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Review of Youth Employment Policies and their Impact in Kenya.



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Abstract

This follow-up study reviews youth-employment policies and programs in Kenya, focusing on their implementation, impact, and recent developments. Utilizing data from 122 key-informant interviews, focus-group discussions with 221 beneficiaries, and secondary sources, we address three primary questions: What changes have occurred in youth-employment programs since the 2021 review? How effective are current initiatives in enhancing labour market efficiency, entrepreneurship, and skills training? What gaps remain in ensuring sustainable youth employment? Despite various programs targeting employment, entrepreneurship, and skills training for youth, challenges persist, including mismatches between education and labour market demands, inadequate funding, undervalued technical and vocational education and training, and sluggish growth in formal sector opportunities. To address gaps in youth-employment programs, the study recommends the need to transition toward more comprehensive programs; reorient public works to incorporate technical training and flexible scheduling; expand labour-export initiatives with structured pre-departure and reintegration support; strengthen entrepreneurship through innovation hubs and improved resource access; align technical and vocational education and training curricula with industry demands, modernizing educational infrastructure, and expanding e-learning platforms; implement robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks, improve resource allocation, enhance inter-agency coordination, and simplify tax regimes to support startups and small enterprises.

Key words: Youth; Unemployment; Youth-Employment Programs

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I. Introduction

Employment creation for youth is a critical item on the global-development agenda, and jobs are fundamental to inclusive economic growth and social progress. They provide individuals with livelihoods, contribute to economic activity, and promote human-capital development. More productive employment opportunities drive poverty reduction and socioeconomic transformation. Prioritizing employment creation fosters equity, social cohesion, and economic prosperity, making it essential for building inclusive and resilient societies (Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis, 2023).

Even so, youth unemployment is a persistent global challenge, with significant implications for social stability and economic growth. High unemployment among youth can lead to social unrest, economic stagnation, and missed opportunities for future generations. In Africa, youth unemployment persists despite at least two decades of high economic growth. This gap stems from factors such as limited economic diversification, insufficient investment in high-employment sectors, and inadequate skills development aligned with market needs.

Kenya faces similar challenges, with youth unemployment rates notably higher than for the general working-age population. In the fourth quarter of 2022, the unemployment rate for youth aged 15-34 stood at 8.1%, compared to 4.9% for the working-age group. Over sixteen quarters between 2019 and 2022, youth unemployment consistently exceeded that of the broader workforce, reflecting persistent structural challenges¹ (see Table 1).

Table 1: Selected Labour-Market Indicators, Q1 2019 to Q4 2022

Labour-Market Indicator	2019				2020				2021				2022			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Employment rate 15-64	62.6	66.5	66.1	66.7	64.4	57.7	63.9	65.0	63.7	63.6	62.8	62.4	62.8	62.6	62.6	63.4
Employment rate 15-34	48.9	54.6	54.0	55.5	51.3	45.8	52.5	53.0	51.3	49.5	48.6	48.6	49.7	50.2	47.1	49.9
Unemployment rate (15-64)	6.2	4.7	5.3	4.9	5.2	10.4	7.2	5.4	6.6	6.1	5.6	5.6	5.5	5.8	5.3	4.9

¹ The unemployed are those who do not have a job, have been actively looking for work in the past four weeks, and are currently available for work.

Unemployment rate (15-19) 11.1 6.0 5.0 4.1 10.1 8.6 3.0 2.8 6.8 8.1 9.8 8.4 5.9 6.8 22.7 10.9

Unemployment rate (20-24) 16.8 13.9 16.0 14.2 12.7 22.8 17.6 15.0 16.3 15.7 11.8 14.6 18.3 14.9 14.2 15.6

Unemployment rate (15-34) 10.1 7.2 8.3 7.6 8.2 15.5 10.0 7.9 9.6 9.7 8.9 9.0 8.8 9.0 8.7 8.1

Not in Education, Employment, or Training rate 15-24 14.7 12.3 13.0 12.9 16.8 17.9 15.6 18.0 16.6 22.3 18.1 19.6 20.4 19.3 19.9 16.8

Source: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (various) and Quarterly Labour Force Report.

In addition, many young people have disengaged from the labour market, and about one in every seven young people (15-24) or 13.7% were not in employment, education, or training in Q1 of 2019. This represents a significant potential loss of human capital. The “not in employment, education, or training” rate increased steadily, reaching 16.0% in Q1 of 2020, 16.9% in Q1 of 2021, and 20.6% in Q1 of 2022. This rise can be linked to factors such as a decline in youth enrolment in educational institutions. Besides unemployment and those not in employment, education, or training, among those employed, many are engaged in undignified and unfulfilling work. Additionally, time-related under-employment affected 20.4% of the overall population but was disproportionately higher among youth, at 35.9% (2019 Population and Housing Census Data; Kenya Integrated Household Budget Survey, 2015/16; Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (various); Quarterly Labour Force Survey Reports).

The government has consistently pursued high economic growth as a strategy to address unemployment and reduce poverty. Early post-independence initiatives, including Five-Year Development Plans and Sessional Papers, prioritized rapid economic growth and industrialization, initially through import-substitution strategies. Though the country achieved relatively high economic growth rates by the late 1980s, youth unemployment and the share of youth not in education, employment, or training remained significant challenges.

Efforts to generate employment continued into the millennium, marked by such policies as the Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation (2003-2007) and Kenya Vision 2030 (2008-2030). The Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation initiative aimed to create 500,000 jobs annually through economic reforms, infrastructure investment, and private-sector support. While it boosted economic growth and generated 1.8 million jobs from 2003 to 2007, the annual average of 400,000 jobs fell short of its target, with over 80% of jobs created in the informal sector.

Kenya Vision 2030, implemented through successive medium-term plans (MTPs), set ambitious employment and economic growth targets. Under MTP I (2008-2012), the target was 3.7 million jobs, or 740,000 annually, but actual annual job creation averaged 500,000. MTP II (2013-2017) targeted one million jobs annually but achieved about 800,000, mostly in the informal sector. MTP III (2018-2022) aimed for 6.5 million jobs in sectors like manufacturing, agriculture, and housing but fell short due to economic disruptions and budget constraints.

