



Member of  
JA Worldwide

## **WHITE PAPER ON JA AFRICA STAKEHOLDER CONVENING**

### **Investing in Youth Skills Development and Entrepreneurship Education in Africa as a Pathway to Unlocking the Continent's Potential**

## Contents

Overview of the White Paper.....	3
Approach and Methodology.....	4
Demographic and Socio-economic Context in Africa.....	4
Defining Marginalized Youth in Africa and why they matter in Education Service delivery.....	6
Ongoing Efforts to Improve Youth Capacity and Education.....	7
Barriers to Education, Skills Development, Entrepreneurship Training and Employment .....	10
Solutions to Identified Barriers.....	14
Call to Action .....	16
Conclusion.....	19

## Overview of the White Paper

This white paper emanates from a high-level stakeholder convening held on December 6, 2024, in Port-Louis, Mauritius. The event brought together an interdisciplinary cohort of thought leaders, including policymakers, development practitioners, private sector executives, academic experts, and representatives of civil society organizations from ten countries across Sub-Saharan Africa. The convening aimed to deliberate on the pivotal role of youth skills development and entrepreneurship education as cornerstones for driving Africa's sustainable socio-economic transformation.

The discussions at the convening underscored the urgency of addressing systemic barriers that impede youth potential, particularly within contexts marked by rapid demographic growth, evolving labour market demands, and persistent socio-economic inequalities. This white paper synthesizes the insights and actionable recommendations generated from the convening, focusing on five interrelated thematic areas:

- **Expanding Access to Entrepreneurship Education:** Examining the existing gaps in entrepreneurship education and proposing scalable, context-specific interventions that equip youth with the knowledge, tools, and mentorship needed to navigate and succeed in competitive markets.
- **Enhancing Educational and Skills Development Opportunities for Marginalized Youth:** Analysing structural inequities and designing targeted strategies to ensure inclusivity in skill-building programs, especially for young women, rural populations, and those affected by conflict or displacement.
- **Improving Access to Affordable Financing for Start-ups:** Investigating the barriers to capital access for youth-led start-ups and recommending innovative financing models, such as blended finance, impact investments, and public-private partnerships, to foster entrepreneurial ecosystems.
- **Strengthening Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Assessing the synergies and disconnects between private sector actors, public institutions, donor agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities. Proposing frameworks to enhance collaboration and ensure resource optimization for sustainable youth development initiatives.
- **Integrating Technology and Innovation into Education and Skill Development:** Exploring the transformative potential of digital tools, artificial intelligence, and emerging technologies in revolutionizing education delivery and creating adaptive, future-ready skill sets for youth.

The white paper posits that strategic investments in youth skills development and entrepreneurship education are not only critical to unlocking Africa's vast youth potential but are also essential for fostering innovative, locally grounded solutions to entrenched development challenges. Such investments have the dual potential of catalysing sustainable economic growth and addressing structural poverty by breaking cycles of generational inequities.

Furthermore, the sections of this document are designed to be both interdependent and reflective of the heterogeneous perspectives of stakeholders

from diverse sectors and geographic contexts. This deliberate heterogeneity enriches the analysis and reinforces the urgency for holistic, inclusive approaches to youth empowerment.

### Approach and Methodology

To create a well-structured engagement, the event combined structured and participatory techniques to foster meaningful dialogue and drive actionable outcomes. The core methodological components included:

- **Panel Discussions:** Subject matter experts from NGOs, government agencies, academia, and the private sector provided insights into systemic challenges, shared best practices, and identified opportunities for reform. These discussions set the stage for deeper exploration of thematic areas.
- **Breakout Sessions:** Smaller, focused discussions allowed stakeholders to delve into specific issues such as curriculum alignment, sustainable funding mechanisms, the integration of technology in education, and addressing gender disparities. These sessions fostered collaborative problem-solving and encouraged the co-creation of innovative solutions tailored to local contexts.
- **Plenary Sessions:** Findings from the breakout groups were presented, consolidated, and analysed during plenary discussions. These sessions provided a platform for cross-sectoral feedback and enabled the development of a cohesive strategy addressing the identified challenges.

The methodology emphasized participatory approaches, ensuring that diverse perspectives were represented. Structured frameworks, such as SWOT analyses and root cause identification, were employed to systematically unpack barriers to youth skills development and entrepreneurship education.

