

Unlocking Decent Work for African Youth: Aligning Policy, Skills, and Mindsets for Dignified Futures

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Africa's rapidly growing youth population is often described as the continent's greatest asset—or its greatest looming crisis. According to United Nations projections, by 2050, one in every four people globally, and more than a third of the world's youth aged 15 to 24, will be African.¹ This demographic shift represents an unparalleled opportunity to catalyse economic growth and social transformation. Yet for millions of young Africans, this potential remains unrealised, constrained by entrenched structural, educational, and cultural barriers that limit access to decent work.

Each year, an estimated 11 million young people enter Africa's labour market, but only about 3 million formal

jobs are created to absorb them,² a stark imbalance that deepens economic insecurity and social vulnerability. The core challenge is not merely generating jobs, but unlocking sustainable, dignified work that equips and empowers Africa's youth to thrive in a rapidly evolving global economy.

In June 2025, LEAP Africa convened stakeholders for the Dissemination Wednesday Webinar themed "[Unlocking Decent Work for African Youth](#)." The panel discussion, moderated by [Anthonia Nnabuko](#), Head of People, Culture, and Administration at LEAP Africa, brought together three dynamic voices: [Precious Ajoonu](#), Founder of SkillsHQ; [Omotayo Abraham](#), Senior Project Manager at EyeCity Africa; and [Mercy](#)

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). [World Population Prospects 2022: Summary of Results](#). UN DESA/POP/2022/TR/NO. 3.

² World Bank. (2023). [Delivering Growth to People through Better Jobs. Africa's Pulse, No. 28 \(October 2023\)](#). Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-2043-4. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO

[Oguche](#), Senior Programme Coordinator at LEAP Africa. Together, they provided a compelling, multi-layered exploration of Africa's youth employment crisis and proposed actionable solutions rooted in cross-sector collaboration, mindset transformation, and policy reform.

Throughout the discussion, three critical imperatives emerged:

- **The informal sector is Africa's greatest untapped engine for growth.** When formalised and supported, it can provide millions of dignified jobs.
- **Mindset shifts, soft skills, and future-oriented thinking are as critical as technical competence.** Employability is now defined by adaptability and critical thinking.
- **Collaborative, cross-border ecosystems must replace isolated, country-specific approaches.** Africa's future of work will be built through shared learning, innovation, and policy coherence.

Though this conversation was led by voices from Nigeria, the insights reflect trends, challenges, and opportunities shared across diverse African contexts. The key ideas presented here offer a continental perspective to guide policymakers, educators, and private sector actors in shaping a dignified future of work for all African youth.

The Informal Sector: Formalising Africa's Hidden Engine

Across Africa, the informal sector accounts for more than 85% of all employment.³ Yet, this sector remains heavily stigmatised and largely unsupported by policy structures that could help elevate its contribution to national development. Precious Ajoonu, Pioneer Director-General of the John Odigie-Oyegun Public Service Academy (JOOPSA) in Edo State, Nigeria, brought deep insight into this issue. Drawing from her leadership of large-scale public sector training and her previous role heading youth engagement for the MasterCard Foundation's *Young*

Nigeria Works initiative, she drilled on the urgent need to dismantle the perception that informal work is synonymous with menial, low-value labour.

She argued that informal sector workers, from artisans to street vendors, are not only essential to Africa's economies but represent a scalable pathway to dignity and prosperity if properly formalised.