The job-creation agenda continues under MTP IV (2023/24-2027/28) and the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda. The government has targeted 1.2 million jobs annually by supporting micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises through capacity building, credit facilitation, and market linkages; establishing Special Economic Zones and industrial parks; promoting export-led manufacturing; revitalizing agriculture; and leveraging information and communication technology to expand digital job opportunities through programs like Ajira Digital and Information and Communication Technology Innovation Hubs. Medium-term plan IV further promotes the Talanta Hela Programme which encourages talent among young people and is intended to revitalize the creative economy.

Employment in undignified and unfulfilling work, unemployment, under-employment, and exclusion from the labour force significantly impede progress toward achieving Kenya's development agenda. These challenges affect both individuals and the broader economy, creating a cycle of stagnation that demands urgent and targeted interventions. At the macroeconomic level, unemployment leads to reduced consumer demand and lower consumption. The decline in spending weakens the profitability of businesses, which may implement budget cuts, reduce investment, or lay off workers. Workforce reductions further exacerbate unemployment while under-employment or employment in undignified and unfulfilling work prevent a significant segment of the population from using their skills or earning sufficient income. All of this perpetuates a vicious cycle of economic slowdown in which efforts to achieve inclusive economic growth are undermined, and individuals and households cannot contribute to or benefit from national development. Without deliberate policy measures and sustained economic stimulus, a succession of effects of this nature difficult to reverse.

Beyond economic implications, unemployment has serious social consequences. It has been linked to heightened levels of frustration, social unrest, and instability. Unemployed or underemployed individuals, particularly youth, may feel disenfranchised, increasing the likelihood of involvement in antisocial activities or susceptibility to manipulation by harmful political or

criminal elements. Addressing these interconnected challenges is critical for fostering sustainable economic growth, improving social cohesion, and advancing Kenya's development goals. While some progress has been made, sustained efforts are necessary to address systemic barriers and create viable opportunities for youth. Understanding youth-employment policies and programs, along with their impact, is critical to making informed policy changes, navigating competing interests in the labour market, deciding how to allocate resources, and improving the overall outcomes of employment initiatives.

This working paper provides an updated analysis of youth-employment initiatives and assesses their effectiveness in addressing unemployment and under-employment. We address the following specific objectives:

1. Undertake a review of youth-employment policies and programs, their impact, and gaps.
2. Map out programs for accelerating work opportunities for youth.
3. Identify lessons and best practices to inform youth-employment policy reviews, programs, and strategy development.

The study focuses on youth-employment programs supported through public or mixed public-private initiatives, and our review encompasses active labour-market policies for youth, including entrepreneurship support and internships as well as programs that provide training, wage subsidies, job search assistance, or start-up capital to youth seeking self-employment opportunities. The distinction between an employment policy and an employment program lies in scope, objectives, and implementation. Employment policies such as Kenya Vision 2030 and the Kenya Youth Development Policy 2019 provide a broad, long-term framework intended to guide decisions and actions. In contrast, an employment program is a specific, actionable initiative with a short-to medium-term focus that targets specific groups, regions, or sectors to achieve policy goals. Examples include the Ajira Digital Program, which equips youth with digital skills; the Talanta Hela Programme, which promotes talent among young people and revitalizes the creative economy; and *Kazi Mtaani*, which offers short-term urban employment. Policies set the vision, while programs deliver targeted interventions. Empirical evaluations of these programs can provide valuable insights into their impact on skill development, socioeconomic outcomes, and Kenya's labour-market dynamics (Sam, 2016; Monari et al., 2020).

Demand-side challenges also greatly contribute to higher unemployment rates (Onsomu et al., 2023). Employers may be reluctant to hire young workers, for example, because of perceived

risks or a preference for more experienced candidates. Another manifestation of this challenge is that most jobs that are created are informal. According to the Kenya Integrated Household Budget Survey, 2015/16 (2022) and the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2024), 83.6% of employed youth are in informal employment. These jobs are usually characterized by low earnings, limited social protection, job insecurity, and unsafe working conditions, and they present a major challenge for young people trying to build stable, long-term careers.

II. Methodological Approach and Data

2.1 Framework for Analysing Youth-Employment Policies and Programs

To effectively review the diverse youth-employment interventions, we adapted the categorization framework developed by other researchers. This framework classifies interventions into seven broad themes: (i) making the labour market work better, (ii) improving opportunities for entrepreneurs, (iii) skills training, (iv) enhancing the effectiveness of training programs, (v) refining labour market regulations, (vi) facilitating overseas employment, and (vii) multi-component programs combining elements from the other categories. In the Kenyan context, this categorization was tailored to integrate interventions related to improving labour market regulations and facilitating overseas employment into the other themes. Table 2 presents a summary of the categories, detailing the components and examples of each type of intervention.

Table 2: Typology of Youth-Employment Program Interventions

Category	Type of intervention
(i) Making the labour market work better	wage subsidies public-works programs counselling job-search assistance
(ii) Entrepreneurship support programs	funds for business startups youth guarantees
(iii) Skills training	vocational training apprenticeships internships

(iv) Making training programs work better	providing information about high-return training opportunities credit programs for individuals and enterprises. subsidies and vouchers for training programs training system targeting disadvantaged groups
(v) Comprehensive approach	combination of training, job assistance, and entrepreneurial services development dual programs

2.2 Data Sources and Types

We employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both primary qualitative and secondary quantitative data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of youth-employment interventions. Primary data was collected through structured key-informant interviews and focus-group discussions to ensure an in-depth exploration of perspectives.

To enable comparison over time, we aligned our study sample with that of the research conducted in 2021. At the national and subnational levels, discussions and interviews were held with a wide range of participants (Table 2), including 122 interviews with stakeholders (i.e., twenty-seven policymakers and program implementers, thirty-five labour officers, twenty employment officers, and forty youth officers, as well as focus-group discussions with 221 beneficiaries of various programs. Representatives from workers’ and employers’ unions were also engaged to incorporate the viewpoints of organized labour and business.

