



Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 135

The Employment Status of Zambians: Official Definitions versus Citizen Perceptions

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March 2014

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge to most Zambians that, among other things, the Patriotic Front was voted into power on the promise of reducing unemployment. For many Zambians, their hope of earning an income leans heavily on being able to secure employment. While Zambians have the option of engaging in entrepreneurial activities, the uncertain income of entrepreneurship, the difficulties in raising start-up capital (especially for the youth), and the general lack of business management skills, makes the option either unattractive or an outright impractical choice.

The relationship between unemployment, economic growth and poverty is clear. High levels of unemployment mean the underutilization of the nation's most valuable resource – labor. When labor resources are underutilized, the nation's growth potential is not attained. When the nation's growth potential is not achieved, whatever modest growth that is attained will not be enough to move many Zambians out of poverty. This offers a potential explanation for the current paradox of sustained economic growth for slightly more than a decade without an appreciable reduction in poverty levels.

This briefing paper focuses on unemployment in Zambia. Drawing on official statistics and data from the latest Afrobarometer survey (2013), the paper begins by clarifying the concept of unemployment in as far as it is used in Zambia. It then presents the official status of unemployment as measured by the Labor Force Survey. This metric of unemployment is contrasted with perceptions of Zambians on their employment status measured by the Afrobarometer survey. Finally, the results of the Afrobarometer survey are explored by examining the relationship between employment status and demographic characteristics, such as age and urban-rural location, and poverty level. An important finding is that official definitions of employment/unemployment do not reveal the true extent of unemployment, particularly if one is interested in the participation in the labor force.

2. Afrobarometer Survey

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys, covering 35 African countries in Round 5 (2011-2013). It measures public attitudes on democracy and its alternatives, evaluations of the quality of governance and economic performance. In addition, the survey assesses the views of the electorate on critical political issues in the surveyed countries. The

Afrobarometer's main goal is to produce scientifically reliable data on public opinion in Africa while strengthening institutional capacities for survey research, and sharing research findings to inform policy and practice. The Afrobarometer also provides comparisons over time, as five rounds of surveys have taken place from 1999 to 2013. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Zambia in 1999 (Round 1), 2003 (Round 2), 2005 (Round 3), and 2009 (Round 4).

Afrobarometer surveys use a common survey instrument and methodology. The instrument asks a standard set of questions that permits systematic comparison in public attitudes across countries and over time. The methodology was based on a national probability sample of 1,200 adult Zambians selected to represent all adult citizens of voting age, allowing for inferences with a sampling margin of error of +/- 3% at a 95% confidence level. The sample was drawn randomly based on Probability Proportionate to Population Size (PPPS), thus taking account of population distributions, gender as well as rural-urban divides. The sampling process ensured that every adult Zambian citizen had an equal and known chance of being selected in the sample. Fieldwork in Zambia was conducted by RuralNet Associates Ltd between 21 January and 8 February 2013.

3. Official Definitions and Measurement of Unemployment

According to the latest Zambia Labor Force report commissioned by the Zambian Ministry of Labor and Social Security and implemented by the Central Statistical Office, a person is employed if in the period concerned they performed work for pay either in cash or kind, barter or family gain (CSO, 2013). It is immediately noticeable that this definition is broader than most people's concept of employment, which often focuses on participation in the labor force. Zambia's official definition implies that a homemaker or a housewife who tends to household activities, such as making sure the house is clean and preparing meals, is employed. Therefore, the homemaker is, officially, not part of the unemployment statistic. Employment is also assumed for young people (e.g. a 15 year old) who work, often for free, in a family kantemba (micro-business), or who help weed the maize field. Also, employment is officially counted for a mine retiree and the peasant farmer who both work in their own vegetable gardens. These cases illustrate the Zambian state definition of working for family gain, in which employment does not mean garnering a wage or salary.

The Zambian state defines unemployment as the condition of complete joblessness where the affected persons are also available for work or are actively looking for work (CSO, 2013). Notice that though unemployment is the opposite of employment, the Zambian definition of unemployment introduces the term "job". The term job has the connotation of paid employment. Thus, unemployment as defined here denotes a lack of paid employment and in this regard, may not exactly be the opposite of employment.

Related to the issue of measurement of unemployment is the term "unemployment rate". This is defined as the ratio of the unemployed population to the labor force in given period of time (CSO, 2013). The labor force, also referred to as the economically active, is defined as all persons above a specified minimum age who are either employed or unemployed. In Zambia, the minimum age is 15 for the labor force survey.