Drawing parallels to the structured informal economies in Benin Republic, Ajoonu emphasised how well-regulated artisan certification programmes have allowed workers in that country to access better contracts, cross-border employment, and social benefits. In 2001, the government of Benin introduced a policy on technical and vocational education and training that prioritises modernising traditional apprenticeships.^{4,5} As part of this initiative, two qualifications were established: the Trade Qualification Certificate (CQM) and the Vocational Training Certificate (CQP), to formally recognise skills gained through informal apprenticeships, replacing the traditional release ceremonies.⁶

The Beninese model demonstrates that with the right policy environment, informal work can be systemically recognised and valued. Similar successes can be found in Kenya's *Jua Kali* sector, where the government's introduction of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) framework has legitimised the skills of informal workers and improved their marketability.⁷

Ethiopia's Micro and Small Enterprise Development Strategy further illustrates the transformative power of formalising informal work.⁸ Over the past decade, Ethiopia has scaled thousands of small enterprise hubs, providing business support, skills training, and credit access.⁹ These centres have created millions of

³ Kiaga, A., & Leung, V. (2020). [The transition from the informal to the formal economy in Africa](#); ILO Global Employment Policy Review Background Paper N°4. International Labour Organization. Retrieved July 7, 2025

⁴ Republic of Benin. (2001). *National policy on technical and vocational education and training*.

⁵ Savadogo, B. (2021). [Case study: Update on improving apprenticeship in the informal economy in Benin](#). International Labour Organization. Retrieved July 7, 2025

⁶ Republic of Benin. (2005). Decree No. 2005-117 of 17 March 2005 on the State recognition of professional, technical, and general skills acquired through apprenticeship or the practice of a qualifying professional activity or trade.

⁷ International Labour Organization (ILO). (2024). [Kenya's Journey to Recognizing Informal Skills: The Making of the Recognition of Prior Learning Policy](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

⁸ Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (MoUDH). (2016). [Micro and small enterprise development policy and strategy](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

⁹ African Development Bank (AfDB). (2015). [Development Effectiveness Review 2015 – Ethiopia Country Review](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

jobs, lifted workers out of poverty, and empowered many to transition from the informal to the formal economy.

Yet, while these examples provide a template, the challenge persists in much of Africa, where many artisans and small traders remain excluded from social protection, bank loans, and standardised certification systems. Elevating the informal sector requires governments to rethink policy priorities by integrating informal workers into national employment strategies, facilitating affordable access to healthcare and pensions, and ensuring that technical and vocational skills are validated and transferable across borders.

Soft Skills and Digital Agility: Preparing for a Fluid Labour Market

Technical competence alone is no longer sufficient in the modern African workplace. Omotayo Abraham, an innovation consultant with extensive experience driving livelihood-focused initiatives across Africa, emphasised that soft skills—such as adaptability, effective communication, and professionalism—are increasingly the currency of employability. Employers, he explained, are no longer simply hiring based on what candidates know; they are hiring based on how candidates think, how they engage with teams, and how quickly they can learn and adjust to evolving workplace demands.

In Ghana, the ‘Boosting Digital Skills’ project stands as an example of a government-led initiative that has embraced this new reality.¹⁰ By training thousands of young people in digital marketing, coding, and cybersecurity, Ghana is actively positioning its youth to meet the demands of both local industries and the growing global gig economy.¹¹ Rwanda, similarly, has invested heavily in decentralised digital learning hubs that not only improve access to technology but

intentionally develop the soft skills needed for collaboration and entrepreneurial thinking.¹²

Yet, despite such efforts, many African career services remain trapped in outdated paradigms, focusing narrowly on helping job seekers craft the perfect CV or ace an interview. Abraham urged that this must change. Career services must evolve into dynamic training hubs that focus on bridging behavioural gaps, guiding young people to develop the confidence, resilience, and critical thinking necessary to succeed in rapidly changing work environments.

The growing influence of technology, particularly artificial intelligence, is reshaping employer expectations. It is no longer enough to know how to use basic digital tools such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel; youth must now engage with digital platforms strategically and creatively. In some African countries, including Nigeria, Rwanda, and Kenya, young people are already leveraging AI-powered platforms to access remote work, but across much of the continent, digital exclusion remains a significant barrier.^{13,14}

Efforts to close this divide must be deliberate. Programmes that embed digital fluency and soft skills training into primary, secondary, and tertiary education can prepare Africa’s youth not just to participate in the job market but to lead it.