Table 3: Key Informants Interviewed and Focus-Group Discussions Conducted

Selection Criteria	Beneficiaries	Youth officers	Labour officers	Policy makers	Employment officers
Age (Below 35)	216 (97.7%)	3 (7.5%)	4 (11.4%)	1 (3.7%)	2 (10.0%)
Gender (Male)	120 (54.2%)	27 (67.5%)	21 (60.0%)	21 (77.8%)	13 (65.0%)
Person with Disability	7 (3.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (0.0%)
Total	221	40	35	27	20

Focus-group discussions (focus-group discussions) were conducted with beneficiaries of youth-employment programs at both national and county levels, offering direct insights into their experiences as well as the challenges and outcomes of the interventions.

Focus-group discussions) were conducted using a purposive sampling approach to ensure participants had relevant experiences and insights. Youth officers in each county played a key role in identifying and inviting participants who had directly benefited from government-funded

programs such as the Youth Enterprise Development Fund, the *Uwezo* Fund, and the Hustler Fund. Selection criteria included participants who had used these funds, with efforts made to ensure diversity across economic sectors, genders, and regions. This structured approach allowed for the collection of diverse viewpoints, making the findings comprehensive and representative. By engaging participants with practical knowledge of these initiatives, the focus-group discussions provided valuable insights that informed our objectives.

This collection of diverse data ensured that we had captured a holistic view of the implementation, impact, and effectiveness of youth-employment initiatives (Table 3). A key limitation of the study, however, was the absence of focus-group discussions with non-participants in programs. This omission restricted our ability to gain insights into the perspectives and experiences of individuals who may have faced barriers to participation or were excluded from programs. This can be addressed by future research in the area.

We focused on assessing the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability of youth-employment programs by collecting data on policy implementation, enforcement, selection criteria, labour-market outcomes, and participation of such stakeholders as program implementers, labour officers, and civil society. The areas of focus in our data collection are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Focus Areas for Data Collection

Target Respondents	Focus areas and type of data collected
1. Program implementers	Youth-employment program relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability, and evaluation; labour-market outcomes; political economy perspectives.
2. Youth policy implementers	Information was collected on status of policy implementation, enforcement, and effectiveness.
3. Beneficiaries including marginalized groups	Information was collected on selection criteria, civil society participation, and access to labour market information.
4. Labour officers	Information was collected from labour officers on youth-employment-policy implementation and enforcement.
5. Youth officers	Information was collected on the effectiveness of youth-employment policies and on occupational health and safety.
6. Employment officers	Information was collected on the effectiveness of youth-employment policies and on occupational health and safety.

Secondary data came mainly from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, publicly

accessible data sources, and policy and strategy documents, from the Ministry of Labour and the State Department for Youth Affairs. Specific secondary sources for employment data included annual Economic Surveys and Statistical Abstracts and Quarterly Labour Force Reports (2019-2021) by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. The study also referred to policy and strategy documents including Kenya Vision 2030, Medium-Term Plans, and the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda.

III. Review of Youth-Employment Programs

Youth-employment programs are public or mixed public/private programs focused on youth employment. For purposes of the subsequent review, the programs were categorized into five broad themes: programs that aimed to make the labour market work better, provided skills training, designed interventions to support entrepreneurs; made training programs work better, and executed comprehensive programs (Table 1).

3.1 Making the Labour Market Work Better

Public-works programs, which address high youth unemployment and disengagement from the labour market through interventions such as wage subsidies and job search counselling, aim to increase labour demand via labour-intensive activities. These programs operate as administrative actions, offering flexibility to successive governments and are more common relative to the other program examples in this category. A recent example in Kenya is the Kazi Mtaani initiative (2020-2022), which provided short-term relief to vulnerable youth (18-35) in informal settlements during the COVID-19 pandemic. The six-month program cushioned participants from the economic effects of the pandemic and of response measures.

Gauging the impact of these programs is difficult because public-works programs, including those in Kenya, often lack rigorous impact evaluations and cost-benefit analyses, thus limiting

understanding of their effectiveness. Studies on public-works programs in Africa and in the Middle East and North Africa regions show neither robust evidence of sustainable employment creation beyond the program period nor significant impacts on income, consumption, or spending. However, anecdotal evidence from Kenya suggests they had some success in providing income support to vulnerable households. For instance, beneficiaries of the Kazi Mtaani program noted that, despite its short-term nature, youth were helped to acquire skills and start income-generating activities.

Even so, the implementation of public-works programs such as Kazi Mtaani faced several challenges. Targeting the most vulnerable households was difficult because the first-come, first-served approach often excluded the poorest individuals. The interventions failed to create long-term jobs and excluded those unable to provide labour, such as persons with disabilities or those facing time poverty. Additionally, they overlooked seasonal factors that affected time use and often targeted urban youth in informal settlements, neglecting rural youth, who make up over 60% of Kenya's youth population. These limitations reduced the inclusivity and long-term impact of the programs.

3.2 Entrepreneurship Support Programs

Among sampled youth, most (55%) benefited from the programs aimed at supporting entrepreneurs. Typically, youth-employment programs in this category offer financial assistance, though most have transitioned beyond financial assistance alone to providing training and technical assistance, mentorship, and linkage to markets. The objective is to promote employment creation through entrepreneurship. Kenyan examples include the Youth Enterprise Development Fund and the Women's Enterprise Fund (both implemented in 2007), the *Uwezo* Fund (since 2013), the National Government Affirmative Action Fund and, more recently, the Hustler Fund (Youth Enterprise Development Fund, n.d.).

A review of literature reveals a lack of rigorous impact evaluations for these programs. While some reports highlight successful business ventures, evidence on their impact on employment compared to control groups is scarce. A key challenge is inadequate baseline data and consistent monitoring of outcomes. Existing assessments yield mixed results: some find no significant effects

on enterprise development while others report positive impacts. Programs showing limited success often face issues such as restrictive or unclear eligibility criteria, low entrepreneurship skills, weak accountability, and poor coordination among government agencies.

