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Young Africa Works Summit

Key Insights and Emerging Priorities for Collective Action



Introduction

The Young Africa Works Summit brought together leaders from government, business, education, finance, civil society, and development institutions across Africa to reflect on one central question: *what system shifts are needed, and what collective action can expand access to dignified and fulfilling work for young people in Africa?*

Grounded in the lived realities of young people and informed by research, evidence and experience, participants explored what is working, where progress remains stalled, and what it will take to accelerate change at scale. The discussions reinforced established evidence and understanding, while surfacing practical opportunities where greater focus and collective action could make a difference. Lessons learned by the Foundation over seven years of implementing the Young Africa Works strategy, as well as insights from pre-Summit country dialogues held in Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, Rwanda, Nigeria, Uganda, and Ethiopia, provided a starting point for the Summit. The lessons shared at the Summit are captured in our Lessons *Learned brief*, which you can access here. Participants emphasized that expanding dignified and fulfilling work requires more than isolated programs. It requires coordinated shifts in the systems that shape young people's transitions, enterprise growth, access to finance, market participation, and inclusion.

"... if we want dignified and fulfilling work at scale, helping young people, one by one, essential as that is, will never be enough. We have to take on the systems around them."

Sewit Ahderom
President and CEO
Mastercard Foundation



Sewit Ahderom, President and CEO, Mastercard Foundation.
Photo: Mugisha Fred Shiru and Manirakiza Etienne

Young people were at the center of the Summit. Representing more than a quarter of participants, young leaders contributed lived experience, challenged conventional thinking, and helped shape discussions throughout the day.

> **"Nothing for us without us. If we truly want young businesses to thrive, then the ecosystem around us must intentionally work with us."**
>
> Adetunde Ademefun, Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities, Nigeria

Three cross-cutting areas of convergence, **which align with established evidence**, provided a shared lens for the discussions and for identifying priorities for collective action.



1. The informal economy is not peripheral to African economies; it is central to how work, enterprise, and livelihoods are organized. Participants noted that a large share of young people already earn, learn, trade, and build businesses through informal systems. The issue, therefore, is not simply how to move people out of informality, but how to improve the conditions in which informal workers and enterprises operate. This means strengthening productivity, market access, skills recognition, finance, social protection, and pathways to growth, while making formalization gradual, useful, and responsive to the realities of young people and small businesses.



2. Governments have a decisive role in creating the conditions for dignified and fulfilling work. Public institutions are needed to coordinate across education, finance, infrastructure, labour markets, trade, and social protection; use evidence to guide policy; and create the regulatory and investment conditions that allow young people and enterprises to succeed. This role must be inclusive and consultative, with young people engaged not only as beneficiaries but as economic actors, innovators, and partners in design and implementation.



3. Digital transformation is already reshaping work and enterprise, but access remains uneven. Participants saw digital technologies as a powerful route to wider markets, greater productivity, financial inclusion, and new pathways for young entrepreneurs and workers. At the same time, they stressed that many young people remain excluded by gaps in electricity, affordable connectivity, devices, digital literacy, advanced skills, and trusted digital public infrastructure. They pointed to a dual priority: invest in the foundations of digital participation while building the African institutions, capabilities, and governance systems needed to ensure digital transformation expands opportunity rather than deepens inequality.

Within this broader context, participants identified four priority shifts where more focused collective action could help expand opportunities for young people. These shifts reflect areas of emerging convergence across the pre-Summit country dialogues and Summit discussions. Rather than a definitive agenda, they offer a starting point for collaboration.

Emerging Priorities for Collective Action



Align education systems and pathways with high-growth sectors, emerging green economies, and evolving market realities.



Build financing pathways that fit the realities of young enterprises.



Connect young entrepreneurs to the markets and support they need to grow.



Design inclusion into systems.

Align education systems and pathways with high-growth sectors, emerging green economies, and evolving market realities.

Participants pointed to a broader need for education and skills systems to adapt more quickly to changing labour market realities. Across the continent, education systems are often evaluated on outputs, particularly enrolment and graduation rates, rather than on whether young people make successful transitions into further education, training, or work. Most countries are not systematically collecting and using labour market data on where skill gaps exist, which sectors are growing, and what employers need. Without that information feeding back into curriculum design and education financing, there is a mismatch between what education delivers and what the labour market needs. A specific point was made about secondary education. Across many African countries, it serves as a critical platform for employment and further opportunities for young people. However, education systems do not always equip students with the skills, information, or support required to navigate post-school pathways.

> **"...education systems are preparing young people for today's opportunity, but not for tomorrow."**
>
> Hon. Joseph Nsengimana, Minister of Education, Rwanda



(Left) Uwase S. Arlette, Moderator and (Right) Hon. Joseph Nsengimana, Minister of Education, Rwanda.
Photo: Mugisha Fred Shiru and Manirakiza Etienne

There was a recurring call, and examples of emerging practice, for greater industry involvement in curriculum design. Governments and education institutions need to work more closely with private sector partners to co-design training that reflects evolving labour market needs, so that young people graduate with skills that match demand. Participants also highlighted the potential for performance-based financing, where funding is tied in part to employment and work-readiness outcomes rather than enrolment alone.

