

Young Women and Men's Aspirations and resilience in Kenya

Prospects for Livelihoods, Employment and Accountability
before ,during and beyond COVID-19 Pandemic



Prepared by : Mary Thamari, Elizabeth Onyango, Victor Onyango

Edited by: Joel Otieno, Jim Kaketch, Racheal Makokha, Daniel Doh

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ACRONYMS

AfDB	African Development Bank
AU	African Union
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FKE	Federation of Kenya Employers
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
KEPSA	Kenya Private Sector Alliance
KII	Key Informant Interview
KNBS	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and many more
NACOSTI	National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation
NCPWD	National Council for People with Disability
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PASGR	Partnership for African Social and Governance Research
SPSS	Statistical Program for Social Science
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from mixed-method research on youth aspirations, resilience and perceptions of dignified work among Kenyan youth. Kenya has a checkered outlook in reference to youth aspirations and their access to dignified work. On one hand, the country grapples with a high population of youth alongside high unemployment rates; and on the other hand, there exists an opportunity to harness their potential. The challenges of unemployment and disruption caused by COVID-19 pandemic notwithstanding, young women and young men in Kenya have demonstrated their capacity to be innovative and potentially explore new pathways towards dignified work, as evidenced in this research.

In the context of high unemployment, underemployment and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, youth marginalisation has been exacerbated, underscoring a more nuanced understanding of young people's strategies for securing dignified work. Additionally, an understanding of youth resilience and adaptability, the future of work, and the support needed to achieve their aspirations is pertinent to policy and programmatic interventions. Therefore, this research aimed to understand the aspirations and resilience of young women and men in Kenya, how they navigated through the COVID-19 crisis, and the implications for public policy in Kenya in pursuit of dignified work. In line with Mastercard Foundation's strategic vision of increasing young people's access to dignified employment, learning, and growth, this research was designed to ensure young people's voices, lived experiences and dreams were captured.

Findings

Youthhood is a complex and confusing phase characterised by personal growth, employment anxieties, and aspirations for the future. For Kenyan youth, this period presents tensions of achievement and failure. While the young people understand their responsibility to develop skills and lay foundations for their careers, challenges related to lack of access to essential resources dampen their efforts. In their own voices, the young people reiterated that with the right support and resources, youthhood presents a time of great opportunity and potential for personal fulfilment and success.

COVID-19 pandemic brought forth both positive and negative experiences to young people's aspirations. On the positive side, it strengthened their self-reliance, resilience, and adaptability to new circumstances leading to innovative means of survival and 'hustling' spirit which continues to be valuable beyond the pandemic. The pandemic also resulted in the discovery of new youth identities, skills, and capabilities useful for pursuing future aspirations. Increased technology uptake, adaptation to change, personal and social development, as well as an opportunity to experience the future of work (remote and digitised modalities) was presented by the pandemic. On the negative side, the loss of businesses and employment prospects, disruptions to education and training greatly affected the youth. As a result of the pandemic disruptions such as lockdowns, there were increased cases of mental illness, gender-based violence, unwanted pregnancies and early marriages, and drug and substance abuse. Overall, there was also evidence of missed key development milestones; limited access to meaningful and secure employment, delayed education plans, difficulty saving money for the future, and the entrepreneurial plans delayed, postponed or completely derailed.

To be successful, according to Kenyan youth, means to secure good jobs and establishing businesses. Besides this, a significant finding from the study revealed that young people perceive success as not only a means of achieving their business aspirations but also creating employment opportunities for others. These aspirations drive them towards financial security that would unlock the ability to give back to society particularly by supporting family and friends. Creating employment opportunities for others was echoed by the young people demonstrating desire for impact beyond themselves. While the youth aspirations are rooted in a desire to create an impact in the community, the study showed that the path to achieving these aspirations is non-linear and complex due to multiple barriers. These hurdles include personal impediments such as fear of failure, mental health challenges, gambling, addiction and substance abuse; financial constraints including lack of school fees for further education, and insufficient credit for business start-ups; employment related challenges such as limited job prospects for youth

pursuing career paths with low job opportunities, high competition, and inadequate practical skills; and institutional and systemic barriers including corruption, ineffective youth policies, government mistrust towards youth and lack of youth involvement in decision making.