Interestingly, the Zambian state has defined youth unemployment separately from general unemployment in the latest report of the labor force survey. In Zambia, a youth is any person aged 15 to 35. Gauging from public pronouncements, the government appears to be very concerned about youth unemployment and this, perhaps, is the reason for treating youth unemployment separately from adult unemployment in the Labor Force Survey report.

4. Official Status of Unemployment in Zambia

Given the official definition of unemployment, we now consider the official status of employment in Zambia. In 2012, the number of people who were completely jobless though available for work or were actively looking for work was 466,526 out of a labor force of 5,966,199. This translates into a 7.8% unemployment rate. There was a slight decline (0.1%) in the rate of unemployment from the 2008 figure. The 7.8% unemployment rate is slightly higher than the average for Sub Saharan Africa, which in 2012 averaged 7.6%. Also, Zambia's unemployment rate is much higher than the global average of 6% (ILO, 2013). Youth unemployment in Zambia was estimated at 10%, which is higher than the national average of 7.8%.

The picture painted by these statistics is not as gloomy as Zambians may expect. However, a critical look at the official definition of employment suggests that these official statistics may not reveal the true extent of unemployment, particularly if one is interested in the participation in the labor force. A majority of Zambians consider themselves employed when they are in paid employment, but only 1,120,178, or 19% of a labor force of 5,966,199 is in paid employment. On the other hand, 1,915,327 or 32% of the total labor force is composed of unpaid family workers. Additionally, 4,652,253 or 78% of the total labor force work in the informal sector. The informal sector consists of unregistered enterprises, of which the majority are smallholder farm households most of which employ unpaid family workers.

5. Zambians' Perceptions of Unemployment in the Country

5.1. Rank of Unemployment among Major Problems Facing Zambians

Unemployment was ranked as the most important problem facing Zambians in the latest Afrobarometer survey. 19% of Zambians rated it the most important problem facing the nation, followed by infrastructure/ roads and farming/ agriculture (Table 1).

Table 1: Rank of Unemployment among Most Important Problems

	Percent	Rank
Unemployment	19	1
Infrastructure/ roads	15	2
Farming/ agriculture	12	3
Education	10	4
Health	10	5
Water supply	9	6
Poverty/ destitution	6	7
Food shortage/ famine	3	8
Corruption	2	9
Management of economy	2	10

Question: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?

Regionally, the unemployment concern was ranked the most important problem in Lusaka and the Copperbelt provinces, and the second most important problem in Central Province (Table 2). Lusaka and the Copperbelt are the most urbanized provinces in Zambia accounting for 67% of the total urban population. Additionally, they are the most populous provinces, with 26% of the total population residing in them. Although unemployment appears to be an important general concern, the Afrobarometer survey results suggest that unemployment is first and foremost an urban problem. Accordingly, though the official national unemployment rate is 7.8%, unemployment in urban areas is 14.2% compared to 3.3% in rural areas.

Table 2: Rank of Unemployment as the Most Important Problem, by Province

Province	Rank for Unemployment
Lusaka	1
Copperbelt	1
Central	2
Western	2
Northern	3
Luapula	4
Southern	4
Eastern	5
Northwestern	6
Muchinga	9

Question: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?

The youth (18-30 years) ranked unemployment as the first most important problem, whereas those aged 31 to 50 ranked it third. Similarly, respondents aged 51 and above also ranked unemployment as the third most important problem (Table 3).

Table 3: Rank of Unemployment as the Most Important Problem, by Age

Rank for Unemployment	Age Group			
	18-30	31-50	51 and above	All age groups
	1	3	3	1