Skills development must also be anchored in what Africa needs now, while building towards what it will need next. Participants noted with concern that technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and apprenticeships are still too often seen as secondary options rather than viable and respected pathways into work. This matters particularly given that many working-age Africans have not progressed beyond primary or secondary education and work in the informal economy. Participants pointed to agriculture, agro-processing, and manufacturing as important sectors for generating dignified and fulfilling work, alongside the need to prepare young people for emerging opportunities and changing economies.

Implications for action: Participants were clear that strong curricula and frameworks already exist in many contexts. The gap often lies in implementation at country level. Improving young people's transitions into work will require:

1. Institutionalizing demand-driven curricula co-designed with industry and sector leaders.
2. Building labour-market intelligence and longitudinal tracer systems so curriculum design is evidence-informed.
3. Expanding TVET, apprenticeships, and work-based learning opportunities as credible pathways into growth sectors.

Build financing pathways that fit the realities of young enterprises.

Access to finance discussions were driven by a stark systemic tension. While financial inclusion has increased considerably, particularly through mobile money and community-based mechanisms, access to formal credit and bank services remains low. Young businesses encounter a financial system designed, from central financial regulations to bank practices, to provide credit to larger, established clients.

This is not simply a youth employment issue. It means that some of the economy's most dynamic and productive actors are being overlooked. Young people create products, provide essential services in their communities, and innovate around some of the most pressing challenges on the continent. Entrepreneurs stressed that while skills development is important, access to finance is now a critical missing piece, with many businesses unable to grow, formalize, or create jobs because of limited access to capital.

Addressing this tension will require work across several dimensions:

Policy innovation: The main structural barriers to MSME finance fall into three broad areas: regulatory frameworks, including collateral rules, interest-rate settings, and risk-assessment standards; limited public and private infrastructure, particularly weak data and information systems; and the scarcity of affordable, long-term local capital driven by macroeconomic constraints.

Equipping the financial system to "see" young businesses: One of the strongest messages emerging from the discussions was the opportunity to use alternative approaches to credit assessment. Transaction histories, mobile money records, receivables, and platform data were identified as practical ways to reach informal and rural enterprises, refugees, and young people without conventional identification. Digital technologies, alternative data, and AI-driven risk assessment can help financial institutions better understand and finance businesses that have traditionally been considered too risky.

> **"Finance that is fit for purpose is very important, and understanding the informal sector [and financing needed for that sector] is also critical."**
>
> Agwu Kalu Ibe, Founder & CEO, Level Up Recyclers

The right type of capital: There is no one-size-fits-all financing solution. Businesses require different forms of capital at different stages of growth, from early-stage venture capital to private equity for more established firms. Strengthening this financing continuum is essential to helping businesses scale and create jobs. Capital alone is not enough. The right capital must reach the right business at the right time.

Patient capital and stronger relationships: Participants stressed that many young entrepreneurs need patient capital that reflects the timeline of business growth and the realities of early-stage risk, rather than loans with high interest rates, rigid repayment schedules, and collateral requirements they cannot meet. They also called for greater openness between entrepreneurs and financial institutions, so that banks better understand young businesses and young people better understand the requirements of the financial system.

The role of development finance: Participants highlighted the unique role of development finance institutions (DFIs) in absorbing higher risk, providing catalytic capital, and helping bridge informal activity into formal finance. They stressed that financing women-led and youth-led enterprises should be treated as a core strategy, with funds structured to reach early-stage entrepreneurs rather than only already proven businesses.
Participants also noted that many DFIs continue to operate with outdated mandates and risk frameworks. They called for a more collaborative ecosystem approach in which DFIs, governments, foundations, and private sector actors align their respective roles and comparative advantages.

Implications for action: Country dialogues, Summit sessions, and table discussions converged around three critical pathways for building finance products and services that meet the needs and lived realities of young enterprises:

1. Policy and regulatory reform to push finance toward underserved groups.
2. Product and delivery redesign to make finance fit enterprise realities.
3. Integrated systems and market-linkage support rather than fragmented interventions.

Connect young entrepreneurs to the markets and support they need to grow.

Participants consistently identified a gap in how young entrepreneurs are supported. Too often, young people receive startup grants or seed funding and are then left to navigate an unfamiliar and unforgiving business environment on their own. The expectation that a small grant will become a profitable enterprise within a few years, particularly without sustained mentorship, market linkages, or wider ecosystem support, was widely regarded as unrealistic.