Youth empowerment programs encounter several challenges that undermine their effectiveness. Key issues include limited capacity to provide post-program support (coaching and mentorship, e.g.), bureaucratic application processes, and significant delays of up to six months in fund disbursement. Approximately 73% of youth interviewed reported difficulties in gaining access to these funds, citing limited political inclusivity, poor governance, nepotism, and unethical practices. Program committees, often influenced by political interests, discriminate in beneficiary selection, favouring groups affiliated with the political elite. Furthermore, misinformation spread by political leaders, portraying grants as “free,” undermines repayment efforts. Many funds are established under government financial regulations via legal notices, making them vulnerable to revocation or transition into semi-autonomous agencies.

A 2017 study by Brudevold-Newman et al., using a multifaceted entrepreneurship program and an unconditional cash grant, examined the impact of promoting sustainable entrepreneurship among young women in Nairobi through micro-franchising. The study found that both interventions increased entrepreneurship in the long term and income in the medium term, though the income effects did not persist over time. The higher cost of the multifaceted program, combined with similar impacts across both treatments, suggests that cash grants may be a more cost-effective method for fostering entrepreneurship in this context. However, the lack of sustained income effects indicates that self-employment may not fully address the issue of high youth under-employment.

3.3 Skills Training

Skills-training interventions in Kenya are implemented through programs aimed at equipping young people with practical and marketable skills, including vocational training, apprenticeships, and internships, delivered through initiatives such as the Ajira Digital Program, the Presidential Digital Talent Program, the National Youth Service, County Youth Service initiatives, and the Youth Talent Development Program in Music and Dance, spearheaded by the Permanent Presidential

Music Commission.

Additionally, several sector-specific interventions have been established to enhance youth employability. The Agricultural Sector Transformation and Growth Strategy (2019-2029), for instance, focuses on capacity building in agribusiness, equipping young people with skills to thrive in modern farming and "agripreneurship." Similarly, the Youth Talent Development Program in Music and Dance is part of broader initiatives aimed at nurturing talent within the creative economy and to providing structured support for young artists and performers. These interventions play a crucial role in bridging the skills gap, fostering innovation, and ensuring that Kenya's youth are well-prepared for emerging opportunities across various sectors. Only 11% of the sampled youth for the focus-group discussions had benefited from such programs, however, suggesting limited reach and access. These initiatives are often limited by design (eligibility criteria) and funding, both of which affect scalability and limit their overall impact.

Youth-empowerment programs in Kenya play a crucial role in addressing gaps in employability skills, a major barrier to youth employment (Franz & Omolo, 2014). However, only a few of these programs have undergone rigorous impact evaluations. Among the evaluated programs, the Kenya Youth Empowerment Program stands out for its positive outcomes. A randomized control trial evaluation of the program revealed that participants who received life-skills training and internships experienced a 14% increase in employment for young men and an 8% increase for young women compared to controls. Additionally, young women demonstrated a significant rise in earnings, although this was not observed among young men. Tertiary education was a critical factor: participants with some college education were more likely to secure wage employment (Honorati, 2015).

The Ninaweza program, part of Kenya Youth Empowerment Program, targeted young vulnerable women in Nairobi aged 18-35 who had completed secondary education. Using a randomized control trial, the program evaluated its eight-week life skills and information and communication technology training. The impact evaluation indicated that participants who received training, along with job experience through internships and job placement support, increased their information and communication technology knowledge by 17.3 percentage points above those who did not receive the intervention. Additionally, those who received the training and job experience without the life-skills component still gained 15.8 percentage points more in information and communication technology knowledge compared to non-participants. Beneficiaries were 14% more likely than the control group to secure employment, with statistically

significant higher earnings. The program also increased job-seeking proactivity. The findings underscored the positive impact of life-skills training on improving employment opportunities for young women in Kenya (Alvares de Azevedo, et al., 2013). Here, too, the interventions faced such challenges as inadequate resources and weak monitoring and evaluation (Franz & Omolo, 2014). A major gap is the focus on labour supply over demand, especially in rural areas, where the business environment requires concurrent interventions that address binding constraints to affect meaningful job creation.

3.4 Make Training Programs Work Better

This category of youth-employment program includes interventions to provide information about high-return training opportunities, credit programs for individuals and enterprises, subsidies and vouchers for training programs, and training systems that target disadvantaged groups. These youth-employment programs aim to address unemployment among educated youth and those with low take-up of training or skills mismatch. Other interventions aim to improve the transition from training to work by enhancing trainees' access to work experience. The Kenyan Jua Kali voucher Program is one example.

Evidence indicates that voucher programs have had a positive impact on beneficiaries, enhancing employment opportunities, asset accumulation, and business growth compared to control groups. Researchers have reported that vouchers are an effective mechanism for promoting educational attainment and fostering the development of human capital and that outcomes from the Technical and Vocational Vouchers Program, launched in 2008 to support out-of-school youth in western Kenya, were positive. Notably, individuals who received unconditional or unrestricted vouchers demonstrated higher retention rates than those who were given conditional vouchers.

The primary challenges facing these programs are their complexity and their high set-up costs. Voucher programs may also be less effective in low-income countries. Additionally, phasing out the voucher subsidy can be challenging: dependency on subsidies can undermine the program's sustainability if participants struggle to afford services without the voucher; markets may be unable to absorb demand or provide comparable services; and beneficiaries and

policymakers may resist the phase-out because they see vouchers as critical to addressing inequalities or supporting economic growth. From the outset, a robust exit strategy is needed to address these challenges. A gradual reduction in subsidies may allow beneficiaries and markets to adapt, and greater engagement of stakeholders can create buy-in and reduce resistance.

