Assessing Preparedness of African Youth for the Future of Work and Artificial Intelligence *by Abisoye Ajose and Akolade Oladipupo*

Image source: Uche Pedro, Founder BellaNaija with 2017 Social Innovators Programme class

Introduction

According to the McKinsey Global Institute's Future of Work post-COVID-19 report, the pandemic accelerated remote work, e-commerce, and automation trends, with up to 25 percent more workers than previously estimated potentially needing to switch occupations.[1]

Over the past three years, a notable upsurge in demand for Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Tech-related jobs has occurred. This article explores some of the factors affecting the preparedness of young people in Africa for the Future of Work and Artificial Intelligence, and proffers recommendations for relevant stakeholders.

Preparedness of African Youth for the Future of Work and Artificial Intelligence

The employability of young people in Africa for emerging roles depends on various factors, primarily technical and soft skills. AI and Tech-related roles often require a background in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. However, less than 25 percent of African higher education students are enrolled in STEM programmes.[2] Findings have further indicated that African education systems are not equipping students with the right technical, cognitive, and soft skills

[1] Lund S, Madgavkar A, Manyika A, Smit S, Ellingrud K, and Olivia Robinson. McKinsey Global Institute The future of Work After COVID_19 Available from: https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19#/

[2] Andrew Mutsvangwa and Nicholas Zezekwa (2021). STEM Education: A Ray of Hope for African Countries. Available from: https://doi.org/10.15294/usej.v10i2.45746

required for work in the present age, with many employers stating that graduates often require additional training in Information and Communication Technologies.[3]

In Africa, the evolving labour market demands are not commensurate with the skill sets of the youth workforce available. Reports have shown that skill and educational mismatches are pervasive in Africa and could be as high as 40 percent in some cases.[4,5]

Another factor that limits the preparedness of African youth for AI roles is the poorly structured data ecosystem. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) describes national data ecosystems as being at the developing stages of the African data revolution.[6] Currently, few African countries have Labour Market Information Systems (LMIS), and where available, they are dated and limited in scope, providing little value added for employers and employees.[7] There is thus a need for functional LMIS that can be employed to improve outcomes for employers and employees in the evolving labour market.

High levels of structural inequality are another limiting factor. The Future of Work and AI is powered by a fusion of ICTs, technological devices, and supporting infrastructure such as electricity and telecom networks. A vast digital divide still exists between youth residing in rural and urban areas. Youth living in rural areas often lack access to ICT infrastructure and opportunities such as ICT job fairs and ICT training resources, thereby limiting their employability in the evolving job market.

Another pivotal challenge is the unprecedented changes in government policies. For instance, the recent Naira redesign policy and removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria have had negative impacts on the youth of the country, with reports of debilitating effects on their psychological and financial well-being.[8] These factors could further compound the existing challenges limiting their employability and performance in the labour market.

Key Actions for Bridging the Gap

Considering the indisputable changes in the labour market, African youth need to upskill before joining the workforce to minimize skill mismatch.

Upskilling can be done via E-learning platforms such as LEAP Africa's E-learning platform, Data Science Nigeria, Coursera, Udemy, Udacity, LinkedIn Learning, and others.

Furthermore, young people can also proactively join professional networks and reach out to organizations such as the African Coding Network, Blockchain Council, CWW Tech Africa, Data Scientist Network, National Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics and others. Young people need to leverage on free e-learning resources and trainings provided by African Coding Network, and

---

[3] https://acetforafrica.org/research-and-analysis/insights-ideas/articles/african-youth-lack-the-skills-to-thrive-in-the-future-world-of-work-labor-market-information-systems-offer-a-solution/

[4] https://aec.afdb.org/en/papers/youth-jobs-skill-and-educational-mismatches-africa-72#

[5] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1266810/young-working-population-with-skills-mismatches-in-africa-by-educational-level/

[6] https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/ACS/africa-data-revolution-report-2016.pdf

[7] https://www.fhi360.org/resource/roadmap-development-labor-market-information-systems

[8] https://leapafrica.substack.com/p/cash-scarcity-report

National Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics who also have a pool of experts and experienced professionals that can help enhance youth employability and skill development.

Lastly, The government needs to prioritize reinforcing the existing data ecosystem so that it can be accessible to young people. Strengthening existing data ecosystems implies investment in ICT infrastructure and systems that support stable electricity telecom networks, without which integration of AI cannot be successful.

Conclusion

African youth are resilient and possess enormous potential, which, if properly harnessed, would enable them to fit into the emerging field of Artificial Intelligence. However, this depends on the readiness of African youth to pursue these existing opportunities and navigate the challenges. For this transition to be feasible, active collaboration between young people, the Government, and various tech and AI organizations is essential.