Teach Them to Lead, Not Just to Log In

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Africa is racing to give millions of young people digital skills. Without leadership -agency, ethics and voice- we risk training a generation of cheap digital labour instead of architects of dignified work.

Skilled, Connected and Powerless

In early 2023, journalists reported that young workers in Nairobi had been paid less than two dollars an hour to read and label some of the most disturbing content on the internet, so that one of the world's best-known AI chatbots could learn to avoid it. (*TIME*, January 2023.)

Those workers had exactly what every digital skills programme promises: ***digital training and a job in the new economy.*** What they did not have was bargaining power, protection, or a collective voice in the terms of their work.

Digital skills got them through the door. Nothing had prepared them for what was waiting on the other side.

Their story is not an argument against digital skills. Africa needs millions of young people who can code, design, analyse data and build with artificial intelligence. It is an argument that skills alone are not enough. A login gives access, but leadership decides what a young person does with it.



PHOTO: Young people in a tech-enabled LEAP Africa session.

The Skilling Rush and Its Blind Spot

Across the continent, governments and partners have launched ambitious digital skills drives. Nigeria's 3 Million Technical Talent (3MTT) programme aims to train 3 million tech talents by 2027, with 135,000 graduates having already completed their training as of early 2026. Similarly, Kenya's Ajira Digital programme set a target to engage 1 million youths in digital and online work, successfully training over 350,000 individuals to date. Together, these and similar national initiatives aim to prepare millions of young people for technology-enabled work.

The prize is real. Google and the International Finance Corporation projected that Africa's internet economy could reach around $180 billion by 2025. (*e-Conomy Africa 2020)* The World Bank estimates that online gig work may already engage up to roughly one in eight workers globally, with fast growth in sub-Saharan Africa. (*Working Without Borders*, 2023)

But the conditions of that work often fall short. Fairwork, a research project based at the Oxford Internet Institute, has rated digital labour platforms in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Ghana against principles of fair pay, conditions, contracts, management, and representation. Their recent country reports confirm that many platforms score poorly; notably, the 2023 Fairwork Nigeria and Kenya ratings revealed that the vast majority of platforms scored zero out of ten, failing to meet basic minimum standards for worker safety, fair pay, and representation.

This is the blind spot. Most digital skills programmes measure success by how many young people they train and place. Very few measure whether those young people can negotiate fair terms, make ethical choices under pressure, grow into leaders within their organisations, or shape the rules that govern their work.

The sector's own ambition demands more. The Mastercard Foundation's Young Africa Works strategy aims to enable 30 million young Africans to access *dignified and fulfilling* work by 2030. Dignity and fulfillment are not technical outcomes. They depend on agency, values, and voice, the very things leadership education builds.

The research agrees. Nobel laureate James Heckman's work demonstrates that socio-emotional skills shape life outcomes just as powerfully as cognitive abilities. Similarly, the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2023 ranks leadership and social influence among the fastest-growing skills sought by employers. (*Future of Jobs Report 2025*)

Three Things a Login Cannot Teach

Agency: The Ability to Steer Your Own Path

A digital skill is a tool, and agency is knowing where to point it. Young people with agency spot opportunities, set goals, recover from setbacks, and move from task-taker to problem-solver. The OECD's Learning Compass 2030 places student agency at the centre of what education should build. In South Africa, the Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator has shown that investing in young people's behaviours and work-readiness mindsets, such as through targeted soft-skills matching and 90-day

post-placement coaching, significantly improves how well they settle and stay in work, drastically reducing entry-level attrition rates and sustaining long-term retention in the formal economy. The African Leadership Group, through ALX and the African Leadership University, has built a model on the same idea: technical training paired with leadership and purpose.

Ethics: The Judgement to Do the Right Thing When It Is Hard

Artificial intelligence will put enormous power into the hands of young developers, analysts, and creators. It will also put them in front of difficult choices about data, bias, privacy and harm. UNESCO's *Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research* (2023) calls for human-centred, ethical use of these tools. African thinkers have gone further, arguing that relational philosophies such as *Ubuntu* offer a richer foundation for AI ethics than frameworks built purely on individual rights (e.g., Sabelo Mhlambi, Harvard Carr Center, 2020). It has to be deliberately formed.

Voice: The Confidence to Shape the Rules

At the beginning of this article, the Nairobi data labellers had skills but no seat at the table. Voice is what turns a worker into a stakeholder: *the confidence to articulate a position, negotiate terms, organise with peers and engage policymakers.* Initiatives such as Fairwork give young workers standards to measure platforms against. The African Union's Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy (2024) creates an opening for youth input into how AI is governed on the continent. But only young people who have been taught to speak up will walk through that door.

