

Graduates turn to casual labour as job crisis bites

In Fort Portal's sand yards and roadside stalls, academic certificates have given way to survival.

BY ALEX ASHABA.

At the sand-loading yards on the outskirts of Fort Portal City, the clang of shovels against truck beds echoes through the morning air.

Among the men heaping sand under the rising sun is 28-year-old Brian Akasiima, who holds a diploma in Public Administration.

Two years after graduating in 2023, Mr Akasiima has yet to secure formal employment. Instead, he earns a living loading trucks bound for construction sites.

"I thought I would be working in the district as a sub-county chief or in a local NGO," he says, wiping sweat from his face. "But here I am, loading sand to survive."

Each truck earns him Shs10,000. On a productive day, if his team loads three trucks, he can take home up to Shs30,000. The work is physically demanding and competition is intense.

"Here we don't speak English. No books are needed. We compete with villagers who did not go to school," he says.

Mr Akasiima says he has applied for more than 50 jobs and attended only two interviews.

"They say I lack experience. Where do they expect me to get it if no one gives me a chance?" he asks.

A growing crisis

Mr Akasiima's story reflects a wider national challenge. According to the



Food vendors by the roadside in Fort Portal City on Monday. Across the city, graduates are spilling into the informal sector, competing for the same survival opportunities as school dropouts. PHOTO/ALEX ASHABA

2024 National Census by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (Ubos), unemployment among the working-age population stands at 12.3 percent.

Of the 25.1 million working-age Ugandans, only 37.5 percent are employed. The Labour Force Participation Rate is 42.9 percent, while 5.25 million young people — 50.9 percent — are classified as Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET).

Across towns and trading centres, graduates are spilling into the informal sector, competing for the same survival opportunities as school dropouts.

On the Fort Portal-Bundibugyo Road in Kišenyi, 27-year-old Sarah Kabugho arranges second-hand clothes at

her roadside stall. Four years ago, she earned a Diploma in Procurement and Logistics and moved from Bundibugyo seeking better prospects.

"I never imagined I would be selling clothes by the roadside, but rent must be paid and my child must eat," she says.

After graduation, Ms Kabugho secured an internship with a government agency, hoping it would lead to permanent employment.

"They promised to call me if any opportunity came up. I kept checking my phone and email in vain," she says.

Tired of waiting, she borrowed Shs1 million to start a second-hand clothes business. On a good day, she sells merchandise worth Shs50,000, but daily

revenue fees, rent and loan repayments cut deeply into profits.

Next to her, 24-year-old Moses Okello, who dropped out in Senior Two, sells second-hand shoes.

"For me, I knew school was not for me; but now even graduates are here with us. We wake up and fight for the same customers," he says.

"Some customers prefer those who speak English. Some graduates have better marketing skills. Business is harder," Mr Okello adds.

Degrees in the drawer

At Mpanga Market, 30-year-old Esther Atwine runs a mobile money kiosk. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

- 12.3% - National unemployment rate (Ubos 2024 Census)
- 25.1 million - Working-age population
- 37.5% - Employment-to-population ratio
- 42.9% - Labour force participation rate
- 5.25 million - Youth classified as Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)
- 50.9% - Share of youth nationally who are NEET

Social Work and Social Administration in 2019. On a good day, she makes about Shs20,000 in profit.

"It's not what I studied for, but it's honest work," she says.

After graduation, Ms Atwine volunteered for two years with an NGO in Rwamwanja refugee settlement without pay, hoping for formal employment.

"They kept saying funding was coming. I waited and hoped. I got tired."

The emotional toll has been heavy. "People who once saw me travelling in an NGO vehicle meet me here and laugh. It hurts. But life must continue," Ms Atwine says.

On the Fort Portal-Kampala Road, 28-year-old James Tumusiime flips chapatis over a charcoal stove. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology and skills in website design and computer repair. After three years of unsuccessful job hunting, he partnered with a friend to start a chapati and rolex stand.

"Companies ask for more than four years' experience and advanced certifications," he says.

"Some say I wasted my parents' money at university. But hunger doesn't care about your degree," he adds.

On busy days, he earns about Shs30,000. "When I save enough, I plan to open a computer repair shop because I have the skills," Mr Tumusiime says.

From sand yards to roadside stalls and kiosks, the line between graduate and dropout is increasingly blurred in Uganda's informal economy.