have a greater susceptibility to them.

In 1996, the official national unemployment rate was 19.5% while the coinciding rate for the youth was almost 40%. In 2006, the official unemployment rate stood at 25.5 % while the youth unemployment rate was up to 50%.⁸ By 2008, the youth make up almost 70% of the unemployed. The chart below highlights the fact that not only do the youth make up 74.1% of the unemployed, 70.4% of discouraged workers but importantly of those that employed, almost 53.4% are underemployed, taken together the youth, who should be our most productive population make up 67.4% of ‘underutilised labour’.⁹

Abject youth poverty is more highly concentrated within rural areas (Table 3) and the provinces of Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Free State and Kwa-Zulu Natal have the highest concentration of youth poverty (Table 4). Table 5 shows the relationship between poverty and education which go hand in hand, youth with low levels of education are unlikely to find employment to climb out of poverty and those who are raised in poverty are unlikely to be able to access higher education or finish their education.

Historical racial inequities are particularly evident in higher education. South Africa has an over all graduation rate of 15% for higher education, which is one of the lowest in the world. Black students are underrepresented at universities and the graduation rate for white students is double that of black students.¹⁰

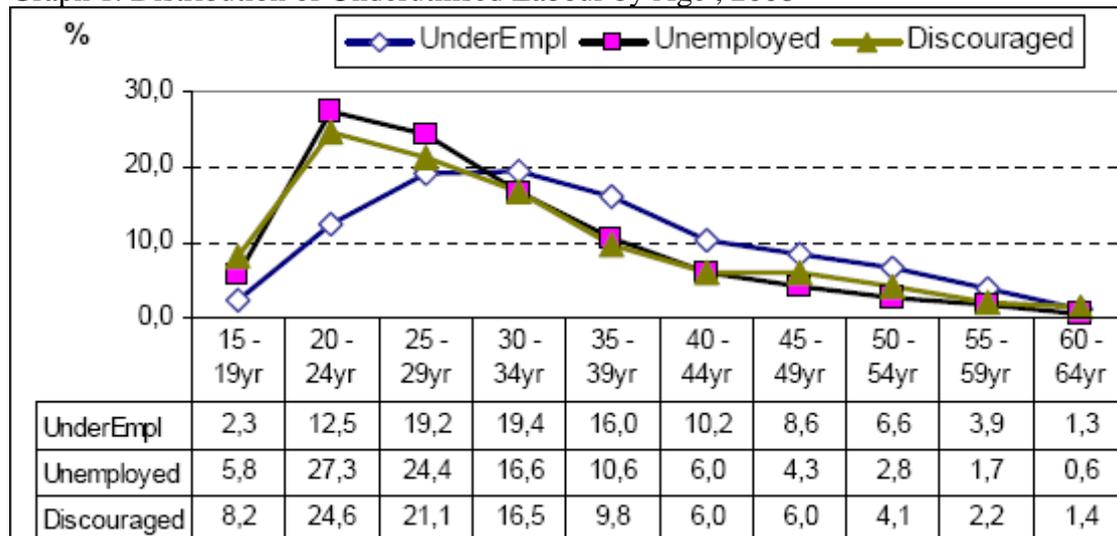
⁷ United Nations Population Fund, 2007, “State of the World Population, 2008”.
<http://www.unfpa.org/swp/index.html>

⁸ Labour Force Survey 2006, defining youth as between the ages of 15 -29.

⁹ Statistics SA, 2008, pg. 15 Figure 6.