The study also found that despite these challenges, Kenyan youth are determined to overcome these obstacles and achieve their aspirations through various strategies like innovative business ideas; taking risks on any business or work venture; pursuing multiple income streams; pursuing higher education through scholarships; establishing self-help and savings groups; pursuing work opportunities abroad; leveraging on their social networks, and participating in government programs like *Kazi Mtaani*.¹

Significant gender norms and barriers were identified in regard to young peoples' aspirations and resilience. The COVID-19 experience reinforced traditional gender roles and expectations that position men as the primary breadwinners and women as the primary caregivers. During the pandemic, women were sent home from work first because they were perceived as more vulnerable than men, while men were expected to be tough and resilient, perpetuating traditional gender norms. Young women faced additional barriers to employment due to sexual exploitation, limiting their employment opportunities and hindering career advancement. Challenges faced by young women reflected patriarchal attitudes and power imbalances in the workplace which amplified young women's vulnerabilities. Cultural norms and biases constrained the opportunities for female youth to pursue certain careers as some occupations were still viewed as appropriate only for men such as drivers construction workers. Young males were also limited in their access to employment opportunities due to gender preferences, with young women favoured over young men in some cases. Similarly, young members of the LGBTQ+ community faced financial burdens in supporting their extended families as a result of societal pressure to secure acceptability, limiting their capacity to invest in their personal and professional development.

Kenyan youth define dignified and fulfilling work as a job that achieves satisfaction, earns respect, offers fair compensation or good income,

fosters a sense of purpose and meaning, offers an opportunity for growth and development, and provides a sense of work-life balance. This definition resonates with their perception of success. To achieve success, and dignified and fulfilling work, young people rely on their social network, including friends, family, well-wishers. According to the young people, the social network provides them with emotional and financial support and helps in creating opportunities for work, including job linkages, skills training, and building on talents. The study found that a diverse range of skills are needed to respond to changing circumstances. These skills identified by the youth include, entrepreneurial and innovation skills, technical and vocational skills, financial literacy, job market competencies and digital literacy.

Finally, the young people exhibited resilience and adaptive capacity as demonstrated through flexibility to try new income generating work, and a positive mindset to grow new skills. They also demonstrated the capacity to recognize and capitalize on new opportunities and embracing alternative ways of survival such as engaging in agriculture and increasing their digital footprint.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Young people are eager to secure their futures and contribute to their families, communities, and societies. This stage of life is crucial for shaping the young people's journey to success. Policymakers need to provide support and resources to help young people navigate the challenges of youthhood and promote a culture that values individual fulfilment and well-being over traditional markers of success. COVID-19 pandemic revealed the need for the young people to harness the digital economy to their benefit. Young women and men need to be supported to gain digital skills for the digital economy in order to be better equipped to face the uncertainties of the future. Policies that incentivise young people's innovations in the digital economy are needed in order to foster a more resilient and adaptable generation.

The perception of success among Kenyan youth indicated a focus on not just individual achievement, but also on social impact and community development. Therefore, youth programs need to focus on access services that accelerate achievement of these aspirations such as education, training, mentorship, networking opportunities, finan-

¹ This program for youth by the Government of Kenya is no longer operating.

cial support and access to business resources.

Kenyan youth face a range of barriers that make it challenging for them to achieve their aspirations. These barriers limit opportunities for personal growth and development, ultimately affecting social and economic progress. There is a need to address the systemic barriers through advocacy and engagement with government and other stakeholders. To strengthen young people's resilience, business literacy to support entrepreneurship, facilitation of higher education and professional development, and supporting the formation of self-help and savings groups should be critical elements of youth-centred programs.

Gender norms that lead to exclusion have significant implications on young people's employment opportunities and career development. Targeted interventions and policies that are responsive to gender needs and inclusivity in employment and career development are necessary. Social behaviour change approaches to address patriarchal attitudes and biases in the workplace, as well as initiatives to promote non-traditional career paths for young women are needed. This calls for the establishment of multi-stakeholder, inter-generational, and inclusive partnerships.

In reference to Kenya's youth definitions of dignified and fulfilling work, earning a good income was identified among other markers of dignified work such as respect, a sense of purpose and meaning, opportunities for growth and work-life balance. Job creation strategies need to be responsive to markers of dignified jobs by creating opportunities that go beyond income. As a key element of dignified work identified by young people, work-life balance needs to be prioritised to mitigate mental health problems and well-being. Additionally, programmatic approaches that support and provide resources to youth to pursue career paths that align with their values and sense of purpose need to be strengthened.

