

# Youth Policy Initiative:

## Integrating the approach to youth development



Youth development is a critical area for social investment, and all the more so if South Africa is to reap the potential benefits of the current youth bulge. However, DR SAADHNA PANDAY and PROFESSOR LINDA RICHTER point out that a common understanding of youth development priorities, and a co-ordinated multi-sectoral approach, is vital to ensure that our up-and-coming generation do not fall through the cracks.

INCREASINGLY, THE DEMOGRAPHIC SIGNIFICANCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE is taking centre stage in discussions on youth development. *The World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation* highlights the concept of the demographic dividend that results from larger-than-normal numbers of youth.

Through various public-health interventions (better sanitation, antibiotics, etc.), infant mortality has begun to decline. As a consequence of better child survival and declining fertility, which means fewer, but healthier children, a 'baby boom generation' is created that gradually works its way through the age structure of the population. To start with, the age structure is bottom heavy, with many children and adolescents to support in terms of health and education. But as the 'baby boomers' get older, the bulge shifts to the middle years, or the working-age population.

With fewer children and elderly people to support, this 'youth bulge' provides an unprecedented opportunity for dramatic economic and human development. The East Asian 'economic miracle' provides the



most salient example of the benefits of the demographic dividend. In these countries, almost a third of the economic growth between 1960 and 1990 is attributed to investments made in youth development.

But the dividend is not automatically reaped from a surplus youth population. To enjoy the benefits, countries need to invest in public health, education and labour-market participation, while simultaneously implementing sound family-planning policies to drive down fertility rates, thus sustaining the window of opportunity.

The number of young people in many developing countries will peak in the next 10–20 years, but sub-Saharan Africa is the only part of the world that will experience a youth bulge in the next two to five decades, provided that mortality and fertility begin to decline. South Africa is about halfway through the youth bulge but will still experience large numbers of young people for the next 15–20 years. This is a time-limited opportunity. As this cohort of young people ages, the bulge moves into the aging years and dependence on the State will then increase.

Is South Africa ready to take advantage of the youth bulge? We know that the current youth cohort in South Africa is the best educated ever, they are the healthiest sector of the population, and our Constitution grants them agency and platforms to influence political processes and civic life. Yet several multi-faceted challenges have constrained our ability to take advantage of the youth bulge for the past two decades and in fact continue to hamper our reaping the benefits of this opportunity.

Chief among these constraints is the inability to create close to full employment during their most productive years, coupled with incomplete and poor quality education. Some of the factors that drive current levels of unemployment include the mismatch between the growth in the economically active population against the number of jobs created in the formal sector. For example, between 1997 and 2002, the potentially economically active population between 18–35 years of age, grew from 6 to 8.4 million; the number of jobs created, however, only increased from 4.3 to 4.9 million. This led to an increase in unemployment among young people from 1.7 to 3.5 million (or two-thirds of the youth population). Other factors that underpin youth employment include lack of access to finance, the extent and quality of

education, and limited career guidance and work experience.

What is more, employment does not automatically translate into financial security or prosperity. Young people are often under-employed, working under precarious conditions in lowly paid contract-type positions, most often in the services sector. And self-employment has not proven to be the panacea of youth unemployment; only 6% of participants in the Status of Youth Report survey (2003) reported being self-employed and this only when they could not find a job in the formal sector.

## South Africa is about halfway through the youth bulge...

The dual reality of the South African context – with some modest strides made in youth development, but equally enormous challenges remaining – creates a conundrum. While access to schooling is expanding, how can we assist more young people to complete their education? Given that our youth are the best educated ever, how can we draw them into the economy and benefit from their talents? With expanded access to family planning, how can we enable young people to choose when and with whom they want to have children? When institutions and opportunities exist for young people to participate meaningfully in civil society, how can we help them to get and stay involved? And what second chances can we offer the large cohort of youth who have fallen out of the mainstream?

Efforts to create a policy and institutional environment conducive to youth development in South Africa is an acknowledgement of the important role young people can play in contemporary society and in shaping the future of the country. But, we have to find ways to optimise what young people do and what they become. We have to ask ourselves: what can we, as a country, do differently in the policy and programme environment to enhance the opportunities young people have for development; how can research optimise the policy-programme nexus; and how can we enable young people to become the custodians of their own development?

These are some of the questions that the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), in partnership with representatives from the

youth sector, key government departments and non-governmental organisations are opening up for debate in the Youth Policy Initiative (YPI). The Initiative, which was launched in April and will span the next 18 months, consists of six high-profile round-table policy-dialogue meetings, supported by a public lecture and seminar series, the HSRC bi-annual conference, and publication of research results and policy analyses.

Experts from the policy, programme and research environments are coming together to highlight key challenges confronting young people, to debate the nature of the challenges and their possible solutions, and to discuss multi-sectoral and integrated approaches to address them. Roundtables, of which two have taken place, will produce policy briefs offering policy and programmatic direction. Topics for roundtables reflect contemporary challenges facing youth and issues of national priority, and include: youth policies and youth institutions; opportunities and risks of the youth bulge; entry into and expansion of livelihood strategies; school repetition, drop-out and discontinuation; teen pregnancy; and violence and violent crime.