### Demographic and Socio-economic Context in Africa

Africa's demographic landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, with the continent home to the world's youngest population. Over 60% of its 1.4 billion people are under the age of 25, a proportion significantly higher than that of any other region (World Economic Forum, 2023)<sup>1</sup>. Projections indicate that by 2050, Africa's population will approach 2.5 billion, with its youth cohort surpassing 840 million (UNECA, 2024)<sup>2</sup>. Unlike the Global North, which has a high median age and a slow growth rate, Africa's median age of just 19 years highlights the scale of its youth bulge (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2019)<sup>3</sup>. This rapid expansion presents both a challenge and an opportunity, requiring deliberate policy interventions to ensure that Africa's young workforce becomes a driver of economic growth rather than a demographic burden. However, the continent faces critical employment and entrepreneurial barriers that hinder economic inclusion (Kappel, 2021)<sup>4</sup>. Youth unemployment remains alarmingly high, exceeding 45.5% in South Africa

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/08/africa-youth-global-growth-digital-economy/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uneca.org/stories/%28blog%29-as-africa%E2%80%99s-population-crosses-1.5-billion%2C-the-demographic-window-is-opening-getting>

<sup>3</sup> <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/news/2019/africas-first-challenge-youth-bulge-stuck-waithood>

<sup>4</sup> <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/18299.pdf>

(Department of Statistics, 2024)<sup>5</sup>. In Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, [more than 80 million young people](#) are struggling with unemployment, out of a total youth population of 151 million with official statistics estimating youth unemployment around 8.6% as at Q3 in 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023)<sup>6</sup>, while in Rwanda, it reached 16.6% significantly higher than the national average (Rwanda National Institute of Statistics, 2024). Despite steady economic growth, job creation has not kept pace with the expanding workforce, leaving millions of young people in precarious economic conditions (ILO, 2020)<sup>7</sup>.

A major contributor to the employment crisis is the persistent mismatch between education and labour market needs. While higher education enrolment has increased, more than 50% of African graduates lack employable skills (Sumberg *et al*, 2021)<sup>8</sup>. The curriculum in many institutions remains disconnected from industry demands, leaving employers struggling to find qualified workers. Meanwhile, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs are underfunded and misaligned with job market needs, further widening the skills gap. Beyond education, limited private sector engagement in workforce development exacerbates the employment challenge. Only 15% of African countries have formal mechanisms that allow businesses to influence education policies and skills training (ILO, 2020).

Another defining feature of Africa's labour market is the dominance of informal employment, which absorbs nearly 95% of young workers aged 15 to 24 (Irwin *et al*, 2018)<sup>9</sup>. While informal jobs provide an income source, they lack essential protections such as social security, health insurance, and legal contracts. Workers in these roles often experience low wages, unpredictable income streams, and poor working conditions, making financial stability elusive. The absence of structured career progression further limits upward mobility, trapping many young people in low-productivity roles with little opportunity for professional growth. Geographical disparities further compound employment challenges. While urban centers offer greater economic prospects, rural youth face significantly higher unemployment due to inadequate infrastructure, limited internet connectivity, and fewer opportunities. Poor transport networks and unreliable electricity make it difficult for rural entrepreneurs and workers to engage in productive activities, leading to high migration rates in search of better prospects. These challenges deepen income inequality and perpetuate cycles of poverty across generations (ILO, 2022).

Access to quality education and skills development remains a significant challenge. Approximately 75% of youth do not possess secondary school-level skills (MATSH, 2023)<sup>10</sup> while tertiary education enrolment remains critically low at only 9%

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=17266>

<sup>6</sup> National Bureau of Statistics (2023), Nigeria Labour Force Statistics Report Q3, NBS Nigeria

<sup>7</sup> Report on employment in Africa (Re-Africa) – tackling the youth employment challenge – International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2020

<sup>8</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dpr.12528>

<sup>9</sup> Irwin, S., Mader, P. and Flynn, J. (2018). How youth-specific is Africa's youth employment challenge? K4D Emerging Issues Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies

(UNESCO, 2024)<sup>11</sup>. Financial barriers, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic inequalities prevent many young people from continuing their education, reducing their employment prospects (Zreik *et al*, 2024)<sup>12</sup>. Gender disparities further exacerbate the issue. In West and Central Africa, only 33% of girls complete secondary education (GPE, 2024)<sup>13</sup>. Structural barriers such as early marriage, caregiving responsibilities, and gender discrimination in the labour market disproportionately affect young women, leading to a higher proportion of women classified as Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET). The NEET rate for sub-Saharan Africa stood at 21.9% in 2023, surpassing the global average of 20.4% (ILO, 2024)<sup>14</sup> and this number does not reflect the millions of youths who are underemployed and working in undignified conditions.

Compounding these challenges is Africa's digital divide. Only 33% of African households have internet access (Munga, 2022)<sup>15</sup>, restricting young people's ability to acquire digital skills, apply for jobs, or engage in remote work and digital entrepreneurship. In an increasingly digitalized global economy, limited connectivity prevents many young Africans from accessing online education and employment opportunities, widening the socio-economic divide. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach that integrates education reforms, workforce development, private sector engagement, and digital transformation. Governments must invest in industry-aligned TVET programs, improve internet connectivity, and strengthen policies that promote youth entrepreneurship. Expanding digital literacy and access to technology will enable young people to participate in the global economy, while private sector collaboration can help bridge the skills gap and create employment pathways.

Africa's youth population presents a vast economic opportunity, but without strategic interventions, the risk of socio-economic instability looms large. By prioritizing skills development, job creation, and digital inclusion, African nations can harness their demographic dividend to drive sustainable growth and prosperity.

