



## Informing strategies to enhance the impact of youth employment policies and programs in Kenya

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### Key messages

- Kenya urgently needs to create more decent jobs for youth.
- Numerous youth employment policy (YEP) initiatives have been introduced, but improved coordination and regular monitoring, review, and updates are essential to increase their effectiveness.
- Most YEPs focus on a single area, such as skills training, yet comprehensive programs addressing multiple dimensions of the employment challenge prove more effective.
- YEP design should integrate political economy analysis and maintain continuous political engagement to facilitate successful implementation.

### The policy context and issues of youth employment in Nigeria

Job creation for youth is an urgent priority in Kenya, given the country's challenging labour market dynamics and the large youth population. Compared to other age groups, youth face higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, and exclusion from the labour force. Notably, 16.8% of youth were not in employment, education, or training (NEET) as of Q4 2022. Skills deficits remain widespread, and female youth experience greater disadvantages across most employment indicators.

While about half of youth are employed, over 40% are in vulnerable employment—as contributing family

workers (21.8%) or own-account workers (19.7%)—roles often marked by low productivity, poor income, limited security, and few opportunities for advancement.

These challenges highlight the need not only for more jobs, but for better-quality jobs and improved access to impactful skills development opportunities. Despite substantial policy efforts, such as the 2019 Kenya Youth Development Policy, systemic barriers, operational constraints, and weak monitoring have undermined the effectiveness of youth employment policies and programs (YEPs).

### The study

Launched in 2021, this initiative aimed to conduct, in two phases, a comprehensive review of existing youth-employment policies and programs and their impact in Kenya. The researchers combined existing data and policy reviews with qualitative data to provide a more nuanced understanding of the policies and programs - see the "Methodology" text box below for more detail.

An initial review was conducted in 2021-2022, and the process was completed in 2024, with a follow-up review to assess progress and highlight changes in the design or implementation of these interventions.

This brief summarizes the authors' key findings and recommendations for policy, based on the overall results of this two-phase review initiative.



## Key Findings

Through their review of the many policies and programmes that have been put in place by the government, and other actors, to tackle (directly or indirectly) the issue of youth unemployment in Kenya, the authors identified five main categories of interventions. These categories correspond, broadly, to the specific purposes or nature of the programs' strategies.

- Make the labour market work better by increasing labour demand
  - E.g. the Digital Public Works for Urban Resilience pilot, and Youth Employment Abroad (YESA)
- Improve chances for entrepreneurs through enhanced access to credit
  - E.g. the Hustler Fund, and the National Youth Opportunities Towards Advancement (NYOTA).
- Train youth on skills and make training programs work better, either through the use of
  - training vouchers – e.g. the Kenya Jua Kali Voucher Program, or
  - internships, apprenticeships, or vocational training – e.g. the Public Service Internship Program and the Graduate Internship Program.
- Combining different types/categories of interventions through a coordinated approach to provide more comprehensive support.
  - E.g. the National Youth Opportunities Towards Advancement (NYOTA).
- Facilitate overseas employment - through information on opportunities, preparation and transition assistance.
  - E.g. Youth Employment Abroad (YESA)



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## Challenges identified across interventions:

- Most programs address only one facet of the youth employment challenge, despite its complex, inter-linked causes.
  - On the other hand, comprehensive programs are harder to implement due to resource and technical capacity constraints.
- Interventions are often fragmented, poorly integrated with macroeconomic or sectoral strategies, and hindered by weak coordination among actors.
- Funding shortfalls and limited scope reduce program effectiveness.
- Overseas employment can expose youth to unsafe or vulnerable work conditions.

## Changes and progress in design and implementation of YEPs between 2021 and 2023:

- Digital Public Works for Urban Resilience: The Digital Public Works for Urban Resilience is a recently (2022) introduced Public Works Programme (PWP) that builds on earlier initiatives - such as Kazi Mtaani, implemented in 2020. Notable advancements include an enhanced design that incorporates digital technologies and prioritizes the development of sustainable, market-relevant skills. Unlike previous PWPs, this program equips participants with transferable competencies, significantly improving their employability beyond the short-term scope of public works engagements.
- Public Service Internship Program: In 2024, the Public Service Commission trained about 400 mentors and coaches - across various Ministries, State Departments, and Corporations - to provide enhanced guidance and nurturing throughout the internship. An initiative which is expected to improve outcomes.
- National Youth Opportunities Towards Advancement (NYOTA): NYOTA is a successor to the Kenya Youth Employment and Opportunities Project (KYEOP), and its design was informed by lessons from KYEOP's implementation. NYOTA is designed with stronger public private partnerships, more comprehensive support systems - beyond initial training -, and a more robust monitoring and evaluation system.
- Youth Employment Abroad (YESA): Initially a less structured type of program, the authors noted improvements between the first and second phase of the review. Indeed, since 2022 the Kenyan government has established over 20 bilateral agreements aimed at not only expanding job opportunities abroad, but also ensuring Kenyan workers have access to skills training and decent jobs.