3.5 Comprehensive Programs

Youth-employment programs include initiatives that combine various interventions into a single program. One example is the Kenya Youth Empowerment Program, which incorporates training alongside a twelve-week internship at private-sector firms (Honorati, 2015). Similarly, the Kenya Youth Employment and Opportunities Project, launched in 2016, and the Yes Youth Can! program integrate multiple components to address youth employment. Comprehensive programs like these often achieve better outcomes than those focusing on isolated aspects. For instance, 75% of the 45,329 young people trained and placed in internships through the Kenya Youth Employment Opportunities Project secured employment. A comparison between Yes Youth Can! participants and a control group revealed the program's significant impact on youth empowerment, particularly in social and political spheres. Participants reported higher self-esteem and confidence, greater civic engagement, and more informed political views. Overall, Yes Youth Can! advanced youth empowerment but faced challenges in delivering economic benefits within the evaluation period (for detailed insights into the design, implementation, and outcomes of the Yes Youth Can! Program, see the Yes Youth Can! Impact Evaluation Final Report, June 2014, prepared by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago for the United States Agency for International Development).

Several programs that have targeted diverse groups, including youth, have been implemented across economic sectors, and they merit attention. Notable examples are the Agricultural Sector Development Support Program II (2017-2022) and the Kenya Climate Smart Agriculture Project (2017-2022). Both programs had nationwide coverage across all forty-seven counties. The Agricultural Sector Development Support Program II and Kenya Climate Smart Agriculture Project integrated support for vulnerable groups, offering tailored services such as childcare for women. Key achievements included strengthened agricultural value chains, increased

adoption of climate-smart practices, enhanced national and county government collaboration, and the empowerment of county governments to implement agricultural strategies.

Since the 2021 review, Kenya's youth-employment programs have evolved, leading to the development of the National Youth Opportunities Toward Advancement program, which builds upon lessons from the Kenya Youth Employment Opportunities Project. National Youth Opportunities Toward Advancement is a more holistic and responsive initiative aimed at reducing unemployment and fostering economic growth. Because a key lesson from Kenya Youth Employment Opportunities Project's implementation was the need for more comprehensive support systems beyond initial training, National Youth Opportunities Toward Advancement has integrated technical and digital skills training, entrepreneurship support, and improved access to both formal and informal job markets. The program emphasizes stronger public-private partnerships, better alignment of training curricula with labour-market needs, and a robust monitoring and evaluation framework and introduces components to promote a culture of saving among youth, focusing on financial literacy and inclusion to address income insecurity and encourage long-term financial stability.

IV. Cross-Cutting Challenges of Youth-Employment Programs

Youth-employment programs face numerous challenges that hinder their effectiveness and sustainability. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach that integrates policy coherence, enhanced funding, private-sector involvement, and targeted support for marginalized groups.

Governance challenges significantly hinder the effectiveness of youth-employment programs in Kenya. Poor rankings on global governance indices reflect issues such as nepotism, political patronage, and resource misallocation, particularly in public-works programs, which often fail to deliver intended benefits to youth. Similarly, entrepreneurship-support programs are

undermined by misinformation, including the mischaracterization of loans as grants by the political elite, harming repayment rates and fund sustainability. Additionally, a challenging business environment marked by regulatory bottlenecks and the high cost of energy and transport and stifles youth-led enterprises and limits job creation in the private sector. Without urgent policy reforms to enhance governance, improve the regulatory environment, and ensure equitable access to resources, the transformative potential of youth-employment programs to address youth unemployment will remain unrealized.

Skills-training interventions in Kenya, including vocational training, apprenticeships, and internships, play a vital role in addressing youth unemployment. The dynamics of the political economy, however, present a significant challenge. A growing reliance on private funding, coupled with declining government support, threatens to exclude economically disadvantaged youth from entering tertiary education or skills training. This trend exacerbates existing inequities because systemic barriers disproportionately affect the ability of marginalized groups to acquire critical skills. To overcome these challenges, Kenya requires balanced financing strategies and policy frameworks that prioritize inclusivity and equitable access, ensuring that all youth, regardless of their economic background, can benefit from skills training.

Youth who were interviewed during focus-group discussions indicated other challenges, including limited reach and scalability linked to budgetary constraints, delayed disbursements, and underrepresentation of marginalized groups such as farmers and youth. Poor implementation, coordination gaps, and weak collaboration among national and county governments and the private sector led to fragmented efforts and program overlaps. Inadequate infrastructure and knowledge of market requirements, along with capacity constraints and gaps in design and focus, additionally hindered commercialization and economic benefits.

Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that incorporates stronger regulatory frameworks, better resource allocation for monitoring and evaluation, improved coordination among agencies, heightened awareness campaigns, and robust accountability mechanisms to ensure transparency and sustainability.

V. Key-Informant Interviews with Stakeholders and Youth:

Findings on Youth-Employment Programs

5.1 Perceptions of Policy Makers Regarding the Effectiveness of Youth-Employment Programs

We evaluated perceptions of the effectiveness of youth-empowerment policies and programs using a three-scale Likert measure: low, moderate, and great extent. About 70% of policymakers believed youth-employment programs were effective “to a great extent” in addressing youth unemployment, while 20% consider their effectiveness moderate and 10% low.

Training and technical assistance were seen as the most effective interventions, with 78% of respondents rating them as highly effective in equipping youth with market-relevant skills. Similarly, 74% viewed start-up capital programs and job-search counselling as highly effective in fostering entrepreneurship and enhancing employability. Public-works programs that offered short-term employment were considered effective by 70% of policymakers, though 17% cited such challenges as poor targeting, limited access, and financial mismanagement. Wage subsidies were perceived as the least effective, with only 52% of policymakers endorsing them, reflecting their limited application in Kenya.

Youth responses align with these findings, with effectiveness ratings for training and comprehensive programs ranging from 43% to 61%. Programs like technical and vocational education and training and vocational training subsidies were perceived as effective by 61% and 52%, respectively, emphasizing the value of hands-on skills training. Comprehensive initiatives like the Kenya Youth Empowerment Program and Kenya Youth Employment Opportunities Project, which combine training, job placement, and entrepreneurship support, were rated effective by 52% and 57%. Digital-skills programs such as Ajira Digital and the Presidential Digital Talent Program received mixed reviews, with effectiveness ratings of 57% and 43%. These findings underscore the need for targeted improvements in program design and implementation.

