

YES Perspectives: A series on Youth Employment and Skills policies

Creating More and Better Jobs for African Youth through School-to-Work Transition Programs

DISCUSSION PAPER

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Africa faces a serious challenge of youth unemployment, which affects millions of young people and hampers the continent's economic transformation potential. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), about 13 million young people in Africa are unemployed, and around 60 million young African people are not engaged in employment, education, or training as of 2022. By 2050, Sub-Saharan Africa will have twice as many people as it has today, and more than half will be under 25 years old. Creating quality jobs for the youth is not only a social and economic necessity, but also an urgent priority for Africa's future.

Alarmingly, even many young Africans who have completed tertiary education still struggle to find jobs. In our report *The Future of Work in Africa: Implications for Secondary Education and TVET Systems*, we found that more than one in six tertiary graduates and one in four secondary graduates in Ghana are out of work. To address this problem, various actors in Africa, including governments, businesses, and non-profits, have launched programs to help young graduates transition from school to work. These programs equip them with skills and experience that can boost their chances of becoming entrepreneurs or finding quality employment. The goal is to ensure that young people can smoothly and successfully enter the labor market after finishing their education.

Alongside the programs implemented by African governments, several multinational organizations have also introduced several school-to-work transition initiatives. Examples include the African Development Bank's "Jobs for Youth in Africa," Mastercard Foundation's "Young Africa Works," and various other programs supported by the World Bank, the ILO, and more. However, the persistently high unemployment rates in African countries suggest that the outcomes of these school-to-work transition programs may be inadequate. Moreover, young people in low- and middle-income countries face a long and uncertain transition from school to work, as it takes them an average of up to 17 months to find their first jobs and up to 53 months to secure permanent employment.

School-to-work transition programs in selected African countries

The Pan-African Coalition for Transformation (PACT) is a collection of platforms that seek to bridge and close gaps between policy design and implementation across several key areas. The Youth Employment and Skills (YES) PACT has chapters in Ghana, Côte D'Ivoire, Niger, Uganda, Rwanda, and Ethiopia. Each of these countries deploys school-to-work transition initiatives with varying levels of success.

Ghana

Unemployment among young graduates in Ghana is high. According to ISSER only ten percent of graduates find work within one year of graduation, while the rest take up to ten years to secure permanent jobs. To facilitate the school-to-work transition of graduates, the Government of Ghana has implemented two major programs: the Ghana National Service Scheme (GNSS) and the Nation Builders Corps (NABCO).

The GNSS, established in 1973, requires all tertiary graduates who are 18 years and above to serve for one year in the public or private sectors, where they can develop their skills, gain work experience, and contribute to national development. However, the effectiveness of this program is questionable, as Arthur et al. (2016) point out some of its challenges, such as delays in allowance payment, mismatch between placements and career paths, and misuse of personnel by some user agencies.

NABCO was launched in 2018 and ended in 2022. This program also aimed to provide graduates with temporary employment in various sectors, such as revenue collection, education, health, technology, governance, and agriculture. NABCO recruited graduates on a three-year contract and paid them approximately \$70 per month. The Minister of Employment and Labour Relations, Ignatius Baffour Awuah, **reported** that 38,000 of the 100,000 beneficiaries transitioned into permanent employment before the program ended. However, this could mean that some or all the remaining 62 percent of the NABCO beneficiaries became unemployed after the program expired, raising doubts about its impact on the school-to-work transition of graduates.

Côte D'Ivoire

According to the World Bank (2022), approximately 5.7 percent of Ivorian youth are unemployed. To tackle this problem, different organizations have implemented various school-to-work transition programs in partnership with the government of Côte D'Ivoire.

An ongoing project is the Youth Employment and Skills Development Project, funded by the World Bank, which aims to enhance the skill training of Ivorian youths and strengthen the existing TVET systems to provide quality job opportunities.

The Build Your Business initiative was implemented from 2010 to 2014 by the International Youth Foundation, which provided entrepreneurial training to Ivorian youth to start and maintain their business. However, the Mastercard Foundation (2019) argued that the program lacked inclusivity, as it excluded many youths uninterested in entrepreneurship.

Niger

Youth unemployment in Niger stood at 12 percent in 2022, according to data from the ILO's Key Indicators of the Labour Market. Niger also remains one of the poorest countries in the world with a very low Human Development Index score and very high underemployment rates. In response to these challenges, Niger has implemented a few school-to-work transition schemes, including the Improving Employment and Income Opportunities project. This project, funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development with co-funding from the EU, operates from 2021 to 2023. It focuses on organizing seminars and training courses to provide young people with employable skills and improve the incomes of people in the Agadez, Tillabéri, and Zinder regions.