### **Defining Marginalized Youth in Africa and Why They Matter in Education Service Delivery**

The employment and education challenges facing Africa's youth are particularly pronounced for marginalized groups, who experience systemic exclusion and inequities that limit their access to essential services. These young people face intersecting barriers shaped by socio-economic status, gender, geographic location, disability, ethnicity, and conflict-related factors. Without targeted interventions, their exclusion threatens to undermine Africa's broader

---

<sup>12</sup> Zreik, Mohamad & Iqbal, Badar & Hassan, Munir & Marzuki, Sharifah. (2024). Infrastructure development, inequality, and employment in Sub-Saharan Africa from the professional perspectives of Kenya, Ghana, and Tanzania. *Discover Global Society*. 2. 10.1007/s44282-024-00103-2.

<sup>13</sup><https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/educated-healthy-and-thriving-adolescents-and-young-people-commitment-west-and-central-africa>

<sup>14</sup>International Labour Organisation (2024). *Global Employment Trends for Youth*. ILO Brief. Global

<sup>15</sup> Munga, J. (2022). *To Close Africa's Digital Divide, Policy Must Address the Usage Gap*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

development goals and impede efforts to harness the continent's demographic dividend. Addressing their needs is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for driving equitable development.

Marginalized youth in Africa encompass diverse groups that share common characteristics of exclusion and limited access to opportunities. Specific groups of marginalized youth identified by stakeholders include:

- **Youth in Poverty:** Over 70% of Africa's youth live on less than \$2 a day, making education and skills development inaccessible (Ogunleye, 2023)<sup>16</sup>. Many are forced into child labour or informal employment, reinforcing intergenerational poverty.
- **Rural Youth:** With secondary school attendance rates lower than urban areas, rural youth face infrastructure deficits, long travel distances to schools, and fewer economic opportunities.
- **Young Women and Girls:** Gender disparities in education, early marriage, and cultural norms restrict opportunities for young women, leaving them overrepresented in vulnerable employment<sup>17</sup>.
- **Out-of-School Girls:** These young women face compounded barriers such as poverty, cultural restrictions, and early pregnancies, leading to lifelong socio-economic disadvantages.
- **Youth with Disabilities:** Structural barriers such as inaccessible infrastructure and societal stigma prevent young people with disabilities from accessing education and employment.
- **Youth Affected by Conflict and Displacement:** Over 16.6million displaced youth in Africa experience disrupted education and psychological distress, limiting their ability to secure stable futures (UNICEF, 2024)<sup>18</sup>.
- **Unemployed and Underemployed Youth:** Youth unemployment remains at 12%, but underemployment in the informal sector is significantly higher, leaving many in precarious job conditions.
- **Ethnic and Linguistic Minorities:** Youth from minority backgrounds face discrimination and lack access to education that incorporates indigenous languages and cultural knowledge, leading to high dropout rates.

### Ongoing Efforts to Improve Youth Capacity and Education

Across Africa, numerous initiatives have been launched to tackle the challenges of access to education, entrepreneurship training, and skills development. These efforts are crucial in addressing the gap between education systems and the evolving demands of the workforce.

---

<sup>16</sup> Ogunleye, E.K. (2023). Leveraging Potentials of the Youth for Inclusive, Green and Sustainable Development in Africa, Global Community of Practice Policy Dialogue, African Development Bank.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-and-education/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/resources/data-snapshot-of-migrant-and-displaced-children-in-africa/>

Speaking at the event, Dr. Suwaiba Said Ahmad, the Nigerian Minister of State for Education, who was the guest of honour, highlighted that ***Africa's greatest resource is not buried within the continent but exists in its people***. She emphasized that ***"Africa's potential is not self-activating but requires deliberate effort to be unearthed"***. Drawing from a recent study on learning outcomes in Nigeria, she mentioned that 47% of young people in schools were learning-poor, indicating a crisis in the education sector. The study also revealed that teachers often lack the necessary tools to facilitate meaningful and engaging learning experiences for diverse learners. She noted that ***"when education is relatable, it becomes irresistible"***. Education and skills development, she asserted, require a collaborative effort from all stakeholders to deliver real value.

This strong focus on relevance and collaboration is evident in the significant progress made across the continent, where governments and institutions are actively implementing strategies to improve education and workforce readiness. Key areas identified by stakeholders include:

- **Expansion of TVET Programs:** Many African countries are prioritizing Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a key strategy to bridge the gap between traditional academic education and practical, job-ready skills. With youth unemployment on the rise, TVET programs provide a viable pathway for equipping young people with industry-relevant competencies that enhance their employability and entrepreneurial prospects. Nations such as Kenya, Rwanda, and Ghana have made significant strides in expanding and reforming their TVET sectors. Rwanda's National Skills Development Policy has facilitated the establishment of technical training institutes aligned with labour market demands, offering specialized courses in construction, engineering, ICT, and hospitality. These programs ensure that graduates possess the practical skills needed to integrate seamlessly into the workforce. Similarly, Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) emphasizes hands-on learning and problem-solving, preparing students to meet industry expectations upon graduation. Ghana has also ramped up its TVET Roadmap Initiative, focusing on modernizing infrastructure, improving instructor training, and increasing partnerships with industries to ensure a direct link between education and employment opportunities. This growing emphasis on TVET aligns with the view that education must be made relevant, practical, and engaging to address the continent's employment challenges. By investing in vocational education, African nations are not only enhancing workforce readiness but also fostering a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship among young people.
- **Curriculum Alignment:** With rapid technological advancements and shifting economic priorities, many African countries are modernizing their educational curricula to ensure alignment with evolving industry demands. Traditional syllabi, often criticized for being outdated and overly theoretical, are being replaced with skills-focused, technology-driven learning models that better equip students for the future of work. One notable example is South Africa, which has partnered with private sector players to integrate