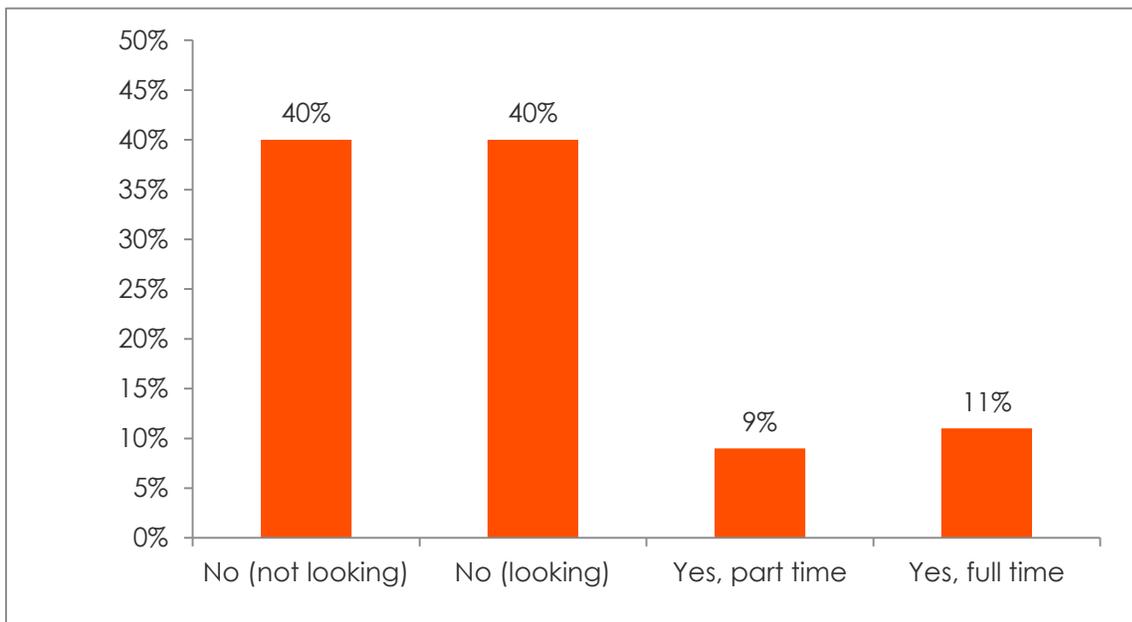
Question: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?

It would appear from these statistics that while both young and old perceive unemployment as a major problem, one may infer that the youth—those entering the work force—are affected the most by persistent unemployment.

5.2. Citizen Perceptions of Employment Status

The Afrobarometer survey included a question that asked for the employment status of the respondent. This is unlike the labor force survey that derives employment status by asking what an individual was doing in a given reference period. In contrast, the Afrobarometer measures an individual's perception of his or her employment status. In this regard, about 80% of Zambians said they were not employed (Figure 1). Nearly half (40% out of 80%) of those who said they were unemployed also mentioned that they were not looking for a job, while the other half (40% out of 80%) said they were looking. This leaves about 20% of respondents who said that they were employed either part time or full time. Interestingly, this 20% is the same as the 20% of the total Zambian labor force who are in paid employment according to official definition. If the convention of defining unemployment is in terms of those who are jobless but looking for a job, then the Afrobarometer data indicates that 40% of Zambians are unemployed and are actually looking for employment.

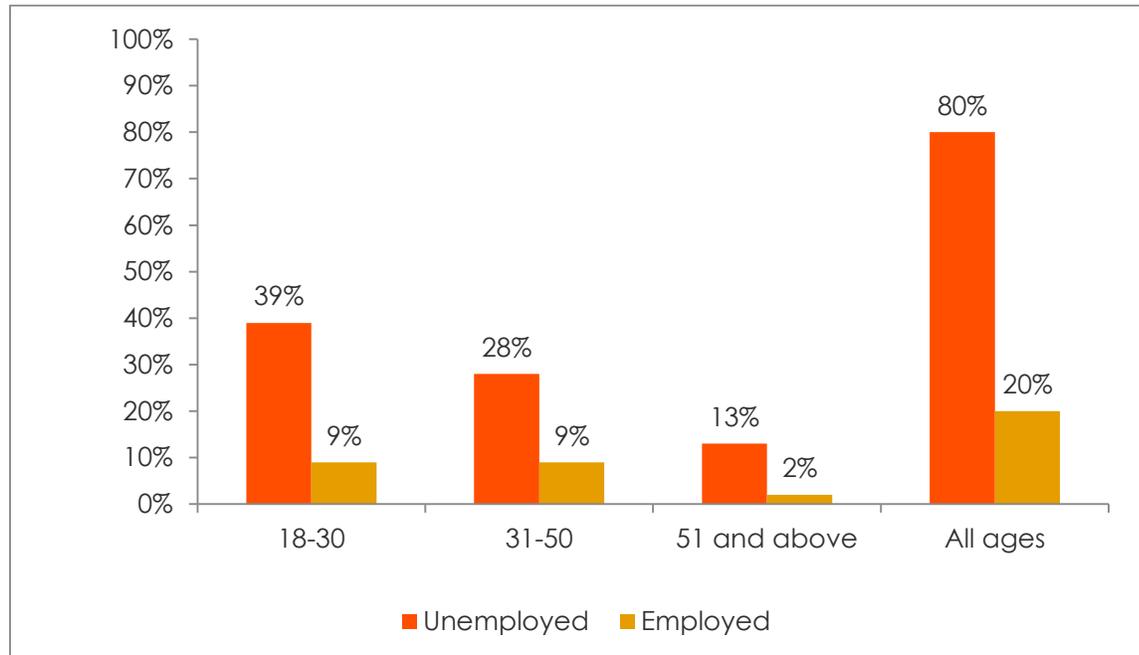
Figure 1: Employment Status



Question: Do you have a job that pays cash income? If yes, is it full-time or part-time? If no, are you presently looking for a job?