Social networks play a significant role in supporting young people in Kenya, both financially and emotionally. They rely on their friends, family, well-wishers, and community for financial support, as well as for opportunities such as job linkages, training, emotional support, and talent development. An investment in youth-focused self-help groups or business associations would strengthen these networks.

To be adaptive to the changing circumstances

in work and business, youth in Kenya require diverse skills including financial skills, digital literacy, entrepreneurial and innovation skills, technical skills and job market competencies. These skills are seen as essential for navigating the evolving employment landscape and seizing new opportunities for personal and professional growth and should foreground and buttress any youth programmatic and policy interventions. Lastly, opportunities for holistic support including psychosocial care for young women and young men to address emerging mental health challenges need to be considered in programmatic plans.

BACKGROUND

Introduction

Young people have a significant role to play in shaping the future and creating positive change for themselves and the communities around them. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted their lives, changing how they learn and how they make a living. The pandemic compelled young people to put their dreams on hold in some cases and to change their aspirational goals in other cases. These changes did not diminish their desire to make a difference in the world and be heard. They remain a powerful force for shaping the future and promoting socio-economic progress. Through creativity, innovation, and resilience, the young people demonstrate an optimistic and adaptive outlook and determination to contribute to positive change in their communities and beyond.

Other research has delved into the diverse experiences of young people in various contexts (LaRue, Daum, Mausch, & Harris, 2021; Thieme, 2018) and this current study adds to that by showing experiences and realities related to Kenyan youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study provides insights into how the pandemic has shaped young people's self-understanding, their aspirations and resilience strategies. By taking a youth-centred approach, we recognize young people's voices, their agency and their perspectives are critical for policy formulation and programmatic interventions that are relevant to their lives.

This report presents the findings of a research project that investigated the aspirations and resilience of young women and men in Kenya². This research collected representative data on the experiences and perspectives of young people on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on their understanding of youthhood, aspirations and resilience. The findings reported here aim to inform policies and programmes on youth livelihoods while contributing to the strategic goal of Mastercard Foundation's Young Africa Works of enabling 30 million young women and men in Africa to secure dignified and fulfilling employment by 2030. The report also presents the youth's understanding of digni-

fied work as well as the resilience strategies they employ in the face COVID-19 pandemic and other uncertain circumstances. It also provides recommendations to government agencies, development partners, the private sector and civil society organisations on youth-centric actions to ensure a just, sustainable future for Kenya youth.

Contextual Background: Youth and aspirations

The concept of youth lacks a precise and universally accepted definition worldwide. Youth is defined differently in different contexts based on social, economic, legal, political, and geographical factors (Arubayi, 2015). First and foremost, youth is viewed as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood – the boundaries between which are not always clear. Secondly, the characteristics of youth, such as physical, cognitive, and social development, vary widely within the age group, making it difficult to establish an exact age range for youth. Thirdly, the diversity of experiences and challenges faced by young people in various parts of the world makes it difficult to develop a universal definition of youth. Subjective factors such as individual experiences, social norms, personal aspirations, and perceptions influence the concept of youth.

While youth is commonly perceived as a fluid and transitional period between childhood and adulthood, a description of a child in international law, "every human being under eighteen years" is more explicit. For analytical purposes, age is used to define youth. For instance, the World Bank and the United Nations use an age-based definition of a 15-24-year-old cohort. The International Labour Organization (ILO) applies a wider measurement of 15-29. The African Union (AU) considers everyone between the ages of 15-35 to be a youth. These examples illustrate the diversity of youth definitions. Namuggala (2018) cautions usage of aged-based definitions, arguing that it is insufficient in comprehending the diverse and complex youth experiences today. Similarly, young people who are beyond the age categories of youth who are unable to move into employment and economic independence are said to be living in a state of "wait-

² The fieldwork for this research occurred in September 2022, shortly after the presidential elections in August. As a result, our discussions with youth transpired against the backdrop of significant political controversy and turmoil in Kenya. However, politics did not dominate the research discussions; youth were generally eager to share their opinions, ideas, hopes, and dreams for their own and Kenya's future.

hood” or generation in waiting because they have not yet attained the social markers of adulthood (Honwana, 2012; Kovacheva, Kabaivanov, & Roberts, 2018). These variations further complicate the definition of youth. The experiences of being a young person are shaped by personal experiences, social-cultural norms, economic and political factors. Turolla and Swedlund (2022) argue that the common definition of “youth” in Africa which is based solely on age is inadequate and fails to capture the diversity and complexity of young people’s experiences and identities. Instead, the authors propose an analytical framework that includes dimensions such as social status, gender, education, geographic location, and economic status to understand the heterogeneity of young people’s experiences in Africa. In Kenya, according to Kenya Youth Development Policy (2019), the concept of youth is defined as individuals between 18-34 years old.

