

“I Want to be an Entrepreneur”: How youth aspirations and perspectives on dignified and fulfilling work inform investments in youth empowerment

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POLICY BRIEF

Executive Summary

Youth unemployment in Africa is an ongoing challenge that policy makers are grappling with. The numerous policy interventions and programmes including loans and grants for business and entrepreneurship have not created enough jobs for young women and men on the continent. Many policy interventions are framed towards enhancing skills sets for young people but it is not clear the extent to which they concentrate on the skills that are driven by the demands of the labour market. This has contributed to a mismatch between the available work opportunities *and* what young people are interested in. Through community and youth-led participatory research on understanding Africa’s youth aspirations and resilience across seven countries, namely, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia and Senegal, this policy brief **posits that understanding young women and men’s aspirations and their perspectives on dignified and fulfilling work offers useful insights in determining the kind of investments capable of producing more significant impact.** The evidence indicates that young African women and men are uniquely positioned to understand, respond to and pursue their aspirations and achieve dignified and fulfilling work when their voices are translated in policy decisions. They can do so with the support of governments, development and civil society organizations and the private sector.

Key Messages

- Insights into youth aspirations and resilience offer an evidence-informed pathway to responding to the growing youth unemployment challenge in Africa.
- Opportunities for dignified and fulfilling and secure jobs that offer sufficient remuneration, and respectable work are important aspirations of both young women and men
- Policy interventions that support young women and men to pursue their entrepreneurship aspirations, produce greater impact.



“ My biggest aspiration is to be able to solve a particular problem that I have been able to identify and then along the line get recognized for my impact and get some money along the line. So, I think that is my biggest aspiration

– Young Man, Ghana.

What young women and men say about their work aspirations

Young women and men across Africa have diverse and high aspirations for successful futures. These can be classified broadly to include creating wealth and being rich, starting businesses, supporting families, and participating in the efforts that contribute to community welfare and development. Other aspirations include leadership, societal recognition and providing solutions to prevailing challenges.

Interviews with young women and men, capturing their voices, show that despite challenges, they have high aspirations, energy, and ambition.

“My aspirations for tomorrow are to become a leader or work for the government” – Young woman, Rwanda

Young women and men aspire to work opportunities that generate fair compensation and enable self-reliance, independence, and ability to cater not only for their own socio-economic needs, but also their families. The evidence on young women and men’s aspirations is useful in understanding the various pathways of work that youth across continent are seeking. While, employment either by government or the private sector still remains the most preferred work, there is sense in which the voices are shifting to amplify entrepreneurship and self-employment as alternative forms of work. Businesses such as trading in commodities, agri-business especially processing and distribution value chains, logistics, as well as gig-work constitute some of those alternatives.

Perspectives on Dignified and Fulfilling Work

Despite great diversity in terms of socio-economic backgrounds, levels of education and literacy, as well as exposure, young women and men in Africa demonstrate shared perspectives regarding dignified and fulfilling work. It is seen as more than just a means of earning a living but as a pathway to personal social goals and career growth. Dignified and fulfilling job is therefore defined as work that is secure and stable; offers sufficient income that reflects one’s skills and experience; aligns to one’s sense of purpose and provide personal satisfaction; where they are respected and valued; and where they have opportunity for career and personal growth. They believe that employers should recognize their unique skills and

Introduction

African countries just like the rest of the world are experiencing an increasing unemployment rate, particularly for their fast-growing youth population. According to a report by the [International Labour Organization](#), although youth unemployment in Africa remains below the global average, - 12.7% in Africa compared to 14.9% globally – there are substantial differences across countries. Moreover, the low unemployment rates especially in sub-Saharan Africa is partially a factor of the high informality and underemployment as many young women and men engage in insecure, unsafe, and low productive jobs, to earn a living. Similarly, a critical component is also missing in the policy interventions on youth employment which is the incorporation of the voices of young men and women (youth) in discussions about their aspirations and livelihoods. The [statistics](#) indicate that the unemployment rate is higher among young women than their male counterparts. Two out of three women between the age of 15–35 years are in precarious working conditions, receive low earnings, and have limited social security arrangements. This is ostensibly contributed to by socio-cultural and religious beliefs that still hinder women from equal participation in the labour market as well as the fact that women generally have low coping strategies to a variety of social, economic and environmental shocks.

“ I want to be an entrepreneur. I want to be my own boss. I want to have a poultry farm, radio station, and a fuel station

– Young man with disability, Kenya.

abilities, acknowledge their worth and create an environment that appreciates their contributions, knowledge and innovative ideas.