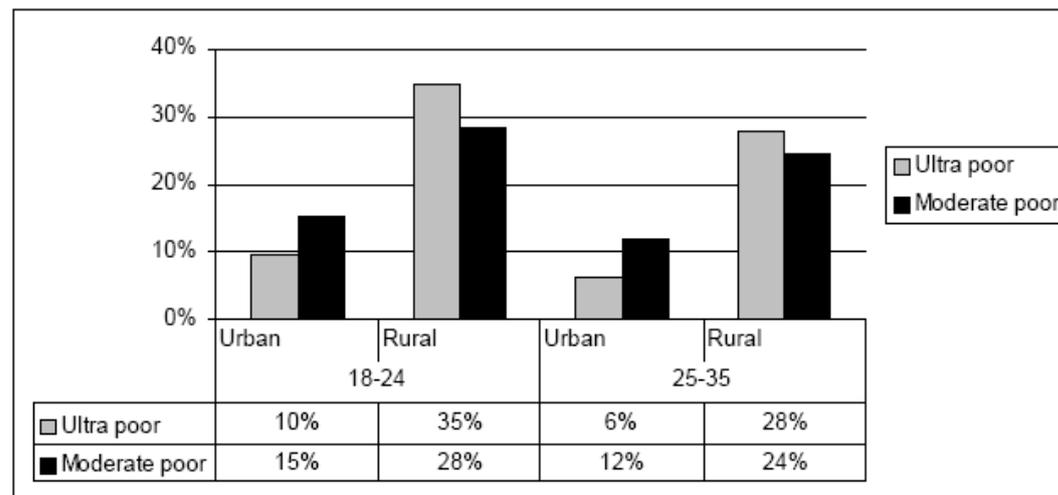
¹⁰ Leteseka, Moeketsi and Maile Simon, 2008, “High University Drop-Out Rates: A Threat to South Africa’s Future, HRSC Policy Brief, 2008

Graph 1. Distribution of Underutilised Labour by Age , 2008



Source: Statistics South Africa, 2008, pg.15 Figure 6.

Table 3: Rural vs. Urban Distribution of Youth Poverty, 2000



Source: IES/LFS2000, Stats SA: calculated for SYR

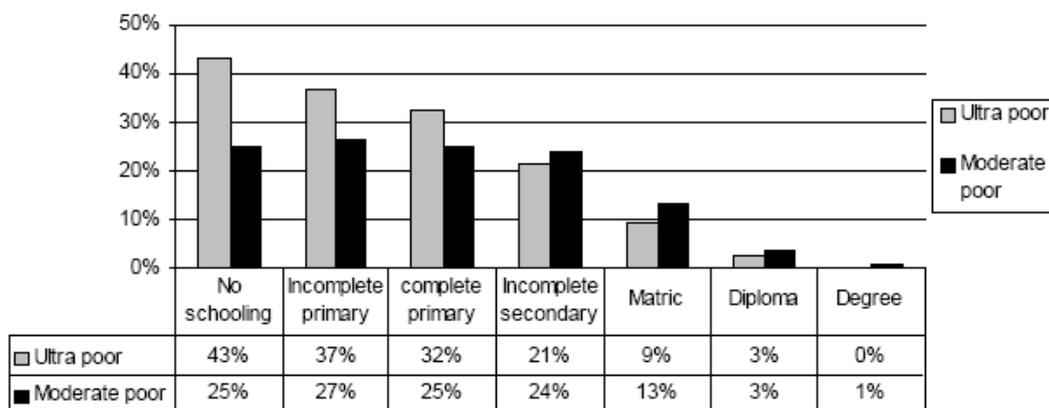
Table 4: Provincial Spread of Youth Poverty 2000

Province	Ultra poor	Moderate poor	Non poor	Total
Western Cape	3%	9%	88%	100%
Eastern Cape	29%	26%	45%	100%
Northern Cape	16%	20%	64%	100%
Free State	22%	23%	55%	100%
KwaZulu-Natal	23%	21%	55%	100%
North West	18%	18%	65%	100%
Gauteng	6%	11%	83%	100%
Mpumalanga	12%	21%	67%	100%
Limpopo	31%	26%	43%	100%

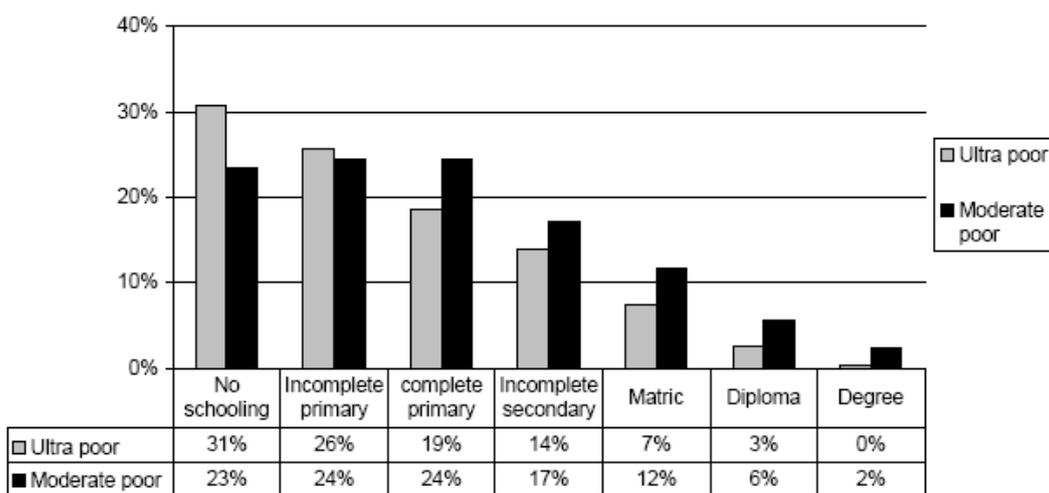
Source: IES/LFS2000, Stats SA: calculated for SYR