White and Wyn (2004) emphasised the role of social and cultural contexts in shaping the experiences of young people. These contextual factors include family dynamics, peer relationships, and societal norms. Young people are compelled by these factors to plan their futures and make decisions that will impact their long-term outcomes

(Fortune, Ismail, & Stephen, 2015). Disruptive events such as COVID-19 therefore add to the experiences that shape young people’s goals and aspirations for life. In this current study, although an age-based categorisation of youth has been used for purposes of sampling and targeting, a contextual rather than period of linear transition framed the understanding of youth in the analysis of their experiences.

Youth in the Kenyan context

Kenya is a developing lower-middle-income country with an estimated population of 47.6 million based on 2019 census data. With a youthful population of 29% falling under the age of 18-34, Kenya is experiencing a youth bulge driven by a low infant and youth mortality rate.³ Youth bulge is defined as a situation where individuals aged between 15-34 years make up more than one-third of a country’s population (KNBS, 2019), youth bulge has already become a distinctive characteristic of Kenya’s demographic landscape⁴ as shown in Figure 1.

³ <https://www.knbs.or.ke/>

⁴ National Council for Population and Development, 2017

Table 1: Youth Population Distribution in Kenya

Table 1: Distribution of Population by Age and Sex, Kenya

Age	Male	Female	Intersex	Total
Total	6,910,167	7,146,861	1,524	47,044,296
18	475,670	457,032	24	932,726
19	483,586	488,305	35	971,926
20	486,633	523,210	46	1,009,889
21	406,910	444,707	44	851,661
22	406,099	455,328	34	861,461
23	420,329	477,116	43	897,488
24	382,719	434,417	39	827,175
25	454,278	485,467	51	939,796
26	358,506	404,246	27	762,779
27	373,126	403,576	29	776,735
28	318,319	353,653	19	671,991
29	335,312	367,915	27	703,254
30	449,798	497,944	50	947,801
31	296,045	324,359	29	620,833
32	369,586	407,999	24	777,609
33	302,318	340,100	18	642,436
34	260,431	301,485	24	561,940

Total: 13,777,861

Source: (KNBS, 2019). Kenya Population and Housing Census Volume III. Distribution of Population by Age, Sex and Administrative unit.

This phenomenon coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic has led to intersecting effects on youth's aspirations presenting opportunities on one hand and challenges on the other. Policy makers and development agencies also have to contend with high growth in the youth population of Kenyans in light of a relatively modest economic growth that has led to high youth unemployment. Indeed, youth unemployment has also become a distinctive characteristic of Kenya's current socio-economic situation (NCPD, 2018; Samuel Hall, 2017). Additionally, Kenya is also characterised by a formal wage employment sector which is only accessible to a small fraction of youth, a vibrant informal sector and a rural agricultural sector.

While the annual GDP growth rate has averaged 5%, the young people continue to be disproportionately impacted by unemployment, underemployment, and low-quality (informal, and low-paying) jobs.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Research Design and Research Questions

The study employed concurrent mixed-method research, utilizing both a quantitative survey and qualitative research designs. Ethical approvals for the research were granted by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) ensuring alignment to ethical and safeguarding guidelines per Kenyan laws. All research respondents were briefed on the purpose of the research and oral consent was obtained from them as part of data collection protocols. The data collected remained confidential and was used for this research only. Research assistants underwent training on safety guidelines and validation procedures, data protection and research ethics, gender and inclusion sensitivity as well as consent and protection measures. Guidelines on data management including validation, cleaning, and secure storage of data, as well as data-sharing agreements were provided.

The research was youth-centric, youth-led, for youth and by the youth which employed a youth-voice approach during the design and in all processes of data collection. To capture the youth voices a quantitative survey was augmented with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions from youth drawn from rural, urban and peri-urban settings in Kenya. Gender-sensitive research protocols were used to ensure free speech and gender-specific expression of young people's experiences. Figure 2 below shows the geographical locations represented by the respondents.

