

We need new theory:
The relationship between
education and work

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This presentation based on:

- Allais, S., Cooper, A., & Shalem, Y. (2019). Rupturing or reinforcing inequality? The role of education in South Africa today. *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, 101(1), 105-126.
- Cooper, A & Dubbeld, B (editors). (2021). Youth and the future of work, Special Issue, *Social Dynamics*,

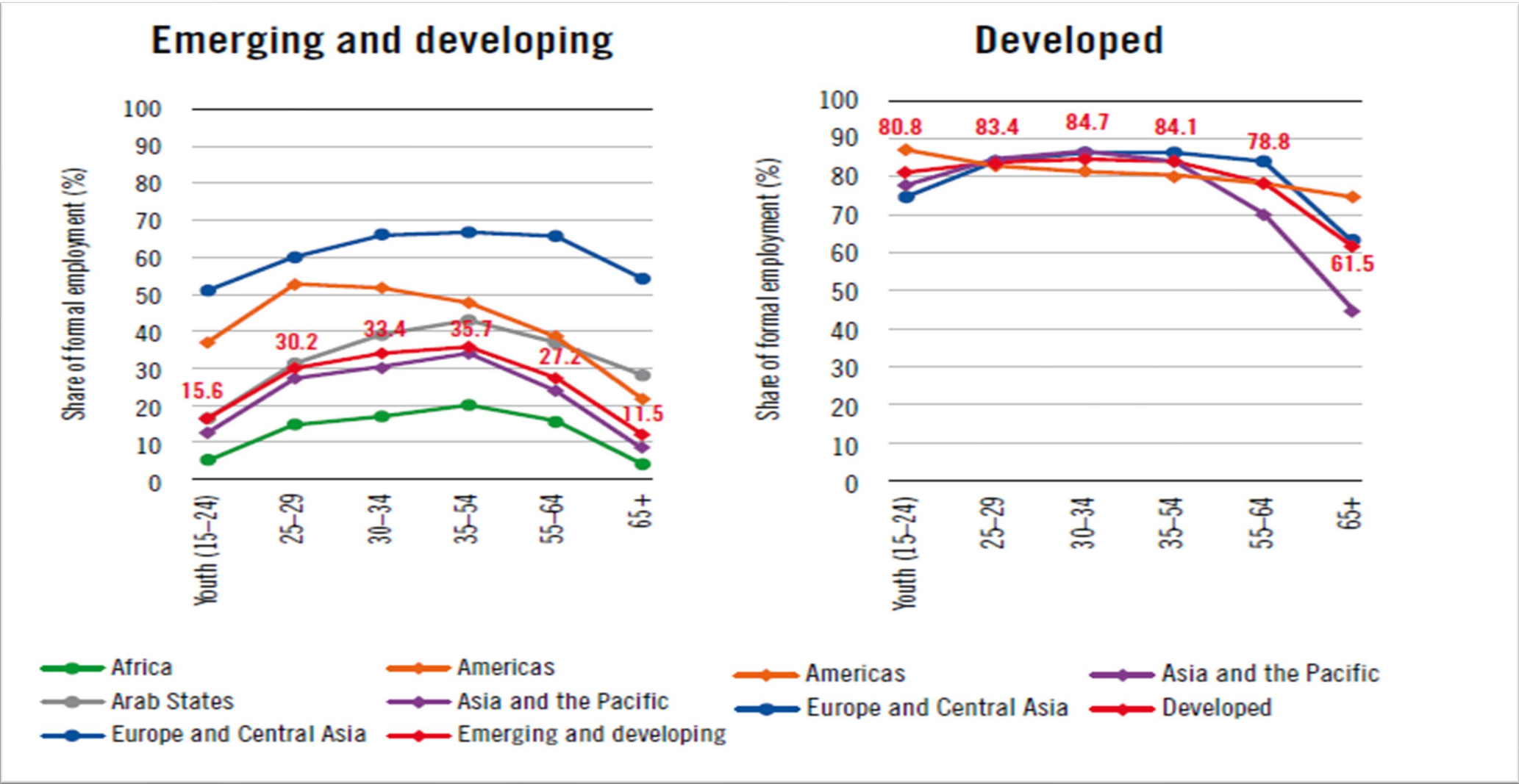
i. The global context

Since the 1970s

- Global labour market shedding jobs
- Jobs in the global North radically less secure
- Brazil: 1950-1980- average 5.5% economic growth- no reduction in informal sector jobs
- India: nearly 6% economic growth 1950-2022; 80% work in informal sector
- South Africa: 70% youth unemployment during Covid, post-apartheid generation = most educated



Informal sector



- Informal arrangements dominate urban areas
- Precarity increasing despite massive educational gains everywhere: current generation equals the most educated and yet precarity ubiquitous

ii. South Africa



An obsession with “jobs jobs jobs”!

Livelihoods generated in 3 “translocal sub-fields”:

- Main urban sub-field:
 - labour market with a few lucrative jobs;
 - entry-level service sector work in call centres and retail etc,
 - unskilled work as domestic workers, petrol attendants, supermarket packers
 - Little mid-level/semi-skilled work
 - The result of Mineral Energy Complex reconfigured in post-Apartheid SA: a few large conglomerates dominate each sector

Rural sub-field

- In rural areas people survive on mixtures of on and off farm wage labour, formal and informal trade, social grants, reciprocity
- Links to urban areas
- “Double-rootedness”



Peripheral urban sub-field: township life

- Informal economy
- Reject wage labour if possible
- Work heavily gendered
- Racism and discrimination in wage labour
- Townships continue to snare poor youth away from most lucrative opportunities and social/cultural capitals valued in a service-sector economy

South Africa

- Three translocal sub-fields connected through kinship-based livelihoods
- Race, space and gender integral to how people make a living
- An persistent and unwavering belief that solving the education crisis will solve the livelihoods crisis

iii. Education

How do sociologists of education, policy makers and economists make sense of this situation?

Globally

- Since the 1970s: Human Capital Theory= the dominant position
- More learning equals more earning...
- Measuring rates of return
- Developing countries lag behind because of lower levels of human capital

- Gary Becker; Theodore Shultz:
 - Productive capability/ value of labourer's work determined by investment in income producing human capital
 - *Education* enhances individuals' productivity.
 - Employers willing to pay higher wages to better-educated workers because they will be more productive than uneducated workers.

- An educational arms race

In South Africa...

- This translates into “poor quality education is a poverty trap”

i , ii and iii

- Globally: work becoming more insecure as flexibilised capitalism has gained dominance
- People survive on portfolios of income
- SA: work heavily spatialised, racialised through collective livelihoods that have been historically forged
- An unwavering belief that “better quality” education will simply solve the situation
- Education becomes a panacea for saving the poor, similar to Christianity and “civilising missions” in previous times
- No Educational theory that links the micro everyday practices, knowledges and social relations to broader political and economic contexts

iv. *What do we do?*

- Pay more attention BOTH to the contexts of work AND the strategies people use to make a living
- Understanding the South African context
- Do not simply assume that JOBS will appear
- Need new ways of assessing how people contribute value to society and for compensating them
- Space and place matter