Why Africa Can Write the Rules

Africa is not simply catching up on the digital economy. Rather, it is well placed to shape it.

The continent has what the Mo Ibrahim Foundation identifies as the world's youngest and fastest-growing population, which, as projected by the World Economic Forum, means "the future digital workforce will increasingly be African." The continent has already proved it can design technology for its own realities: as the GSMA notes in its state of the industry reports, "mobile money began here and became a global reference point," pioneered by innovations like Kenya's M-Pesa. Furthermore, emerging frameworks for inclusive tech highlight that Africa's "ethical traditions centre community and mutual obligation," rooted in philosophies like Ubuntu, providing "a strong starting point for dignity-first technology." Finally, with developments like the African Union's Continental AI Strategy demonstrating that "many of the rules for AI, data and platform work are still being written across the continent," there is a clear opportunity for the next generation: "today's young people can help write them, if we prepare them to lead."



PHOTO: SIPA 2026 Convening- Leveraging the trisector: Technology, Finance and Policy.

Leadership First, Technology as the Multiplier: LEAP Africa's Approach

LEAP Africa has spent more than two decades raising ethical, innovative young leaders, reaching over 120,000 young people directly and more than 13 million in total across 48+ African countries. Our conviction is simple: *technology multiplies whatever a young person brings to it. So we start with the leader, and use technology to scale.*

- **Pathways into Dignified Work:** LEAP Africa serves as the central coordinating partner for the Mastercard Foundation Associates Program, placing high-potential young African graduates in organisations across West, East, Francophone and Southern Africa, with applied experience, leadership development and structured mentorship. More than 3,000 young people have been supported through paid internship placements.
- **Digital and Leadership Skills together in Schools:** iLEAD builds digital competencies alongside leadership, life skills and entrepreneurship. In Sokoto, its 2024 digital skills component was delivered with the state's Ministry of Innovation and Digital Economy.
- **Leadership Learning at Scale:** Our learning platform, **learn.leapafrica.org**, delivers LEAP's indigenously designed curricula online, from teacher training to the online learning phase that reaches a far wider pool of social innovators and changemakers than any single cohort.
- **Young Innovators Building the Digital Economy:** SIP alumnus Isaac Damian Ezirim's **Teens Can Code** has trained more than 20,000 students across over 200 schools, and he received the Queen's Young Leaders Award in 2018. SIP 2024 fellow Adaeze Akpagbula's Farm Support Innovation uses AI-based disease diagnosis to support more than 5,200 farmers in Abeokuta, Ogun State.
- **Preparing Founders for AI:** In our 2025 needs assessment, more than 80% of respondents asked for practical support with AI and emerging technologies. AI now sits within the SIP Enterprise Sustainability Bootcamp curriculum as a response to this engagement.

- **Youth Voice in the System:** SIPA 2026 was built around youth agency, under the theme **"Africa as THE Sector: Maximising Youth Agency for a Prosperous Africa - Leveraging Technology, Finance and Policy"**. Through our work as a Training Partner in Nigeria with the African Youth Panel, funded by the Mastercard Foundation and implemented by Trust Africa, LEAP Africa equipped 20 young panellists to map the barriers that keep their peers from dignified and fulfilling work, and to design solutions that target root causes rather than symptoms, while transitioning into work and enterprises that support them and their communities.

"Technical skills gave me the tools to build, but leadership taught me what was worth building. Learning to code was just the first step; it was the leadership training that showed me how to use those digital skills to solve real problems in my community and bring others along with me." - Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumnus.

QUOTE: A Mastercard Foundation Associate on how leadership shaped what they did with their digital skills.



PHOTO: SIP fellows in a digital skills or AI session at the SIP 2026 Enterprise Sustainability Workshop

A Lead plus Log In Standard

If Africa wants a digital generation that thrives rather than merely survives, every digital skills investment should carry a leadership layer. Here is what that shift looks like.

Who	Stop Measuring Only	Start Investing in
Governments	Number of young people trained	Leadership and labour-rights literacy in every national skilling programme, and youth seats in AI and digital policy processes

Who	Stop Measuring Only	Start Investing in
Funders	Placements and headcount	Agency outcomes: self-efficacy, ethical decision-making and voice, tracked alongside jobs
Platforms and employers	Hours worked and cost per task	Fair work principles, visible career ladders and leadership development for young staff
Digital skills providers	Course completions	Partnerships with leadership organisations, so soft skills are designed in, not added on
Schools and universities	Exam results in ICT subjects	AI ethics, critical thinking and responsible technology use taught as core leadership skills

LEAP Africa is ready to partner with governments, funders, employers and digital skills providers to build this standard together.

Logging in is the start of opportunity, not the definition of it. The young Africans who will shape the digital economy are the ones who can lead within it.

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