renewable energy and sustainability studies into technical schools. This initiative ensures that students develop skills relevant to the green economy, which is expected to drive job creation in the coming decades. In addition, countries across Africa are reforming science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curricula to incorporate emerging fields such as coding, robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), and data analytics. These updates not only prepare students for careers in the digital economy but also encourage problem-solving, creativity, and innovation. Beyond STEM, some countries are also incorporating soft skills training, such as critical thinking, teamwork, and communication, into their educational systems to produce well-rounded graduates who can thrive in diverse work environments. Such reforms ensure that African youth remain competitive in a globalized labour market.

- **Mainstreaming Entrepreneurship Education:** With formal employment opportunities often failing to keep pace with population growth, many African governments are prioritizing entrepreneurship education as a means of fostering self-reliance and job creation. Entrepreneurship-focused training equips young people with the mindset, skills, and resources needed to start and sustain successful businesses, ultimately contributing to economic growth and poverty reduction. Programs such as Nigeria's YouWin initiative and Kenya's Kenya Youth Employment and Opportunities Project (KYEOP) provide aspiring entrepreneurs with access to mentorship, business incubation, and funding opportunities. These initiatives help young people develop viable business ideas, navigate regulatory processes, and build sustainable enterprises, reducing their reliance on traditional employment. Moreover, several African universities and vocational institutions are incorporating entrepreneurship modules into their curricula, ensuring that students graduate with both technical expertise and business acumen. Incubation hubs and innovation centers, supported by government and private sector partners, are also emerging across the continent to provide young entrepreneurs with workspace, networking opportunities, and access to venture capital. By mainstreaming entrepreneurship education, African nations are nurturing a generation of job creators rather than job seekers, accelerating economic transformation and reducing youth unemployment.
- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):** Governments are increasingly recognizing the value of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in addressing educational challenges and improving skills development. By leveraging private sector expertise, technology, and financial resources, PPPs have the potential to enhance learning outcomes, bridge resource gaps, and create sustainable education models. One successful example is Kenya's Digital Schools initiative, which is a partnership between Computer Aid International and ICDL, formerly known as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) has equipped thousands of schools with e-learning facilities, digital content, and internet access. This initiative enables teachers and students to tap into a vast range of online learning materials, virtual classrooms, and interactive lessons, improving the quality of education and

making learning more accessible, particularly in underserved communities. Similarly, in Uganda, technology companies are collaborating with the government to develop digital learning platforms, making educational resources available to students in remote and rural areas. These platforms offer courses in STEM, business, and vocational training, helping bridge the digital divide and expand access to quality education beyond urban centers. Beyond technology, PPPs in vocational training are also gaining momentum. Large corporations are partnering with TVET institutions to co-develop curricula, provide on-the-job training, and offer apprenticeships, ensuring that graduates are equipped with real-world, industry-specific skills. In sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and fintech, these collaborations are playing a pivotal role in preparing Africa's youth for employment and entrepreneurship.

- **Technology-Enabled Learning:** The proliferation of mobile technology is expanding educational access in underserved communities. Platforms like *Eneza Education*, operating in Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya, deliver educational content via mobile phones to students who lack traditional classrooms or internet access. These technological innovations reinforce the Minister's assertion that relatable education is essential for engagement and effectiveness. In addition, some African countries have made notable progress in addressing digital exclusion. Kenya and Rwanda, for instance, have implemented targeted initiatives to expand digital literacy and improve access to technology. Kenya's *Digital Economy Blueprint* outlines a strategic framework to foster digital innovation, enhance ICT infrastructure, and integrate digital skills training into education systems. Similarly, Rwanda's Vision 2050 strategy includes investments in nationwide broadband coverage and ICT training programs aimed at equipping young people with future-ready skills. These efforts demonstrate that with the right policies and investments, digital inclusion can be significantly improved.

### **Barriers to Education, Skills Development, Entrepreneurship Training and Employment**

Despite ongoing efforts, stakeholders identified a range of barriers that Africa's youth consistently face in their quest to access education, develop skills, and secure employment, self-employment, or further training. Among the barriers to education, skills development, entrepreneurship and employment identified include:

- **Fragmented Policies and Misaligned Curricula**  
Educational policies across African countries often fail to align with labour market demands, creating a persistent mismatch between the skills of graduates and the competencies required by employers. Many higher education institutions continue to emphasize theoretical knowledge over practical skills, leaving graduates ill-equipped for the evolving job market. Several reports indicate that many African university graduates lack employable skills due to outdated curricula that fail to incorporate essential elements such as digital literacy, problem-solving, and practical technical

training.<sup>19</sup> As a result, a significant portion of young graduates struggle to secure meaningful employment, leading to high levels of underemployment and job dissatisfaction.