Bridging the Education-to-Employment Divide

One of the most sobering reflections from the webinar was the deep disconnect between what African universities are teaching and what the labour market requires. Mercy Oguiche, an international development professional with significant experience in designing cross-sector youth employment initiatives across Africa, pointed out that many of the continent’s graduates are not trained for

¹⁰ International Telecommunication Union (ITU). (2022). [Ghana's underserved rural communities get a digital skills training boost](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

¹¹ Vaultz News. (2024). [GIFEC's digital skills initiative exceeds expectations, reaching over 22,000 Ghanaians](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

¹² Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). (2025). [In Study Trip, an Up-Close View of Rwanda's Digital Transformation Initiative](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

¹³ AltSchool Africa. (2025). [Why remote work is Africa's next big thing](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

¹⁴ Jobtech Alliance. (2023). [Platforms for Digitally-Delivered Work in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Landscape Scan II](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

high-demand sectors such as agritech, renewable energy, or the digital economy.

Drawing on insights from the 2024 *Future Work Africa* report,¹⁵ Oguiche argued that the gap is not merely about outdated syllabi; it reflects a deeper failure to engage industry leaders in shaping educational content. She emphasised the urgency of reimagining education as a responsive, future-oriented ecosystem, one that aligns with market realities and builds the mindset, agility, and capacity young Africans need to thrive.

Senegal has made notable progress by embedding employer-led input into its Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system, ensuring that students graduate with practical, market-driven skills that align with national growth sectors like solar energy, tourism, and ICT.^{16,17} Morocco has advanced this further by institutionalising apprenticeships within university and vocational programmes, ensuring that real-world exposure is an integral part of formal education.^{18,19} This model has yielded a more competent, job-ready workforce and has contributed to Morocco's growing competitiveness in manufacturing and service industries.²⁰

Across much of Africa, however, the educational system remains disconnected from employer needs, leading to a paradox where thousands of graduates remain unemployed while employers struggle to find qualified candidates. This persistent misalignment calls for urgent curriculum reforms, stronger partnerships between academia and industry, and the inclusion of flexible, modular learning that can adapt as markets evolve.

The success of Kenya's Ajira Digital programme, which equips young people with freelancing skills,²¹

demonstrates that market-aligned interventions can generate meaningful employment even within informal and non-traditional sectors. Governments and educators must therefore embrace a dynamic approach, one that actively anticipates the skills Africa will need in the next decade rather than training students for the jobs of the past.

Transforming Mindsets: Reframing Work and Success

At the heart of the webinar's reflections was a call for a profound mindset shift. Precious Ajoonu challenged young Africans to reconsider their perception of dignified work, urging them to move beyond the allure of prestige and instant success. She argued that true career growth requires patience, ethical conduct, and the ability to build reputation capital over time.

In many African societies, vocational and technical careers are often viewed as inferior to white-collar professions. This cultural bias pushes many young people into pathways that neither suit their strengths nor meet market demands.

Mauritius provides a compelling example of how this narrative can be reshaped. Through its Youth Employment Programme, the country has invested not only in job placement but also in mentorship that emphasises character development, sustainability, and resilience.^{22,23}

Côte d'Ivoire's Government Youth Programme (PJ-GOUV) similarly helps instil national pride, work ethic, and long-term career planning by embedding young people into local industries and social development projects.²⁴ These models demonstrate the power of government-led initiatives in shaping mindsets and reinforcing the value of all work as dignified.

