

# A New Framework for Diversified Work Opportunities for Kenyan Youth

As the number of educated unemployed youth in Kenya increases, most are responding to the unemployment challenge by diversifying their livelihood options in multiple ways that are unique to their abilities and circumstances. It is critical that the Kenyan government restructure its current employment policies to reflect these new dynamics of finding work among educated youth and redefine what comprises a meaningful livelihood for young people. A youth-led framework with effective index measures would ensure that policy interventions match the aspirations, abilities, and realities of young people who are diversifying their work options during times of employment uncertainty.

## Rising rates of unemployed educated youth in Kenya

Kenyan youth make up 60 per cent of the working population yet their contribution to economic development remains significantly low, posing a great challenge to sustaining the growth envisaged by government.

Through the National Youth Policy of 2006, the subsequent policy directives addressing young people, and numerous non-state supported youth empowerment programmes, the Kenyan government envisaged investing in building the capacity of youth through targeted interventions that address specific needs in education, skills and training, and gainful employment as an imperative for national development.

In 2010, the Kenyan government invested 17.2 per cent of its expenditure and 6.7 per cent of its GDP on education provision. The free and compulsory primary education and subsidised secondary education policies resulted in an increased youth literacy rate of 86 per cent in 2015 with up to 50 per cent of young people enrolling into secondary education from 2013. Approximately 200,000 students proceed to higher learning institutions annually but only a small fraction of these secure decent employment afterwards. With the unemployment rate at 10.4 per cent, Kenya's population now comprises of an increasingly skilled youth workforce who have fewer opportunities to contribute to the economy and attain recognition as adults.

## Lessons from previous youth policies

Programmes such as the Kazi Kwa Vijana, the Youth Fund, and Uwezo Fund have received enormous state and non-state financial backing aimed at empowering unemployed youth. Yet there is no evidence that these projects have successfully increased decent employment opportunities or even inspired more youth to pursue such options. Alongside allegations of mismanagement, one major reason for failure is that the majority of these initiatives offer temporary work and employ group-based entrepreneurship models. Additionally, group financing starts at very low amounts to enable the group to realise decent income in the first phases of developing their enterprises. Findings from a recent study of the diversified livelihoods of Kenyan educated youth illustrate how such group-working approaches are misaligned with young people's aspirations and preferred models. More so, these opportunities barely benefit the neediest youth who often lack the required collateral to access finance, or even the enthusiasm to become entrepreneurs. The programmes also fail to acknowledge that youth unemployment is not just about lack of jobs, but a dispossession of young people meaning they have less social and cultural capital which is needed to run successful enterprises or become employed.

## Lessons from educated unemployed youth about diversified work opportunities

While educated youth might be out of the formal labour markets, they engage in diverse activities,

most of which earn them some capital and propel them to economic independence. Usually, these activities are individualised, innovative and entrepreneurial and often referred to as side-businesses or 'side-hustles', implying that one engages in several of them to earn a decent living.

Preliminary research shows that sometimes it is not the occupation that matters, but whether a young person earns an income and the respect that transitions into adulthood. Essentially, these side-activities shape young people's work aspirations and have become integral to how they envision themselves as productive and respectable individuals in society. As such, any policies targeted to create employment for young people must be concerned with the role of education in reconfiguring youth work aspirations towards diverse livelihoods in a context

where the changing labour markets offer limited employment opportunities.

In the broader framework of youth livelihoods, understanding multiple work opportunities is important because the circumstances under which young people now get employed are characterised by flux, temporary contracts, and a trend towards the informal sector. Globally, side-activities and associated identities have been related to the precarity of work arising from lack of social security and work without contracts. As work opportunities emerge (and others shrink), a person's aspirations are constantly changed and their expectations are reformulated to reflect what is possible and rational in the present and the future. Hence, the perception and ability of young people to earn incomes from diverse opportunities should be capitalised and enhanced.

## Policy recommendations

- 1. A youth-led framework:** Strategies to implement the government directive to mainstream youth in every ministry and government agency, the 2010 Constitution and the Vision 2030, will benefit from a framework that considers the flexibility of young people to earn meaningful livelihoods from diverse work options. Understanding these opportunities, measuring their impact on youth wellbeing, and investing in the most feasible ones, will assist the educated youth in fast transitioning into meaningful livelihoods. It will also support various government and non-government agencies to design programmes that can include other youth whose opportunities are diminishing. In particular, policies should strive to create an enabling environment by sustaining demand-driven skills training, models for mentoring, access to necessary resources, as well as a mechanism for providing safety nets to young people to avoid burn out and exploitation through entrepreneurship models.
- 2. An index of measurement:** To ensure success, the new national youth employment policy framework must address youth unemployment from the viewpoint of how to effectively utilise the youthful workforce to contribute to an inclusive economy rather than from the viewpoint of their poverty, social organisation, urbanisation, and political unrest. The new policy framework should have an index to measure the extent to which any side-work opportunity can be considered decent in the short- and long term. In doing so, state and non-state actors will be able to assess and widen the range of opportunities for young people to meaningfully contribute to both formal and informal economies. This requires investment in research on the multiple ways that young people respond to employment uncertainties, the range of capitals they accumulate or lose, and the implications for existing policies.



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## Further reading

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