The issue extends beyond universities to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs, which are meant to bridge the skills gap. However, several studies highlight that only 25% of Sub-Saharan African countries have fully aligned their TVET programs with industry needs, further deepening the crisis. Many TVET institutions lack modern equipment, updated syllabi, and direct linkages with employers, resulting in graduates who are underprepared for the demands of the workforce. Without structured industry partnerships, TVET programs fail to provide the hands-on training necessary for sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and technology, where demand for skilled workers continues to grow.

A major factor contributing to this misalignment is the inadequate collaboration between policymakers, academia, and industry stakeholders. Decision-making in education often occurs in isolation from labour market realities, leading to curricula that are disconnected from contemporary economic demands. Many African businesses struggle to find adequately trained workers, with a significant number of employers citing a skills gap as a primary constraint to growth. This disconnect is particularly evident in high-growth sectors such as information and communication technology (ICT), renewable energy, and advanced manufacturing, where rapid technological advancements demand continuous skills upgrading.

Furthermore, the absence of structured internship and apprenticeship programs limits students' exposure to real-world job settings. In many African countries, work-integrated learning opportunities remain scarce, preventing students from acquiring practical experience before graduation.

- **Resource Constraints and Infrastructure Deficiencies**

The evidence across most African countries confirms that government funding and programs alone are insufficient and may not be capable of systemically addressing youth unemployment. Despite numerous policy interventions, the persistent shortage of financial resources undermines the quality of education, enterprise development, and skills training programs across the continent. Structural inefficiencies, budgetary constraints, and competing national priorities often limit governments' ability to provide adequate support for youth employment initiatives.

One of the critical challenges in education is the inadequacy of funding for basic, secondary, and tertiary institutions, which directly impacts the quality of learning. According to UNESCO (2021)<sup>20</sup>, the average pupil-to-teacher ratio in Sub-Saharan Africa stands at 58:1, far higher than the global average of

---

<sup>19</sup> Africa Careers Network (2023). Employability In Africa: Career Opportunities and Job Placement Trends Report <https://careernetworks.africa/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/SUMMARY-Employability-Report-by-ACN-Summary-2023.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> [https://teachertaskforce.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/Closing%20the%20gap%20-%20Ensuring%20there%20are%20enough%20qualified%20and%20supported%20teachers\\_TTF%20advocacy%20brief%20July%202021\\_v2.pdf](https://teachertaskforce.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/Closing%20the%20gap%20-%20Ensuring%20there%20are%20enough%20qualified%20and%20supported%20teachers_TTF%20advocacy%20brief%20July%202021_v2.pdf)

24:1. This severe shortage of qualified teachers reduces individualized attention and learning effectiveness, particularly in rural and underserved communities. Additionally, the lack of adequate teaching materials, modern curricula, and proper school infrastructure further diminishes learning outcomes, leaving students ill-prepared for the labour market.

Beyond formal education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems also suffer from underinvestment. Many African countries lack well-equipped vocational training centers, restricting students' opportunities for hands-on learning. Several studies have found that only a small fraction of African students have access to functional science laboratories, workshops, and digital learning resources. This limited exposure to practical and technological skills widens the gap between education and labour market demands, making it difficult for young people to transition into employment or entrepreneurship successfully.

Moreover, inadequate access to finance and business support services further compounds the challenge. Many young entrepreneurs struggle to secure capital due to stringent lending conditions, high-interest rates, and limited government-backed financial schemes. Without sustained investment in youth-focused programs, such as business incubation, mentorship, and digital literacy initiatives, the employment crisis will persist.

- **Weak Private Sector Engagement in Education and Training**

Collaboration between governments, businesses, and educational institutions remains insufficient, restricting the private sector's ability to influence education policies, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship training. The limited integration of industry expertise into national education frameworks has resulted in a disconnect between the skills young people acquire in formal education and the demands of the labour market. This gap contributes to high youth unemployment rates, as many graduates lack the practical experience and technical competencies that employers seek.

Private sector involvement in shaping education strategies has been minimal. A broad analysis across the continent reveals that only a few African countries have established formal mechanisms for private sector engagement in national education strategy development. Without structured partnerships, businesses often struggle to engage in curriculum development, vocational training, and mentorship initiatives that could better align education with industry needs. This lack of coordination weakens efforts to create a workforce that is adaptable, innovative, and capable of driving economic transformation.

However, countries that have established strong, structured partnerships between industries and educational institutions have demonstrated tangible benefits. For instance, South Africa's National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) has effectively integrated employer-led training programs, leading to improved job placement rates among graduates (Department of Higher Education and Training, South Africa, 2021). Through this initiative, businesses actively contribute to designing training curricula, providing

apprenticeships, and offering on-the-job learning opportunities, ensuring that young people acquire industry-relevant skills.