## Conclusions

The authors' overriding conclusion is that, while each type of intervention is useful for job creation, greater coordination and synergy among programs would significantly enhance their impact.

### Two key lessons emerge from the overall (two-phase) review:

1. Comprehensive programs are more effective than single-focus interventions. For example, NYOTA integrates skills development, job creation, labour market information, and policy support.
2. Targeted investments should prioritize sectors with high job-creation potential, such as agro-processing, textiles, trade and repairs, construction, manufacturing, tourism, horticulture, and ICT (Munga et al., 2021; Onsomu et al., forthcoming).

## Policy recommendations and road map

1. Adopt a holistic approach

The fragmentation of programs and efforts generate inefficiencies, and reduce effectiveness of interventions.

### Recommendations to the Ministry of Youth, and other partners implementing YEPs:

- Improve synergy across programs and design more comprehensive YEPs.
- Establish a centralized coordination framework involving ministries, counties, the private sector, and civil society.
- Factor in political economy risks (e.g., corruption, mismanagement) and include safeguards in program design.
- Strengthen political engagement to overcome governance-related challenges.

2. Raise awareness of YEPs

Low uptake and limited awareness hinder program impact.

## **Recommendations for the State Department of Youth Affairs, State Department for ICT and Digital Economy, National Youth Council, and counties:**

- Set clear job targets backed by funding and skills development requirements.
- Increase youth outreach and awareness campaigns to promote programs like Ajira Digital and NYOTA.

### 3. Address demand-side constraints and enact forward looking policies

Skills training alone is insufficient without job creation.

## **Recommendations for Parliament, relevant ministries, and NEA:**

- Complement training with efforts to reduce business barriers (e.g., regulatory burdens, limited financing, poor infrastructure, and market linkages).
- Ensure programs include pathways for graduates to access financing, mentorship, and formal employment opportunities, fostering long-term livelihoods.
- Strengthen labour market regulation by 1) using evidence available regarding impact of interventions and 2) adopting a forward-looking approach that anticipates and addresses emerging challenges – e.g. setting minimum wage based on economic signals.

### 4. Improve Labour Market Information Systems (LMIS)

Data limitations and fragmented M&E systems impede policy effectiveness.

## **Recommendations for the Ministry of Labour, KNBS, NEA, and development partners:**

- Develop or enhance data portals and build on initiatives like the youth dashboard.
- Strengthen institutional capacity for data collection, analysis, and dissemination.
- Continuously review and update policies based on evidence.

## **Methodology**

Drawing from Betcherman's (2007) framework for classifying employment interventions, the study adopted a mixed method research analytical approach, combining the use of both primary qualitative and secondary data. The key components of their approach include:

- Collection and analysis of primary qualitative data: Qualitative data was collected at both national and sub-national levels using semi structured interviews. Specifically, the project team organized 46 focused group discussions with 221 participants, and conducted interviews with 122 key informants (including policy makers, labour officers, employment officers, youth officers, and YEP beneficiaries).
- Analysis of secondary quantitative data: Drawn from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, government strategy documents, and surveys including the 2015/16 Kenya Integrated Household Budget Survey, the 2019 Population and Housing Census, and quarterly labour force reports.
- Desk review of available literature and reports: The authors reviewed various impact evaluation studies



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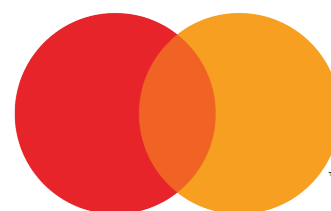
### The 'What Works for Youth Employment in Africa' initiative

This paper was produced in the context of the What Works for Youth Employment in Africa: A review of existing policies and empirical analysis in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. It was a three-year initiative that ran between 2021 and 2024 to create a knowledge base of youth employment and related social development policies to inform policy and practices. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Foundation, its staff, or its Board of Directors.

For more information about this initiative, please visit:

[www.pep-net.org/programs/youth-employment](http://www.pep-net.org/programs/youth-employment)

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