A critical component of the YPI is creating opportunities for young people to participate in debates using channels appropriate and familiar to their generation. Live webcasts of the roundtables can be viewed at youth centres run by partner organisations such as the National Youth Commission, Umsobomvu Youth Fund, and loveLife. Video and audio files can be downloaded from the HSRC website, and young people can participate in a youth poll ([www.hsrc.ac.za/yip](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/yip)) or an sms poll (in the publication, *Power Your Future*) that features questions relevant to each of the roundtables.

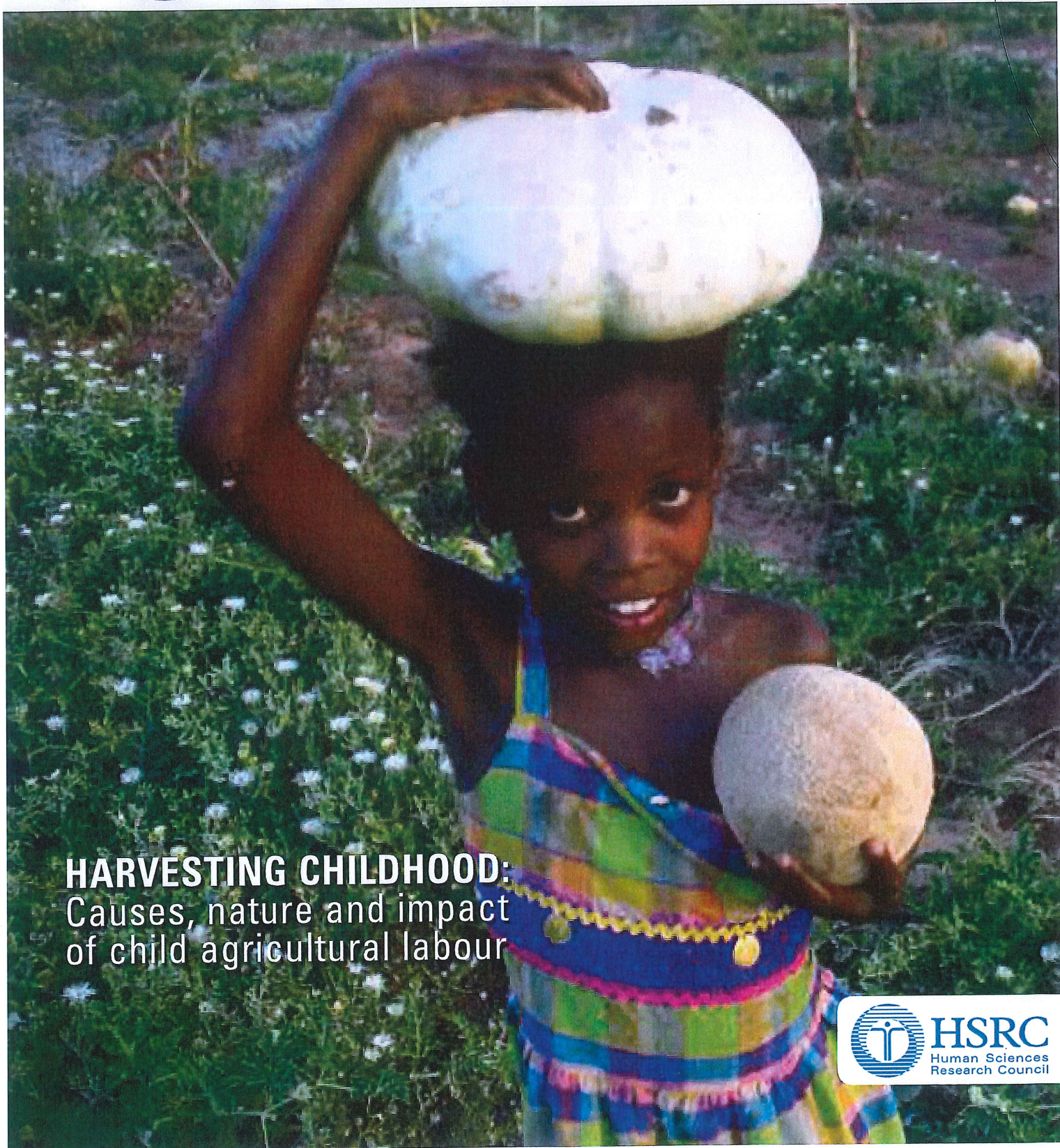
The YPI is experimental and therefore dynamic. It is the inaugural and flagship project of the HSRC's newly formed Policy Analysis Unit, in collaboration with the Child Youth Family and Social Development research programme. Its principle aim is to inform policy-makers and implementing agencies, and to enable them to co-ordinate their efforts. Much depends on the Initiative's ability to garner support from key constituencies, particularly capturing the interest of young people in this process. ●

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