Despite the success of such models, similar frameworks have not been widely replicated across the continent. In many African countries, inadequate policy frameworks, limited funding, and weak institutional linkages hinder the development of sustainable public-private partnerships in education and training. As a result, a significant proportion of young people remain without access to structured, industry-driven skills development programs, reducing their employability and entrepreneurial potential.

To address this challenge, governments must adopt policies that actively encourage private sector involvement in education and workforce training. Expanding employer-led initiatives, fostering industry-academia collaboration, and incentivizing businesses to invest in apprenticeships and entrepreneurship programs will be critical in closing the skills gap. By leveraging private sector expertise and resources, African nations can enhance the quality and relevance of education, ultimately equipping young people with the skills needed to succeed in a rapidly evolving global economy.

- **Digital Divide and Technological Exclusion**

Limited internet access and digital literacy gaps continue to pose significant barriers to youth participation in the digital economy, particularly affecting rural communities and young women. Without reliable connectivity and the necessary digital skills, many are unable to access online education, remote job opportunities, and entrepreneurial resources, widening the socio-economic divide.

Internet penetration in Africa remains low at only 33% with connectivity rates dropping sharply in rural areas where digital infrastructure remains underdeveloped<sup>21</sup>. This digital divide is even more pronounced among women and girls, further limiting their economic opportunities. A report by GSMA (2024)<sup>22</sup> found that only 32% of women in Sub-Saharan Africa own smartphones, significantly restricting their ability to engage in digital learning, access financial services, and participate in the growing online job market. The lack of electricity, affordable devices, and digital literacy barriers exacerbate this digital divide, creating additional obstacles to inclusive economic growth.

- **Social and Cultural Barriers to Education and Employment**

Deep-seated gender biases, societal perceptions, and economic constraints continue to exclude many young people, particularly girls, from education and skills training. UNICEF (2022) estimates that 35 million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa are out of school due to factors such as child marriage, household responsibilities, and financial constraints.

---

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.ses.com/blog/africa-connectivity-outlook-2022-and-beyond>

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2024.pdf?utm\\_source=website&utm\\_medium=button&utm\\_campaign=gender-gap-2024](https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2024.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=button&utm_campaign=gender-gap-2024)

Furthermore, rigid social norms often deter women from pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). A report by the African Union (2021) indicates that women constitute only 28% of STEM graduates in Africa, limiting their participation in high-growth industries. Addressing these barriers requires targeted policies that promote gender-inclusive education, provide scholarships for marginalized groups, and enforce legal protections against discriminatory practices.

- **Lack of Practical Experience and Work-Based Learning Opportunities**  
Many African graduates lack hands-on training and real-world experience, which contributes to high youth unemployment rates. In Sub-Saharan Africa, limited access to internships and apprenticeships further hinders young people's transition into the workforce. Successful models, such as Germany's dual education system, which combines classroom learning with workplace training, have proven effective in equipping students with employable skills. While countries like Ghana and Nigeria have introduced similar apprenticeship schemes, these programs remain underfunded and inconsistently implemented, limiting their overall impact.
- **Limited Funding for Entrepreneurship and Startups**  
High-interest rates and stringent lending criteria make it difficult for young entrepreneurs to access capital, hindering startup growth. In Sub-Saharan Africa, interest rates for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are significantly higher than in other regions, posing a major challenge for new businesses. Additionally, a large percentage of youth-led startups fail within the first three years due to financial constraints. Expanding access to affordable financing through venture capital, microfinance, and government-backed grants is essential to fostering youth entrepreneurship.

### **Solutions to Identified Barriers**

To address these barriers, stakeholders proposed the adoption of the following comprehensive and innovative approaches:

- **Policy Reform and Curriculum Alignment:** Governments should collaborate with industry experts and academic institutions to design adaptive educational policies that bridge the gap between education and employability. This includes aligning curricula with the evolving demands of the labour market, particularly in high-growth sectors. Incorporating digital skills and entrepreneurial competencies into core syllabi ensures that graduates possess practical and relevant skills. Moreover, these reforms should be underpinned by continuous feedback mechanisms to adjust curricula dynamically as market trends evolve. A multi-stakeholder task force could be established to oversee these reforms, ensuring inclusivity and alignment with national development goals.
- **Scalable Infrastructure Investments:** Investments in scalable, cost-effective educational infrastructure are essential to bridge access gaps, particularly in remote and underserved regions. Mobile classrooms equipped with modern learning tools can provide flexible learning solutions for nomadic or rural populations. Solar-powered e-learning centres can

mitigate challenges posed by unreliable electricity in such areas, ensuring uninterrupted access to digital resources. Additionally, public-private partnerships (PPPs) could mobilize funding and technical expertise to develop these infrastructures, while community involvement ensures that solutions are contextually appropriate and sustainable.