Uganda

Graduate unemployment continues to remain a great challenge in Uganda. According to the [Uganda National Household Survey](#) in 2019/20, 16.9 percent of Ugandan youth aged 15-24 are unemployed. The survey report further notes that 18 percent of Ugandans who have completed secondary, post-secondary and higher education are unemployed. Only 27 percent of young people secure jobs within three years of graduation, according to a 2015 School-to-Work Transition Survey by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics. NEET rates are also high among Ugandan youth aged 15-24, with a disproportionate impact on young women. Specifically, 30 percent of youth between 15 and 24 are NEET, with 37 percent young women and 21 percent young men. In 2016, the government of Uganda launched the [National Youth Action Plan \(NYAP\)](#) which offered specialized training and employable skills to Ugandan youth to secure jobs or start and maintain their businesses. The NYAP, which focuses on strengthening Uganda's capacity to implement numerous quality jobs for youth, was developed to operationalize the Ugandan National Youth Policy from 2016 to 2021. As an [ILO Youth Country Brief on Uganda](#) notes, there is little evidence from systematic monitoring and evaluation of the plan and other relevant policies to thoroughly assess the plan's impact.

Rwanda

There is a significant skills gap between the education system and the job market demands in Rwanda, resulting in a [youth unemployment rate of 21 percent](#). Moreover, about 60 percent of the employed persons are in low-productive sectors such as construction, farming for subsistence, and retail. To overcome this challenge and achieve its vision of becoming an upper-middle-income country by 2035, the Rwandan government is investing in various school-to-work transition programs to equip its youth with relevant skills for employment and entrepreneurship. Examples of relevant initiatives include the critical skills program offered by the National Strategy for Transformation, which runs from 2017 to 2024, and the [Priority Skills for Growth program](#) sponsored by the World Bank. This program offers youth quality and market-relevant skills to secure better jobs in the climate change, energy, and transport sectors.

Ethiopia

Graduate unemployment is also a serious challenge in Ethiopia, where [42 percent of graduates cannot find jobs](#). Mekonnen found that skills mismatches, low quality of education, and inadequate entrepreneurial skills are responsible for Ethiopia's high graduate unemployment rate. The Ethiopian government and the ILO have launched the Youth Employment Services (YES) program to address this issue. The program provides youths, including unemployed graduates, information about job opportunities and labor market demands to help them secure job opportunities. However, [the Mastercard Foundation](#) argued that the program does not guarantee that all unemployed youths will find jobs.

Lessons for improved school-to-work transition programs in Africa

An ideal school-to-work transition program should have two main goals: to help young people find fulfilling employment quickly and efficiently and to ensure that the program is inclusive of women, individuals with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. The program should also be free from political interference in the selection process. To achieve these goals, the program should provide comprehensive training in relevant skills that prepare youth for the job market, such as ICT, critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, networking, and leadership.

However, an evaluation of school-to-work programs in the six YES-PACT countries indicates that programs often face a trade-off between the quality and the quantity of their impact. Programs that reach a large number of young people often lack relevant training that prepares them for the job market. For instance, the National Service Scheme of Ghana offers inadequate remuneration and limited career development opportunities for graduates, resulting in only 10 percent of them finding permanent employment after completing their service.

Conversely, programs that offer comprehensive preparation for young people often lack the capacity to reach a large audience. For example, Educate!, an effective program that prioritizes inclusivity, trained only 51,300 youths in 2022 in Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda, which is a small fraction of the millions of young people in these countries.

Moreover, while many programs focus on providing education and training to enable young people to create or obtain quality jobs, they often neglect the need to create more high-quality job opportunities for youth. Alongside offering young people quality education and training, it is imperative to prioritize creating dignified jobs. Creating quality jobs and designing and implementing school-to-work transition schemes for young people should involve the private sector, employers, development partners, and other relevant stakeholders. Their active participation is crucial in ensuring the effectiveness and success of these initiatives.

Finally, African governments should not neglect robust school-to-work transition tools as stand-alone tools or within broader labor market information systems in designing and implementing school-to-work transition schemes. Such tools must provide youth with timely and accurate information about available opportunities for secondary or tertiary education courses. This will assist the youth in making informed decisions when choosing their courses, allowing them to effectively target and secure opportunities that require knowledge and skills in their chosen fields of study.

References

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