

## ***Strengthening Youth Mental Resilience Amidst Precarious Economic Landscape in Africa***

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***Image description: Female Youth Participant during YLDP Debate held in 2023***

### **Introduction:**

According to the International Labour Organisation, more than one in four young people in Africa (about 72 million) are not in employment, education or training.<sup>1</sup> The challenges of unemployment and access to decent work impacting African youth are also multifaceted, with over 80 percent of young people on the continent employed in informal work.<sup>2</sup>

This is evidenced by Jane's story, who after four years of tertiary education, eventually completed the mandatory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in Nigeria. To escape the unemployment wave, she accepted an offer to start a Social Media Associate role in a FinTech organisation, whereas her career dream was to be an Agronomist. What Jane did not know was that ten years later, if she did not upskill and mentally prepare she could fall back into the labor market.

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<sup>1</sup> [International Labour Organisation African Youth Face Pressing Challenges in the Transition from School to Work](#)

<sup>2</sup> International labour Organisation, World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024

Mental Resilience refers to a person's ability to adapt to change and uncertainty.<sup>3</sup> In a world with so many unpredictable events and unforeseen economic challenges, Mental Resilience is paramount for young people to thrive and scale through life's challenges. This opinion piece highlights the strategies for strengthening the mental resilience of African youth amid a volatile economic landscape.

### **Why Should Young People Embrace Mental Resilience?**

About 11 people per 100,000 die annually due to suicide in the African region. This statistic is higher than the global average of nine per 100,000 people.<sup>4</sup> African youths are faced with several challenges early in life such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, political instability, climate change, and so on. With a population of more than 400 million young people aged between 15 to 35 years,<sup>5</sup> Mental Resilience is a life attribute every African Youth should build and develop.

**Mental Resilience Enhances Adaptability:** For many young people, the journey to facing life's challenges begins at adolescence, where they are faced with different choices, ranging from social to career choices, and continues till adulthood. Mental Resilience is important because it helps an individual bounce back from life's challenges and not wane out. Mental Resilience is essential for young people to surmount the different phases of life. Indeed, to succeed in a dynamic world, young people need to embrace Mental Resilience so that they can be well-adapted and thrive. This is affirmed in the words of Socrates *"The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new."*

**Mental Resilience fosters Innovation:** The youthful age is a time that comes with opportunities as well as challenges. Mental resilience not only promotes a culture and attitude innovation to address diverse problems such as unemployment, climate change, food shortages, and health inequities affecting the African continent. A study published in the International Journal of Innovation Management, Esade Innovation experts Lotta Hassi and Satu Rekonen of Aalto University revealed that while some individuals only saw dead ends, opportunity-focused participants were able to see opportunities in different situations and shared with their teams several possible routes for the project, and this played a key role in moving the team forward into experiments, and promoted innovative behaviour also when unexpected opportunities arose.<sup>6</sup>

Former South Sudanese refugee-turned-entrepreneur, James Thuch Madhier (Founder, Rainmaker Enterprise), was born into the second Sudanese Civil War. As a child, he witnessed the 1998 famine, however did not allow these challenges to deter him. Driven by resilience and innovation, he invented solar-powered water supply and management systems that has created jobs, support livelihoods, enable year-round local food production, improved community health, empowered women and youth, preserved and regenerated ecosystems, and sustained peace in South Sudan. These innovative systems have been transforming the lives of rural communities in South Sudan by providing mechanized farming services to smallholder farmers and community members, thereby helping to reduce food insecurity in the region.

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<sup>3</sup> [Kendra Cherry 2023 How Resilience Helps You Cope with Life's Challenges](#)

<sup>4</sup> [African Renewal 2-23 Reversing suicide, mental health crisis in Africa](#)

<sup>5</sup> [African Union - Youth Development](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Esade Entrepreneurship Institute - 12 Characteristics of Innovative People](#)

Reinventing alternatives is the bedrock of innovation and this is very crucial for mental resilience to be achieved. The results of the alternatives not only benefit the Innovator but also the society where the Innovator lives if such Innovation is up-scaled.

**Mental Resilience Enhances Value:** Mental Resilience helps to heighten personal value. Each setback or experience has in it one lesson or the other which can become a resource to guide in preventing the recurrence of past mistakes. This can be achieved through Reflection. The art of Reflection involves thinking back on your experiences, considering what you could have done differently, and how you could approach similar experiences in the future. Reflecting on personal experiences can aid not only individuals mental health but also enhance well-being and positive state. Embracing personal reflection enables young people to acknowledge mistakes, cull learnings from them, evaluate options, and identify what can be done differently, thereby leading to sound decisions.

**Mental Resilience Enhances Uptake of New Opportunities:** The fact that some opportunities were missed does not mean that new ones will not emerge. Young people who are mentally resilient are better fitted for new opportunities. Mentally resilient young people anticipate new opportunities and take up such.

#### **Strategies Young People Can Adopt in Building Mental Resilience:**

**Build Positive Supportive Social Connections:** Imagine a world with only one individual. No man is an island, definitely, we need people to thrive. Building strong and healthy relationships with people that share ethical values and have a common purpose can provide the vital support needed during times of crisis. Young people can connect with supportive networks through volunteering, and social or networking engagements.

**Continuous Learning:** Another way young people can build mental resilience is through Continuous Learning. By engaging in Continuous learning through Self-reflection, Upskilling and experience sharing with trusted Resource Persons, young people can gain valuable knowledge and skills that can make them relevant and prepared for future opportunities.

**Practice Self-care:** Tough times can hit hard. Young people can build Mental Resilience during tough seasons through Self-care Practices. Youth should take some time out to attend to their needs and feelings by taking adequate rest, eating a healthy diet, practising mindfulness through meditation, yoga, and keeping a gratitude journal. Over the years, LEAP Africa has contributed to enhancing health and wellbeing of Africa youth through various initiatives such as the Youth Leadership Development programme and iLEAD programme. In 2019, iLEAD students from Mary Haney School, Akwa Ibom, Nigeria provided a health clinic within their school and through crowdfunding furnished the health clinic with shelves, tables and chairs, beds as well as sheets and medical drugs thereby providing an avenue for students to access quality healthcare care services and enhance their mental health and wellbeing. By prioritising mental health and wellbeing, young people would be able to thrive and cope despite dynamic economic challenges.

Youth Development organisations in Africa such as LEAP Africa have been at the forefront of facilitating youth mental resilience through the various employability and technical vocational training programmes such as ARIISE, iLEAD, and eLearning Boot Camp. Furthermore,



NonGovernmental organisations such as 8th Gear Hub, Youth Hub Africa,, Paradigm Initiative and others can also foster mental resilience among African youth by providing resources and mentorship programmes.

**Celebrate your Small Wins:** Young people need to celebrate their small wins. By celebrating small wins, youth can gain the strength and courage to move forward on their goals. Celebrating small wins can also help build self-confidence that results in Mental Resilience needed to stay motivated to pursue better opportunities.

**Mentorship:** Young people sometimes experience setbacks due to wrong choices and decision-making as a result of their naivety and lack of guidance. Leveraging on support received through Mentors can provide crucial support needed for a young person to bounce back after a setback or tough experience. This can enhance a sense of optimism about the future and Mental Resilience in the young person who is a mentee.

**Conclusion:**

Although unprecedented economic climes are inevitable, developing and building mental resilience is a vital life skill that would go a long way to help every young person in Africa to continue to remain relevant and maximise their potentials.