- **Strengthened Private Sector Advocacy:** The private sector plays a critical role in shaping education systems that respond to industry needs. To enhance their advocacy, stakeholders should equip private sector actors with tools and platforms to articulate evidence-based proposals for systemic reform. This includes generating detailed labour market analyses to guide budgetary priorities and education policies. Through coordinated efforts, private sector representatives can lobby for increased public investment in education, particularly in STEM fields and vocational training. Incentivizing private investment through tax breaks and co-financing arrangements can further drive resource mobilization.
- **Technological Innovations:** Leveraging technology to deliver education, skills development programs and entrepreneurship training can significantly enhance access and quality. Mobile platforms, offline applications, and virtual learning environments can provide context-specific content tailored to diverse learner needs. Partnerships with technology firms can enhance the scalability and relevance of these platforms, ensuring they cater to local languages and cultural contexts. Additionally, using data analytics to track learner engagement and outcomes can help refine these tools for maximum impact. Blockchain technology could be explored for credentialing and verifying educational achievements, especially in informal or remote learning settings.
- **Entrepreneurship as Core Curriculum:** Introducing entrepreneurship as a compulsory subject at all educational levels fosters a culture of innovation and self-reliance. This curriculum should incorporate experiential learning methodologies, such as business simulations, hackathons, and start-up incubations, to provide hands-on experience. Establishing partnerships with successful entrepreneurs and business accelerators can enrich these programs, offering mentorship and real-world insights. Furthermore, integrating financial literacy and design thinking into entrepreneurship education ensures that learners develop holistic skills for navigating complex business environments.
- **Access to Affordable Capital for Startups:** A significant barrier to entrepreneurship training and employment is the lack of access to affordable capital for startups. Many aspiring entrepreneurs face difficulties securing initial funding due to stringent lending requirements, high interest rates, and limited financial literacy. To overcome this, stakeholders must develop inclusive financing mechanisms, such as microloans, revolving funds, and grant programs, tailored to the needs of young entrepreneurs. Establishing venture capital funds with long-term impact-driven goals and investments can also provide critical support and patient capital for

innovative startups from marginalized youth who may require longer investment cycles. Additionally, financial education programs should be integrated into entrepreneurship training to equip participants with the knowledge needed to effectively manage resources and navigate funding processes.

- ***Inclusive Programs for Marginalized Groups:*** Addressing systemic inequities requires targeted interventions designed for marginalized groups, including women, rural youth, and persons with disabilities. Programs should address barriers such as cultural norms, physical inaccessibility, and financial constraints. For example, scholarships and stipends can alleviate economic challenges, while assistive technologies can enable learners with disabilities to participate fully. Gender-sensitive curricula and mentorship programs can empower young women to pursue non-traditional career paths. Community outreach initiatives are essential to raise awareness and foster buy-in from local stakeholders.
- ***Enhanced Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E):*** Robust monitoring and evaluation systems are critical for tracking program outcomes and ensuring accountability. Stakeholders should invest in advanced data collection and management tools to gather real-time insights on educational initiatives. Establishing centralized data repositories enables comprehensive analyses, helping identify gaps and areas for improvement. Additionally, incorporating machine learning algorithms can facilitate predictive analytics, enabling proactive adjustments to strategies. Regular dissemination of findings through public dashboards and reports ensures transparency and fosters stakeholder trust. This iterative approach to M&E promotes the continuous refinement of educational interventions, maximizing their long-term impact.

## **Call to Action**

Harnessing Africa's demographic dividend—the potential economic gains derived from a growing youthful population—requires urgent and synchronized efforts from various stakeholders. This complex endeavour necessitates technical, policy-driven, and analytical approaches to address systemic gaps and unlock opportunities for African youth to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development.

## **Governments**

African governments must take the lead in implementing policies and allocating resources to ensure equitable access to quality education, entrepreneurship training, and skills development. Key actions should include:

- **Increasing Education Budgets:** Governments should commit to meeting or exceeding the 20% budget allocation recommended by UNESCO for education. This requires fiscal discipline, reallocation of resources, and leveraging innovative financing models such as education bonds, diaspora remittances, and sovereign wealth funds earmarked for education initiatives.

- **Establishing Nationwide TVET Programs:** Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs must be integrated into national education strategies, tailored to local market demands, and supported by accreditation frameworks to ensure high quality and relevance. Governments should also elevate the perception of TVET as a viable and prestigious career path by investing in cutting-edge equipment required for training globally competitive technicians in the nation's TVET colleges.
- **Incentivizing Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):** Policies that encourage private sector investment in education infrastructure, curriculum development, and skills training can catalyse job creation and workforce readiness. Tax incentives, co-financing mechanisms, and regulatory reforms that simplify investment in education can further stimulate such partnerships.
- **Strengthening Digital Infrastructure:** Investing in electricity generation, nationwide broadband connectivity and digital literacy programs ensures that youth, especially in rural and underserved areas, can access online learning resources, remote work opportunities, and digital entrepreneurship platforms.