In terms of age, 39% of all those who are unemployed are youth (age 18-30), 28% are middle-aged (31-50), and 13% are above 51 years old (Figure 2). Thus, unemployment is highest among the youth and least among those aged 51 and above.

Figure 2: Age and Unemployment



Question: Do you have a job that pays cash income? If yes, is it full-time or part-time? If no, are you presently looking for a job? (Unemployed refers to “no (looking)” and “no (not looking)” and employed refers to “yes, part time” and “yes, full time.”)

Disaggregating figures by the status of employment reveals that 61% of youths are unemployed of which 50% are currently looking for employment, 31% are not looking for a job, and only 10% have full time jobs (Table 4). 35% of middle-aged Zambians are unemployed and looking for a job and only 13% have a full time job. These proportions of unemployed Zambians are high, particularly among the youth. The survey results also show that the youth are actively looking for a job more than any other age category.

Table 4: Age and Employment Status (Disaggregated by Form of Unemployment)

Age	No (not looking)	No (looking)	Yes, part time	Yes, full time
18-30	31	50	9	10
31-50	42	35	10	13
51 and above	65	19	8	7
All ages	40	40	9	11

Question: Do you have a job that pays cash income? If yes, is it full-time or part-time? If no, are you presently looking for a job?

5.3. Unemployment and Lived Poverty

This section explores the relationship between unemployment and lived poverty. Poverty is multidimensional and consists of several deprivations. Some important deprivations include lacking food and nutrition, health, safe water, sanitation, clothing and shelter, and education. The Afrobarometer survey includes questions on different areas of potential deprivation. In this section, deprivations related to food, water, medical care, cooking fuel and cash income are used as indicators of poverty.¹

A relationship between unemployment and poverty is discernible (Table 5). The percentage of respondents who did not experience any of the deprivations and had a job was higher (at 53%) than those who were not in employment (41%). However, not everyone who was in employment was completely free from deprivations. This suggests that poverty is experienced to different degrees by all persons, employed or unemployed. For instance, 5% of those in part time employment suffered deprivations in one or more areas all the time (always).

Table 5: Unemployment and Lived Poverty

Employment Status	Gone without water or medical care or cooking fuel or cash income?				
	Never	Just once or twice	Several times	Many times	Always
No (not looking)	41	15	20	18	6
No (looking)	43	16	19	17	4
Yes, part time	47	19	17	11	5
Yes, full time	53	15	17	14	2

Question: Do you have a job that pays cash income? If yes, is it full-time or part-time? If no, are you presently looking for a job?

5. Conclusion

We have seen in this paper that official definitions of employment and unemployment are not necessarily in tandem with the perceptions of Zambians. Whilst the official rate of unemployment is at 7.8%, about 80% of Zambians perceive themselves as unemployed and of those 40% are presently looking for employment. The percentage of those who perceive themselves as employed, incidentally, is nearly the same as that which official figures report as being in paid employment (19%). This may mean that people perceive themselves as being employed when they are in paid employment.

This briefing paper has also shown that though unemployment appears to be an important general concern, the Afrobarometer survey results suggest that unemployment is first and foremost an urban problem. Accordingly, though the official national unemployment rate is 7.8%, unemployment in urban areas is 14.2% compared to 3.3% in rural areas. The youth, in general, are also more affected than adults, with more of them in active search of employment than any other age category.

¹ The responses to questions on deprivations related to food, water, medical care, cooking fuel and cash income were combined using the SPSS multi-response procedure. The combined responses were then cross-tabulated with responses on employment status. No lived poverty index was calculated.

In sum, the disparity between official statistics and citizen perceptions of employment status is important and needs to be taken into account in policy dialogues.

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The Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in South Africa (IJR), the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Survey implementation in Afrobarometer's work in Namibia is coordinated by the Institute for Public Policy Research. We gratefully acknowledge generous support from the UK's Department for International Development (DfID), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank for Afrobarometer Round 5.

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