5.2 Adequacy of Regulatory Frameworks

We evaluated the adequacy of Kenya’s regulatory frameworks for youth employment, with

respondents rating specific regulations based on familiarity. The Labour Institutions Act of 2007, which established key institutions like the Labour and Industrial Courts, was rated moderately effective by 43% of respondents and highly effective by another 43%; 13% found it minimally effective. Challenges cited include weakened enforcement resulting from the transfer of prosecution duties to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 2007 was deemed moderately effective by 48% and highly effective by an equal percentage and credited for improving workplace safety and health. Implementation barriers were noted, however, including limited resources, low stakeholder awareness, and a focus on the formal sector, excluding the informal sector that employs most youth.

The Refugees Act of 2021, which regulated the employment and integration of refugees, was rated minimally effective by 35% of respondents, reflecting gaps in addressing youth unemployment within refugee communities.

Key-informant respondents emphasized the need for regular updates to existing labour laws to address emerging market demands. Most policymakers (82%) strongly agreed that stricter penalties for noncompliance and adaptive legislation were critical for fostering a productive, equitable, and competitive labour market and for protecting workers' rights, promoting decent work, and ensuring the continued relevance of labour regulations.

5.3 Monitoring and Evaluation in Program Design

Addressing youth unemployment requires sustainable and scalable programs, yet findings reveal mixed success in integrating these elements into program design. While 39% of respondents viewed the incorporation of sustainability and scalability as having been largely achieved, 42% rated it as moderate, and 18% perceived it as low. Programs often lack frameworks to ensure that benefits extend beyond the initial intervention period. Short-term training without follow-up support or clear pathways to employment limits lasting impact. Moreover, the absence of mechanisms to measure long-term outcomes hinders effective adaptation and scalability. Policymakers are urged to prioritize sustainability and scalability by establishing frameworks for long-term impact, integrating follow-up support and adapting programs to evolving labour-market conditions. Similarly, monitoring and evaluation practices in youth programs showed

mixed outcomes. While 43% of respondents believed monitoring and evaluation was incorporated to a great extent, 35% viewed it as moderate, and 22% saw it as low. Weak monitoring and evaluation frameworks lead to ineffective resource allocation and missed opportunities for improvement. Programs with robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks can better demonstrate accountability and learn from implementation, underscoring the need for systematic integration of evaluation metrics in youth-program design and execution.

5.4 Hinderances to Successful Program Implementation

Youth programs in Kenya face multiple challenges that limit their effectiveness, including poor program design, low awareness, insufficient funding, mismanagement, inadequate stakeholder collaboration, and weak evaluation mechanisms. Among these, inadequate funding emerges as the most significant obstacle, with 85% of policymakers highlighting it as a major constraint. Unpredictable funding streams and insufficient budgets undermine program quality and limit reach and impact.

Program mismanagement and rent-seeking practices are also prevalent, cited by 80% of respondents as critical issues. These included limited political inclusivity and poor financial controls such that resources were diverted from intended beneficiaries. Similarly, inadequate outreach and communication strategies regarding youth programs, reported by 77% of policymakers, restrict participation, particularly among rural and marginalized youth, who are often unaware of available opportunities.

Poor program design further compounds the problem, with 64% of respondents considered that factor to have made a significant contribution to ineffectiveness. Programs often fail to align with youth needs as the result of inadequate needs assessments, unrealistic goals, and rigid implementation frameworks. Inadequate collaboration among stakeholders, highlighted by 55% of policymakers, also hampers program execution. Limited coordination between government agencies, NGOs, private sector players, and youth has resulted in fragmented efforts and inefficiency.

Finally, weak impact evaluation, identified by 51% of respondents, limits the ability to measure program success and guide improvements. Insufficient data collection, unclear

indicators, and underutilized evaluation findings hinder evidence-based decision-making. Addressing these challenges requires enhanced funding, robust accountability mechanisms, targeted outreach, participatory program design, stakeholder collaboration, and systematic impact evaluation to maximize the potential of youth programs.

VI. Key Findings from Focus-Group Discussions

Findings regarding youth-employment programs were analysed along four broad themes: access to information; experience in participating in youth-employment programs; monitoring and evaluation; decent work and youth-employment programs. Participants were also asked to give recommendations on ways to improve youth-employment programs.

6.1 Awareness of Existing Government Programs That Assist Young People to Find Employment

Youth were generally more familiar with national youth-employment programs) compared to county-level initiatives, highlighting a need for increased promotion of county efforts. Focus-group discussions revealed high youth awareness of national government programs such as Youth Enterprise Development Fund, the Uwezo Fund, the National Government Affirmative Action Fund, and Kazi Mtaani. Participants recognized that these initiatives offered business funds, skill development, and public-works opportunities. Programs like Ajira Digital and government internships were also highlighted for their role in enhancing employability and self-employment. This high awareness was attributed to the fact that respondents had been beneficiaries of these programs, which they credited with providing skills, training, and financial support to improve their economic prospects and self-reliance. Despite high awareness of national youth-employment programs, focus-group discussions revealed limited knowledge of county-level initiatives, and awareness was lower in rural relative to largely urban counties. This may call for enhanced outreach mechanisms, ensuring information about youth programs is effectively communicated to the public.

Social-media platforms are the most popular channel for youth to find employment information, especially in urban areas. In rural counties like Busia, Siaya, West Pokot, and Bungoma, in contrast, social-media use is limited, and referrals from local chiefs, churches, friends,

and youth officers are key information sources. This digital divide highlights the need for blended communication approaches to ensure the inclusion of rural youth who may lack access to digital platforms.

6.2 Experience in Participation in Government Youth-Employment Programs

Participants shared their experiences in applying for government youth-employment programs. Though the experiences of youth varied according to the program they participated in, the discussion can be summarized into challenges experienced when applying and participating in youth-employment initiatives and benefits gained from participation.