Table 5: Relationship between Education and Youth Poverty 2000.

18-24

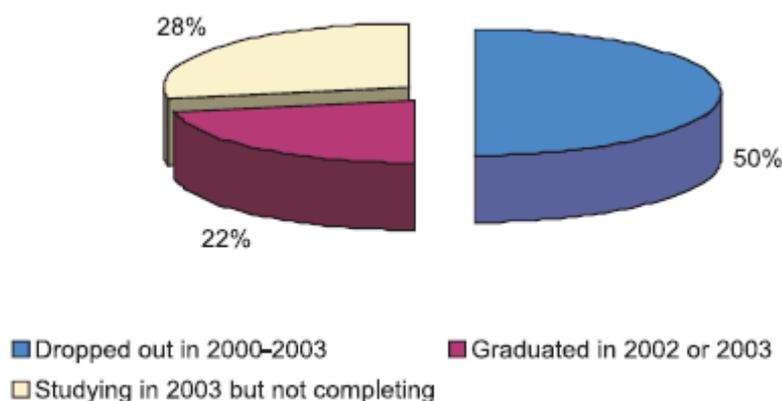


25-35



Source: IES/LFS2000, Stats SA: calculated for SYR

Figure 1. Drop Out rate for Higher Education



Source: Department of Education, 2005

Youth and the 2009 Elections

The youth vote has gained significant attention in the past months because of high registration rates amongst the youth. In the past there has been a large amount of apathy among the youth particularly in the 1999 and 2004 elections. For example in 1999 while the average registration was 88% across age groups it was only 48% for people aged between 18 and 20. It was estimated that only 43% of the youth voted in the 1999 elections and 44.5% in the 2004 elections.¹¹ Similarly, for the 2004 elections it was estimated that some 4.5 million new voters were eligible to vote and that only 20% of these registered.¹²

This year of a population of 48.7 million there are 27 million eligible voters. The IEC initiated the excitement over the youth turnout when it revealed that on its Nov 8-9 registration drive out 1.6 million that participated, 1.2 million fell between the ages of 18 and 29 and made up 77.9% of new registrations.¹³ Currently the youth comprise of almost 25% of all registered voters. It should be noted that in the previous election although 20 million voters were registered only 15 million voted, so registration in itself does not guarantee that voters will turn out on election day to vote.

A new study by the HRSC also shows that the youth are not as apathetic as previously believed the study finds that the youth are politically conscious but tend to veer towards engagement with civil society groups and focus on specific issues and causes, rather support the broad mandate of a political party.¹⁴ Moreover, there are significant disparities amongst the youth and their enthusiasm for the elections, based on racial differences. A recent survey of South African Social Attitudes found that black youth were much more enthusiastic about participating in the upcoming elections with 67% of black respondents stating that they would vote versus 43% of white, coloured and Indians.

¹¹ <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-02-04-will-generation-next-show-up-to-vote>

¹² Jan Hofmeyer, 2004, "Is Democracy Date" in Youth and Elections, Journal of Youth Development 14th Edition April, pg 11-19.

¹³ *The Transformer* Vol. 15 No. 2 Apr-May 2009; http://www.afesis.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=590&Itemid=85; also <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-02-04-will-generation-next-show-up-to-vote>

¹⁴ <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-02-04-will-generation-next-show-up-to-vote>

What will this translate to on Election Day? It's possible given inevitability of an ANC win that the youth may not come out on the droves expected, however anything is possible and they may surprise the electorate by sending a strong message to political parties.