### **Private Sector**

The private sector's active involvement is essential for bridging the gap between education and employment. The involvement of the private sector should cover areas such as:

- **Investing in Mentorship Networks:** Establish structured mentorship programs where industry leaders guide youth in career planning, entrepreneurship, and skill development. These mentorship programs should be accessible through digital platforms to reach a broader audience.
- **Creating Youth-centric Funding Mechanisms:** Develop venture capital funds, angel investor networks, and microfinance products tailored to young entrepreneurs. Specialized financial products, such as startup incubators and innovation hubs, can help youth transition from ideation to commercialization.
- **Expanding Apprenticeship and Internship Programs:** Strengthen the link between education and industry by providing paid apprenticeships and internships that offer hands-on experience, professional networking, and opportunities for career advancement. Businesses should collaborate with universities and TVET institutions to design work-integrated learning curricula.
- **Leveraging Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** Private sector actors can integrate youth empowerment initiatives into their CSR and ESG strategies, funding scholarship programs, vocational training centers, and innovation labs that focus on future industries like renewable energy, fintech, and agribusiness.

### **NGOs**

Non-governmental organizations are pivotal in delivering localized, scalable solutions. Their actions should focus on:

- **Community Engagement and Capacity Building:** Collaborate with local leaders and stakeholders to ensure programs are culturally sensitive, address specific community needs, and include marginalized groups such as girls, youth with disabilities, and those in rural areas.
- **Scaling Proven Models:** Implement evidence-based interventions, such as cash-transfer programs tied to education, and replicate them across different regions. Successful models like "pay-for-results" educational funding should be expanded.
- **Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL):** Use data-driven approaches to measure program outcomes, ensuring accountability, continuous improvement, and knowledge-sharing across the sector.

## **Donors**

Donors play a critical role in providing the financial backbone for youth-focused initiatives. Their contributions should aim to:

- **Support Long-term Funding:** Move beyond short-term grants to sustained investments that allow programs to scale and achieve systemic impact. Multi-year funding commitments provide stability for organizations working on youth development.
- **Promote Innovation and Research:** Fund pilot programs that leverage technology, such as mobile learning platforms and artificial intelligence-driven career counselling, while supporting rigorous research on youth employment trends and barriers.
- **Facilitate Cross-sector Collaboration:** Act as conveners to foster partnerships among governments, NGOs, and the private sector, ensuring that efforts are complementary rather than fragmented.
- **Venture Philanthropy and Loan Guarantees:** De-risk investments in young, marginalized entrepreneurs by providing philanthropic capital to guarantee low-interest and collateral-free loans to them.

## **Educational Institutions**

Modernizing education systems is key to preparing youth for the demands of the future. Institutions must:

- **Incorporate digital and AI-driven Learning:** Integrate e-learning, artificial intelligence, and virtual laboratories to enhance learning experiences and expand access to remote areas.
- **Focus on Competency-based Education:** Shift from traditional rote learning to competency-based approaches that emphasize critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability.
- **Engage with Industry:** Regularly update curricula in collaboration with industry stakeholders to reflect current and future labor market needs. Universities and TVET institutions should embed entrepreneurship modules and experiential learning into their programs.
- **Encourage Research and Development (R&D):** Establish centers for innovation and R&D that encourage students to develop solutions for local and global challenges, linking academia with industry and government.

## Communities

Community buy-in is crucial for the success of youth empowerment programs. Communities should:

- **Advocate for Cultural Change:** Promote the acceptance of vocational and entrepreneurial pathways as legitimate and prestigious career options. Media campaigns, community dialogues, and youth-led advocacy groups can shift public perception.
- **Foster Inclusivity:** Ensure that marginalized groups, including girls, youth with disabilities, and those in rural areas, are actively included in educational and economic initiatives.
- **Provide Local Support Systems:** Establish community-based mentorship and peer networks to support youth through their educational and entrepreneurial journeys. Local role models can inspire young people to pursue diverse career paths.

By fostering collaboration and leveraging innovative strategies, stakeholders can create a robust ecosystem that empowers African youth to thrive as innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders. Through coordinated actions, Africa's youth can drive sustainable development, economic growth, and societal transformation across the continent. The collective commitment of governments, NGOs, donors, private sector actors, educational institutions, and communities is essential to realizing the full potential of Africa's demographic dividend.

## Conclusion

Unlocking Africa's demographic dividend requires a strategic and collaborative approach involving governments, private sector stakeholders, NGOs, and educational institutions. By prioritizing entrepreneurship education, closing skills gaps, and expanding access to quality training, Africa's youth can become key drivers of economic growth, innovation, and sustainable development.

Equipping young people with relevant skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital literacy, will enable them to thrive in an evolving job market and seize emerging opportunities. Additionally, fostering inclusive policies that address gender disparities, regional inequalities, and financial barriers will ensure that all youth, regardless of background, can contribute meaningfully to economic progress.

Public-private partnerships, investments in education, and demand-driven training programs will be essential in shifting young people from job seekers to job creators. By nurturing an entrepreneurial mindset and supporting youth-led enterprises, Africa can cultivate a dynamic workforce that fuels long-term prosperity.

Moving forward, sustained commitment from all stakeholders is crucial to building an ecosystem that empowers young people. With coordinated action and a clear vision for inclusive growth, Africa can fully harness the potential of its youthful population to drive lasting economic and social transformation. JA Africa is committed to playing a crucial role in coordinating this ecosystem of stakeholders to enable Africa's youth to reach their full potential.