

The Long Game by LEAP Africa: Rethinking Africa's Leadership Pipeline Crisis

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Image Showing Participants of the Youth Leadership Programme

Somewhere in Lagos, Nairobi, or Accra right now, a twenty-six-year-old with a postgraduate degree is applying for a job that did not exist five years ago, at a salary that will not cover rent, in a city that was not built for the number of people now living in it. S/he is not unusual. Every year, [10-12 million young Africans](#) enter the labour market. Africa creates roughly three million formal jobs in the same period. The gap between those two numbers is not a statistic.

Leadership development is, admittedly, an odd place to start when confronting a problem of this magnitude. It is a principle and discipline differentiated by programmes that feel good and those that work.

[LEAP Africa](#), a 24 year old Pan African youth leadership development organization, has been making that distinction for over twenty years and aims to address this gap. For example, one of our long-running undergraduate programmes, the [Youth Leadership Programme](#) is not a conference. It runs over months, rooted in specific communities that challenge, and equip young people on a personal leadership journey demanding them to change the status quo rather than merely discuss

them. Civic projects, accountability mechanisms, real engagement with the institutions that actually govern daily life, not the ones that appear in textbooks.

What it has taught us in that five years and 7,100 alumni later is that the two dominant narratives about African youth are both inadequate. The pessimistic version holds that structural barriers are so entrenched that individual development is essentially beside the point. The optimistic version holds that a connected generation will organically produce the leaders the continent needs, and that technology will do the rest. The [Afrobarometer report](#) complicates both stories. Young Africans have not given up on democratic values. They have given up on specific institutions, and the distinction matters enormously for anyone trying to design an intervention that is actually responsive to what people believe.

The programmes that survive contact with that reality tend to share a few features that are mundane to describe but hard to execute. They are not imported. They do not treat the community as a backdrop. They invest in what happens after the training, which is usually where the real development occurs and where almost no funding goes.

There is a funding conversation sitting behind all of this that the development sector keeps deferring. Donors want results in three years, occasionally two. Leadership that changes institutions does not operate on that timeline. The evidence on this is not ambiguous. Multi-year, flexible investment produces outcomes that short-cycle programming cannot. What is ambiguous is whether anyone with money to give is willing to hear that argument and act on it, rather than simply nodding and then writing another three-year grant.

Publishing [evidence](#) from our work is one attempt to make the honest accounting the field needs. What we did, where, with whom, and what we can and cannot claim as a result. The next generation of organisations working on this across East Africa, West Africa, and beyond should not have to reconstruct that knowledge from scratch. Whether they will be able to build on it depends partly on whether we document it properly, and partly on whether the funding environment ever creates enough stability for institutional memory to accumulate. Neither is guaranteed.

The leadership deficit on this continent is a real thing. So is the capacity to close it. The distance between those two observations is not destiny. It is, mostly, a question of whether the money goes to the right places for long enough. As I have noted in the past, LEAP Africa's programmes and interventions take a life of their own; months and years after we have touched the individual, community, school, organisation, state, region and country. Even when we are unaware transformation is happening.