¹⁵ Future Work Africa. (2024). [Designing Africa's future of work: Unveiling opportunities in Africa's evolving economy](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

¹⁶ International Labour Organization (ILO). (2021). [State of Skills - Senegal](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

¹⁷ German Office for International Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (GOVET). (2023). [Senegal: Reform of vocational education and training](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

¹⁸ ICEF Monitor. (2019). [Morocco prioritises vocational training and strengthens ties with China](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

¹⁹ UNESCO-UNEVOC. (nd.). [Work-based learning in Morocco](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

²⁰ Oxford Business Group. (2018). [Manufacturing industry central to Morocco's exports](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

²¹ Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA). (n.d.). [Ajira Digital Project](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

²² Ministry of Finance & Economic Development (Mauritius) (2014). [Youth Employment Programme \(YEP\) report](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

²³ Ramguttia, H. T., & Sanmukhiyab, C. (2021). A study into the effectiveness of the Youth Employment Programme (YEP) in Mauritius. *The European Journal of Social & Behavioural Sciences* 30(3): 2301-2218

²⁴ Pontié, E. (2024). [Mamadou Touré: "We need to invest massively in training"](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

The culture of short-term thinking, sometimes referred to as the "microwave success mentality," was highlighted as a dangerous barrier. Building sustainable careers and businesses, Ajoonu stressed, is akin to cathedral thinking, it requires long-term vision, incremental progress, and the willingness to invest years in mastering one's craft.

Omotayo Abraham added that mindset transformation must also address the growing risk of technological complacency. The digital tools that should empower young people are sometimes misused as shortcuts, rather than as instruments for genuine learning and growth. African youth must be taught to use technology as a lever for innovation, not as a substitute for competence.

Changing mindsets will require a collective effort involving parents, educators, policymakers, and the media. Career guidance must begin early, and success stories that showcase the dignity of informal work, entrepreneurship, and vocational excellence must be amplified across the continent.

Building Collaborative African Ecosystems

One of the most resounding conclusions from the discussion was that Africa's youth employment challenge cannot be solved in isolation. The solutions that work in Ghana can inform strategies in Nigeria. Lessons from Kenya can be adapted in Zambia. Africa's interconnectedness must become its strength.

Omotayo Abraham underscored the need for continental collaboration, pointing to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as a pivotal opportunity for scaling cross-border solutions. Harmonising vocational certifications, creating intra-African job matching platforms, and facilitating regional apprenticeships can foster talent mobility and ensure that youth across the continent can access opportunity wherever it exists.

Pan-African university networks such as the African Centres of Excellence, supported by the World Bank, already exemplify the benefits of cross-border

academic collaboration.²⁵ These centres have produced postgraduates who are not only highly skilled but also regionally competitive.²⁶

The International Labour Organization's Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth, which includes African countries like Ethiopia, Malawi, and Uganda, further illustrates the importance of multi-country knowledge exchange in developing scalable, rights-based employment solutions.²⁷

Africa's future workforce must be shaped by ecosystems that enable shared learning, policy coherence, and seamless mobility. Continental alignment on labour standards, youth empowerment policies, and certification frameworks will be essential to fully unlocking Africa's demographic potential.

Conclusion: Toward a More Inclusive Future of Work

Unlocking decent work for African youth is not a theoretical aspiration, it is an urgent, actionable priority. To achieve this, Africa must:

- **Formalise and dignify the informal sector** through certification, financing, and social protection.
- **Reform educational systems** to align with the digital age and high-growth sectors.
- **Invest in soft skills and mindsets** that promote resilience, integrity, and critical thinking.
- **Build collaborative, cross-border ecosystems** that foster mutual learning and policy coherence.

The future of African work is informal and formal, digital and physical, local and global. What it must always be is decent. Policymakers, educators, private sector leaders, and young people themselves all have a role to play in building a future where work is a pathway to dignity, prosperity, and collective growth.

²⁵ African Centre of Excellence (ACE). (n.d.). [About The Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence \(ACE\) Project](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025

²⁶ Dahlman, C. J., Bashir, S., Kanehira, N., & Tilmes, K. (2021). [The converging technology revolution and human capital: Potential and implications for South Asia](#). South Asia Development Forum. © World Bank. Retrieved July 7, 2025

²⁷ International Labour Organization (nd.). [Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth](#). Retrieved July 7, 2025