“A dignified and fulfilling work from our perspective is first work that pays your bills... your house rent, your car fuelling, good clothes, etc. gives you time to also rest... pay you enough to solve your basic problems, like family problems, and pay you enough to make you have some savings. Then, in that work, you're not embarrassed or harassed...” – Young Man, Ghana

“A dignified work is any work in proportion to your educational qualification without “wuruwuru” in it...” – Young Women, Nigeria.

“For me it is about a job where you get enough money and also the people that you work give you all the respect you deserve whether you are young or old, male or female.” – Young woman, Uganda.

“It's a job which you do and can bring some development. You can find someone who has worked for 30 years, and another has worked for 10 years but the development he has done is far from that of a person who has worked for 30 years. You also find a person working as a matatu tout but the development he has done is more than the person in the office.” – Young man, Kenya

Young women and men also believe that dignified and fulfilling work should offer them freedom and ability to 'think outside the box' and apply their own creativity to solve problems. For instance, when asked why they prefer owning and running their own businesses rather than traditional employment, those who responded pointed out issues like workplace 'rigidity' and bureaucracy as major hindrances to their growth.

“I quit a good job because it was not allowing me to be who I wanted....I had to tender my resignation because I needed freedom ad not to work in an environment that could not allow me to be myself. They had a template of what I am supposed to be....When I quite, I open a cosmetics shop and I really like what I do now” - Young women, Kenya.

Constraints to achieving aspirations

Young women and men face several constraints, including unequal access to formal education, poverty and limited access to financial resources such as affordable business loans, weak empowerment and mentorship, lack of equal opportunities for meaningful civic participation, and gender discrimination, among others. Young people across Africa demonstrate a clear awareness of these constraints. Of these many constraints, the biggest and most commonly mentioned is finance.

“The biggest challenge is finance... because quite several youths come from low-income families” – Young male, Nigeria

“Despite the fact that majority of us have degrees from different colleges, most of us lack entrepreneurial skills, awareness of what it takes to start a business, and access to available business development support” – Young Female, Ghana.

To some, it seems there is no hope and they sometimes resort to unhealthy ways such as drug abuse and addiction to cope.

“There is nothing to hope for. And because of that many of our friends have ended up depressed. Here in Adama, it became common for young people to get into substance addiction to get over boredom and depression. What else can they do? You can't blame them” Youth woman, Ethiopia.

The foregoing statements resonate with many young people across the continent. While some young people demonstrate strong resilience and capacities to navigate these challenges, most can only overcome them with targeted mentorship and support. Young people's inability to navigate these challenges, often results in a vicious cycle of continuous poverty, inequality and exclusion which further pose considerable systemic and development threats for governments across the continent.

Recommendations

Deeper insights into youth aspirations and their perspectives of dignified and fulfilling work offer useful lessons that potentially addresses the youth employment gap in Africa. Practically, aspirations are important pointers to what young women and men want and how that can be harnessed for their empowerment and growth. Based on the analysis of the above insights, the authors make the following recommendation targeted at initiatives of governments and development partners:

- **Create mechanisms that enable financial access through patient capital such as loans and grants dedicated to supporting young women and men to start and grow their businesses.**
- **Create business hubs where young people can access business training and entrepreneurial mentorship** to support skilling and re-skilling of young men and women whose ambitions are to own business enterprises. These hubs should focus on training on business development, financial literacy and management and other relevant skills.
- **Increase investment in high potential sectors such as manufacturing, modernised agriculture and agribusiness**, commodity trade, transport, ICT among others as ways of expanding employment opportunities for young women and men across all cadres.
- **Re-shape the policy environment to be more responsive the needs of young women and men** and seek to support their journey in achieving their aspirations and expand work opportunities both through entrepreneurship and traditional employment.
- **Promote and prioritise equity and inclusion** to ensure young women and men who are affected by intersecting situations such as youth living with disability, those lacking formal education, those from ethnic minorities, survivors of violence and those who became parents while young are identified and responded to.
- **Entrench affirmative action** to strengthen access to credit resources and education, health, empowerment opportunities and other drivers of resilience.

Further Reading

- Doh D., Atela M., Thamari M., Makokha R., Otieno J., and Kaketch J. (2022). From 'Waithood to Hustling': Africa's youth quest for dignified and fulfilling work. A synthesis report. Partnership for Africa Social and Governance Research (PASGR) – forthcoming

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