Participants called instead for more holistic support that combines financing with business development, peer networks, mentoring from experienced entrepreneurs, and the social infrastructure that helps young people sustain momentum when conditions become difficult. They also highlighted the need for practical support to help young entrepreneurs work effectively with government institutions, comply with regulations, access public services, and navigate administrative challenges ethically and professionally.

Access to markets remains a particularly critical challenge. When market systems are weak, young enterprises struggle to connect with reliable buyers or enter established supply chains. The resulting lack of predictable demand makes these businesses appear riskier to lenders, further constraining their access to credit.

Participants also stressed the need to close the information gap. Information about finance and business support needs to go beyond websites and physical branches and reach young entrepreneurs through the channels they use every day, including community radio, WhatsApp voice messages in local languages, social media, and trusted community intermediaries.

Intra-African trade presents another opportunity. Participants noted that weak local demand and perceptions that locally produced goods are of lower quality or higher cost can restrict market access and trade competitiveness. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers an opportunity for young entrepreneurs to reach regional markets, but participants stressed that young businesses, particularly those led by women and underserved groups, will need deliberate support to meet regional and global standards.

Implications for action: Market access should be treated as a core pillar alongside skills and finance, while recognizing that young entrepreneurs also need the wider support required to take advantage of those markets.

1. Use technology and digital marketplaces to connect young entrepreneurs, including those in the informal economy, to buyers beyond their immediate locality and potentially to regional and global markets.
2. Implement AfCFTA instruments to reduce non-tariff barriers and simplify cross-border trade for youth-owned MSMEs.
3. Deploy public procurement as a market-access tool, ensuring fair or preferential access for young businesses.



Photo: Mugisha Fred Shiru and Manirakiza Etienne

Design inclusion into systems.

Inclusion was highlighted consistently throughout the discussions, particularly through the lessons shared by the Mastercard Foundation and the strong voices of disability and refugee advocates. Two levers of change emerged as central:

1. Closing the gap between policy commitments and institutional capacity. Inclusion measures in education and employment often exist on paper, but the institutional capacity to make those commitments real is often under-resourced, fragmented, and poorly adapted to the realities of different groups. Participants made an important distinction between being reached and being included. Young people with disabilities, young women, or young refugees may be trained and counted, yet remain outside stable, respected work, held back less by their skills than by the wider architecture around work: transport, legal identity, care responsibilities, and social norms.

> **"Disability inclusion is an economic investment that unlocks talent, productivity and growth, not a charitable obligation."**
>
> Amena El-Saie, Chief Executive Officer, Helm

2. Inclusion is an economic imperative. Young women, young people with disabilities, refugees, and displaced persons make up a significant share of the workforce. Exclusion is therefore not only a question of fairness. It also represents a loss of talent, productivity, and growth.

This same lens applies across the other priority shifts. Financial products, education systems, and market-access mechanisms need to be designed around these realities from the outset, rather than adapted later.

Implications for action: Participants called for a shift from add-on approaches to embedding inclusion in the design of policies, programs, infrastructure, and financial services, particularly for young people who are furthest from opportunity. Concrete progress can begin with:

1. **Refugees:** Reform ID and collateral requirements to enable access to finance and formal employment.
2. **Young women:** Budget for childcare, safe transport, and flexible schedules to support participation.
3. **People with disabilities:** Enforce accessibility standards and make assistive technology affordable.

> **"It is so much more difficult for a refugee to access a job or become an entrepreneur. Barriers arise from ambiguous regulatory interpretation, inconsistent recognition of documentation, mobile infrastructure... beyond access to legal frameworks to work it's the access to documentation."**
>
> Anonymous Slido contribution



Photo: Mugisha Fred Shiru and Manirakiza Etienne

Closing Reflections

"Skills training without market access, finance without enterprise capability, entrepreneurship support without addressing the conditions around it, each one on its own managed to get us some partial progress. What worked was connecting these pieces."

Daniel Hailu, Executive Director, Impact, Evidence and Learning, Mastercard Foundation



Daniel Hailu, Executive Director, Impact, Evidence and Learning, Mastercard Foundation.
Photo: Mugisha Fred Shiru and Manirakiza Etienne

The Young Africa Works Summit reaffirmed that enabling dignified and fulfilling work for young people at scale cannot be achieved by one institution alone. Across the discussions, there was clear convergence on the need to move beyond single interventions and address the deeper systems, institutions, and policy environments that shape young people's access to opportunity. Importantly, inclusion cannot be an afterthought. Young women, rural youth, persons with disabilities, refugees, and displaced young people must be intentionally centered in the design of policies, programs, and systems from the outset.

As this work moves forward, the four priorities that emerged provide a starting point for practical collective action.

"One of the most significant moments of the Summit was the opportunity to engage directly with high-level decision-makers. We were able to share our expectations, express our concerns, and contribute to building shared solutions. It is this participatory approach that will make it possible to turn ideas into concrete actions."

Reflections from Bamba Kadim, youth leader, following the Summit.



Creating impact together.