Youth face several challenges in accessing employment programs, including lengthy and cumbersome application processes, such as those for Youth Enterprise Development Fund and the Uwezo Fund, which discourage participation, as well as delays in fund disbursement and minimal feedback. Limited political inclusivity, especially in programs such as the Uwezo Fund, in which legislators are patrons, undermines fairness and limits access for genuine applicants. Group formation requirements for some funds create additional hurdles because negative group dynamics or disbandment may disrupt sustainability. The digital divide also presents barriers, with rural youth citing limited access to smartphones and internet as a challenge, while urban youth preferred online platforms.

Youth highlighted several benefits of participating in youth-employment programs, particularly enterprise funds, training, and skills development initiatives. Financial literacy and business-management training were especially appreciated, with Youth Enterprise Development Fund and Uwezo Fund applicants valuing entrepreneurship training conducted before funds disbursement. Post-disbursement mentorship on money management and record-keeping further supported their success. Participants in skill development programs, national youth forums, and internships also noted gaining employability skills and forming valuable networks, which enhanced their career prospects and opportunities for growth. However, where pre-disbursement training was lacking, such as in Garissa County, youth reported challenges that hindered their businesses.

6.3 Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms in Youth-Employment Programs

Monitoring and evaluation of youth-employment programs remains inconsistent and often lacked vigour, depending upon the engagement level of project staff. In some counties, follow-up is entirely absent or occurs only in cases of loan defaults. Program officers frequently gathered information on outputs and beneficiary progress through phone calls, which, while cost-effective, posed risks of unverifiable reporting. Some youth noted that follow-ups were primarily conducted in cases of delayed or defaulted repayments, as seen in West Pokot County, while regular repayments often reduced the need for close monitoring. The intensity of follow-ups appeared to depend on individual officers, with some actively engaged and others less so. For instance, youth in Kericho and Nyamira reported no officer interaction after initial training. These disparities highlight the inconsistent implementation of monitoring efforts across counties, which can affect the overall success and accountability of the programs and suggests a need for improved and standardized follow-up practices.

VII. Summary of Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

Kenya has made concerted efforts to address youth unemployment through policies and the implementation of various youth-employment programs. At the national level, Kenya's programs offer a variety of services to young people, including skills development, overseas employment, and comprehensive programs. At the county-government level, various youth policies and programs are being implemented. In general, programs that provide skills training or offer grants for start-ups are the most prevalent among the cluster of interventions. The overall outlook is that few interventions targeting youth employment have been rigorously evaluated. Of the few that have been evaluated, only a handful have been evaluated using randomized control trials.

7.1 Effectiveness of Stand-Alone vs. Comprehensive Programs

The overarching finding is that, while Kenya has implemented various strategies to enhance youth employment, stand-alone youth-employment programs—such as public-works initiatives and skills training, which are more prevalent—have been less effective than comprehensive, multi-faceted programs. While stand-alone interventions aimed at improving labour-market efficiency and entrepreneurship-support programs have successfully created youth-employment opportunities by offering flexibility, technical training, and performance-based pay, challenges remain. These include unsustainable funding, misalignment with labour-market needs, limited long-term employment prospects after program completion, restricted access to credit, and a lack of tailored business-development services for small enterprises.

In addition, skills training and efforts to improve training programs are widely implemented. Education and training among Kenyan youth aged 15-34, however, reflect both progress and persistent challenges. Transition rates to tertiary education remain low, with only about 15% of youth continuing to higher education. A significant mismatch exists between the skills imparted by the education system and the demands of the labour market, leaving many graduates without the practical and technical competencies needed for high-growth sectors such as information and communication technology and manufacturing. This gap affects the creative industries as well, in which formal education provides outdated technology, weak industry linkages, and limited exposure to training in creative skills. While enrolment in technical and vocational education and training institutions has increased, insufficient funding, outdated curricula, and limited youth interest has continued to plague these institutions.

7.2 Comprehensive Programs and Other Sector-Based Interventions

Comprehensive programs that combine various aspects of the above interventions have had more success in creating employment for youth. These programs' success stems from their comprehensive strategies, which include tailored training, access to financial resources, and collaboration with private sector partners to ensure alignment with labour market demands. Comprehensive youth-employment programs are multifaceted initiatives that offer a combination of services such as skills training, internships, business support, and policy development. An

example of such a program is the Kenya Youth Employment and Opportunities Project, which targets youth aged 18 to 29 with education levels up to form four or below. The project provided training, internships, and business grants to Kenyan youth. As a result, approximately 86% of participants secured employment or became self-employed, with many experiencing income increases in income the ability to create additional jobs.

Although the digital economy and creative industries, such as arts, media, and entertainment, hold significant potential for youth employment, these sectors currently lack a cohesive policy framework to guide their development. Several draft policies which touch on Kenya's creative economy exist in draft form and are therefore not yet operational. These include the draft Film Policy and the draft Creative Economy Policy. Fast-tracking and operationalising these policies will facilitate full exploitation of related sub-sectors. In the recent past, the country has expanded youth-employment initiatives by tapping into the digital and the creative economy to harness opportunities in arts and sports. Inconsistent tracking of their impact has made it difficult to assess their effectiveness in addressing youth unemployment, however.

7.3 Policy Implications and Levers

The policy levers for youth employment are key tools and strategies that governments and institutions can use to create job opportunities, improve employability, and address the challenges young people face in the labour market. Based on the study findings, of these include:

Education and skills development that focuses on equipping youth with practical, market-relevant skills for various industries. This includes focusing on technical, vocational, and Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics education. Efforts to expand and encourage work-based learning through on-the-job training, apprenticeships, and internships are commendable. For Kenya, investing in digital skills is key to equip youth with the digital literacy and information and communication technology skills they will require for the evolving job market.

Labour-market policies shall play a crucial role in creating jobs. Measures include public-works programs and use of employment quotas in government procurement and public-sector hiring. Enhancing entrepreneurship support by reducing bureaucratic barriers, speeding up all processes including youth-friendly financial services, and providing mentorship, training, and business advisory services will help young entrepreneurs start and expand their businesses.

