



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



**PEPFAR**  
U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief

**YOUTHPOWER**  
ACTION

# EMPOWERING YOUTH TO OVERCOME HEALTH WORKFORCE SHORTAGES

## USAID YOUTHPower ACTION SOUTH AFRICA HEALTH WORKFORCE ASSESSMENT BRIEF

*Authors: Obed Diener, Abigail Ornellas, Karen Katz, Roy Natherson, and FHI 360.*

*Disclaimer: The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.*

**Problem Statement** The youth bulge in sub-Saharan Africa offers promise for a long-term 'demographic dividend.' Yet in the near term, the youth bulge is a major driver of several complex, interrelated development challenges. The first is the massive and growing employment crisis, as a steadily increasing population of youth entering the labor force each year far exceeds the number of jobs created, especially in the formal economy. The effects are disproportionately severe for economically marginalized adolescent girls and young women, who are at higher risk for HIV than males of the same age. However, education and economic empowerment have shown promise in mitigating that risk.

The second key challenge is the threat of a rollback in controlling the HIV epidemic, driven by the swelling population of adolescents and young adults who have a disproportionately higher risk of HIV acquisition. The health and social service workforce is inadequate to meet population needs in many countries. The UNAIDS goal of placing 90% of people living with HIV on antiretroviral therapy globally by 2030 may be threatened by the emergence of a projected gap of 18 million health workers over the same period, primarily in low and middle-income countries, according to the WHO.

If harnessed effectively, however, the youth bulge presents a compelling opportunity for mitigating health and social challenges. The YP Action South Africa Health Workforce Assessment explored the opportunities and challenges for youth employment in health and social services. South Africa is a prime example of these trends, with broader relevance in Africa and other low and middle-income countries.

**Methodology** The assessment included a review of youth workforce programs that provide vocational training, career guidance, job placement, and related services. Those included several health and social services workforce programs supported by PEPFAR or USAID, plus a larger number that work across other sectors. Drawing from key informant interviews, a literature review, and labor market data, the analysis then maps potential opportunities for expanding youth employment in health and social services. Fieldwork included in-depth interviews with over 25 diverse stakeholders and six focus groups with youth, led by a four-person, mixed international/local team, which visited Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Cape Town and surrounding townships and rural areas.

### **Four Key Drivers of Success for Health Workforce Training and Employment Programs**

- Availability of Good Jobs: youth can find quality employment in selected fields
- Buy-in From the Professional Council: youths' qualifications meet industry requirements
- Participation of Committed, Qualified Trainers: youth are trained and coached by health professionals
- Clear Articulated Pathway for Professional Development: youth may achieve upward mobility in their fields through experience and further training

**Key Findings** The assessment identified and analyzed several examples of effective programs that already support disadvantaged youth for growing health and social services professions, such as the Kheth'Impilo Pharmacy Assistant program. The box on the front page identifies four key drivers of program success (drawn from those models), which should be more broadly adapted and replicated. A much more numerous group of youth employment programs provide youth with foundational skills and support to enter the workplace more broadly. Such programs could be adapted to include stronger links to health and to facilitate youth entry into this growing labor market. Many programs could incorporate low-cost ways to educate and expose a larger number of youth to careers in health, for example through guest speakers by health professionals or business owners and site visits to employers. More directly, programs that already specialize in training and placing youth in retail jobs could develop a pharmacy track – recruiting youth who show interest and aptitude -- leading to entry-level positions behind the counter at pharmacies. Successful candidates may then advance to careers as professionally certified pharmacist assistants, following further employer-sponsored training.

Health and social services is a bright spot for job creation within an otherwise dismal landscape in South Africa. Most jobs are generated by the private sector, which typically offers better wages, working conditions and career advancement opportunities in comparison with the public sector, which is beset with management and funding challenges. The sector shows special promise for promoting employment and career advancement of young women, thereby reducing their vulnerability to HIV. Data from South Africa's Health and Welfare Sector Education and Training Authority

(HWSETA) show that women make up 75% of the sector workforce, including the majority of managers, professionals and other high skill occupations. The rapid emergence of paraprofessional occupations (see box) provides a growing number of jobs for young people, and holds promise for achieving greater cost-effectiveness in the provision of health and social services. Yet most adolescents and young adults, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, remain unaware.

**Conclusion and Recommendations** Despite emerging career opportunities in health and social services, numerous constraints limit youth access. Most youth lack awareness of health careers beyond nurses or doctors, as well as the skill and education requirements for such jobs. Deficits in math and science skills, emerging at a young age, exclude most youth from the education and training pathways that lead to health careers. Pervasive regulatory barriers restrict access to accredited educational opportunities and constrain enterprise growth and job creation. In response, recommended investments include:

- career exposure and education for health and social services;
- math and science skill development for youth interested in careers in health;
- access to quality health training programs (e.g. expanding accreditation and financial aid);
- Technical and Vocational Education Training system capacity building and reform;
- improved public sector management practices that promote youth employment in paraprofessional occupations; and
- job creation and entrepreneurship initiatives within health value chains showing high potential, such as pharmaceuticals and medical tourism.

**Fast-growing Health & Social Services Fields for Youth in South Africa\***

- Pharmacy
- Nursing
- Phlebotomy (drawing blood)
- Child & Youth Care
- Auxiliary Social Work

*\* Each enjoys strong evidence of job growth, and does not require a four-year tertiary degree.*

<sup>1</sup> Pettifor, et. al, "Keep them in school: the importance of education as a protective factor against HIV infection among young South African women," International Journal of Epidemiology, Dec. 2008, vol. 37(6).

<sup>2</sup> Peck and Fleischman, "Addressing HIV Risk in Adolescent Girls and Young Women," CSIS Global Health Policy Center, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, "Global Strategy on Human Resources for Health: Workforce 2030," 2016.

<sup>4</sup> HWSETA and Statistics South Africa (2016). Sector Skills Plan Update for the Health and Welfare Sector in South Africa for the period 2016/17 to 2021/22.