Simplifying registration processes and reducing bureaucratic delays makes it easier for young people to start and run businesses.

One avenue for expanding the public sector includes expanding interagency collaborations, public-private partnerships to co-create employment programs, internship opportunities, and mentorship for young workers. Collaboration among government ministries (e.g., education, labour, information and communication technology and stakeholders) to create cohesive and comprehensive youth-employment policies and encourage public and private investments in innovation hubs and business incubators are key to making sure young innovators thrive.

Addressing population growth and dependency ratios can ensure sustainable employment opportunities, and the engagement of young people in creating and implementing policies ensures their needs and aspirations are represented. By adopting these policy levers, Kenya can better address youth unemployment, foster inclusive growth, and position its young population as a driving force for economic development.

VIII. Findings and Recommendations

The key findings highlight several necessary interventions, and while each Youth-Employment Program category can be enhanced, the overarching priority is to introduce comprehensive, integrated programs that combine skills training, entrepreneurship support, and labour-market interventions. Additionally, establishing a robust monitoring and evaluation framework is crucial to ensure accountability, track progress, and measure long-term impact. This will enable data-driven decision-making, improve program efficiency, and enhance the sustainability of initiatives. These approaches can be supported by specific interventions as highlighted below for each of the program categories:

8.1 Making the Labour Market Work Better

To improve public-works programs in Kenya, the government in collaboration with other stakeholders to:

- A. Design programs with more flexibility in work schedules to increase accessibility for diverse groups, including students and caregivers.
- B. Incorporate training to increase chances for business startup and long-term employment.
- C. Actively involve local leaders and stakeholders in the planning and implementation of public-works programs to ensure relevance, local buy-in, and alignment with community needs.
- D. Improve internet access and expand digital infrastructure to promote equitable participation in digital public works initiatives. This includes providing affordable connectivity, equipping participants with necessary digital tools, and delivering targeted digital-literacy training.

8.2 Entrepreneurship-Support Programs

There is a need to:

- A. Offer enhanced mentorship programs for youth-owned start-ups.
- B. Provide business development services such as financial literacy, business planning, and market access.
- C. Create innovation hubs for youth to create prototypes and scale ideas, focusing on green businesses and technology.
- D. Delink all funds from politics and consider an independent impact evaluation of the funds to complement the process.
- E. Put in place continual rather than one-off engagement with political players to overcome challenges that emanate from political-economical aspects. To achieve

this, youth-employment programs need to integrate political analysis into their design and implementation.

8.3 Skills Training

To address the challenges related to skills training, the country will need to enhance its efforts, which should include:

- A. Establish/infuse industry-relevant training interventions (in TVETs and universities) to equip youth with technical, digital, and soft skills and ensure industry relevance;
- B. Partner with industries to provide internships and apprenticeships; and institutionalize effective school-to-work transition programs;
- C. Promote short-term certification programs aligned with market demand (e.g., information and communication technology, agriculture, agri-business, renewable energy);
- D. Enhance technical and vocational education and training and university training through practical training relevant to such industries as manufacturing, information and communication technology and creative industries; and
- E. Upgrade institutions of higher learning with state-of-the-art digital infrastructure to support training in animation, game design, and digital media.

8.4 Making Training Programs Work Better

To improve effectiveness of training programs, holistic approaches that integrate financial support, industry partnerships, and targeted interventions, such as rural outreach and employer incentives, are essential. Specific interventions for Kenya include the need to:

- A. Offer more incentives such as scholarships for individuals pursuing further education. In addition, encourage initiatives to sponsor youth training.

- B. Conduct regular labour-market assessments to ensure training programs address current and future skill demands, particularly in high-growth sectors like information and communication technology, green energy, and healthcare.
- C. Collaborate with industries to design curricula that reflect practical requirements combined with flexible schedules and accessible facilities.
- D. Develop e-learning platforms and mobile applications to deliver training to youth in remote and under-served areas and integrate digital skills as a core component of all training programs.
- E. Encourage continuous upskilling through modular training and certifications that allow workers to adapt to changing industry requirements.

8.5 Comprehensive Programs

The recommendations include the need to expand geographic coverage, include marginalized groups, and enhance funding mechanisms through public-private partnerships to support the scaling-up of successful interventions. More robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks are needed to ensure accountability and measurement of long-term impact. For the creative economy, funding support should be increased through government, private sector, and international organizations to expand access and improve the quality of youth programs.

Additional interventions for those who create artistically include the establishment of mentorship programs and internships for long-term skill development and the development of comprehensive alumni networks and county-level professional networks for continuous engagement and effective design of youth programs. It will be important to promote holistic industry growth by investing in training for behind-the-scenes roles such as technical production, scriptwriting, and sound engineering, among others.

IX. Research Gaps

While many programs report short-term outputs—such as participation rates or immediate job placements—rigorous impact evaluations that track long-term sustainable employment outcomes are lacking, a limitation that is particularly evident in entrepreneurship-support initiatives in which the success rates of youth-led businesses, the specific barriers young entrepreneurs encounter, and the actual effectiveness of entrepreneurship training remain underexplored.

Similarly, although technical and vocational training programs and digital skills initiatives (for example, those under the Ajira Digital initiative) are widely promoted, insufficient evidence has been gathered regarding whether the skills imparted match rapidly evolving labour-market demands. In attempting to compare urban and rural contexts, few data exist regarding the ways in which geographic disparities influence access to and the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Moreover, while private-sector partnerships are increasingly touted as a means to provide job placements, internships, and mentorships, the extent to which these collaborations deliver sustainable employment opportunities for youth is not well documented. Finally, a critical review of policy, regulatory, and institutional frameworks is needed to identify systemic weaknesses that hinder the implementation and scaling up of youth-employment programs. Addressing this missing evidence through longitudinal studies and comprehensive impact evaluations will contribute significantly to designing more effective and contextually tailored youth employment strategies in Kenya.

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