Figure 1: Research Locations



Based on the aged-based definition of youth in the Article 260 of Kenya's Constitution and the Kenyan National Youth Policy, the study focused on individuals aged between 18-34 years.

The sample size calculation was based on Kenya's youth population of 13,377,6001 (KNBS, 2019). The sample size was calculated using the RAO soft sample size calculator, where the confidence level is 95%, a margin of error of 2.5% with a population size of 13,377,600 according to the KHPC 2019. RAO soft sample size calculator is based on the following formula:

$$n' = \frac{n}{1 + \frac{z^2 \times \hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{\epsilon^2 N}}$$

Where:

z is the z score; ϵ is the margin of error N is the population size and \hat{p} is the population proportion. The estimated sample size for the study was therefore 1,552 distributed proportionally among the 16 selected countries as shown in the sampling frame size calculation.

A multi-stage cluster sampling approach was adopted. First, a purposive sampling approach was conducted to select the counties for the study, taking into account the unique geographic differences, while also considering the security and safety issues across Kenya. This resulted in the selection of 17 out of the 47 counties for the study. The second stage of the sampling procedure involved the selection of enumeration areas (EAs) in the counties based on their classification as urban or rural. In collaboration with the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), 65 EAs were selected randomly.

The research aimed at answering seven overarching investigation questions, which guided the design and implementation as follows:

1. What are young women's and men's understanding/view of youthhood?
2. What are young women and men's aspirations about their future and how has the COVID-19 pandemic shaped that?
3. What barriers/ risks/ vulnerabilities are young men and women encountering in the pursuit of their aspirations?
4. What capacities and opportunities do young women and men have to pursue their aspirations?
5. How do young people make sense of dignified and fulfilling work?
6. What adaptability and resilience strategies do young women and men employ to pursue their aspirations, especially in the face of militating policy, pandemic, and other challenging environments?
7. What are the provisions, regulations, and policies in Kenya on young people and how do they align with the aspirations and ideas of young women and men about the future?

Data collection and scope

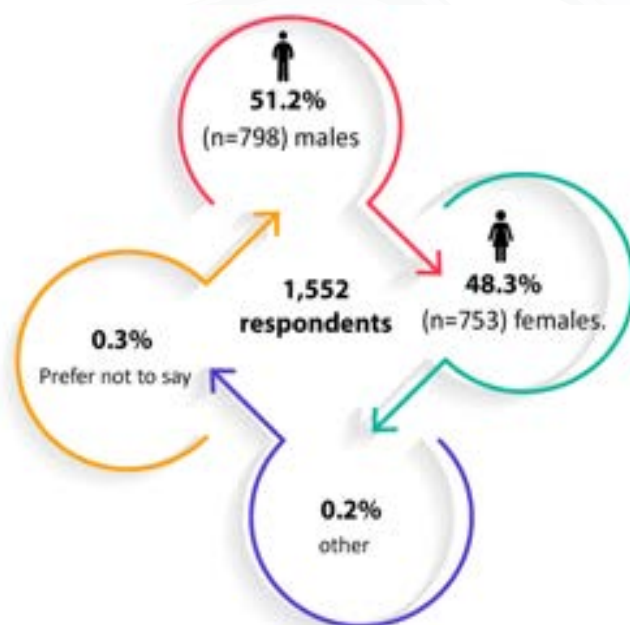
Qualitative data was collected through key informant interviews (KIIs) interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). The FGD participants were identified through purposive sampling, leveraging national and local youth networks, universities, youth groups, and study participants' friends and family. Similarly, key informants (organisations institutions representatives, and individuals) were purposely identified for potential based on their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. A total of 31 focus group discussions and 16 in-depth interviews were conducted. To ensure gender sensitivity and representation of all youth voices, the research envisioned equal number of FGDs for young women and young men. However, due to mobilisation limitations, 10 young men's FGDs and 8 young women's groups were achieved. The following group formations of FGDs and KIIs were conducted:

Table 2: Summary of FGDs and KIIs

Collection method	No. of groups/interviewees	Social Characteristics
FGDs	10 groups	Male
	8 groups	Female
	10 groups	Mixed male and female
	2 groups	youth living with disability
	1 group	LGBTQ
Interviews	2	Youth champions
	3	Youth-led initiatives
	1	Private sector
	1	Development partner
	2	NGO/CBOs
	5	Government
	1	TVET
	1	Youth policy and advocacy expert

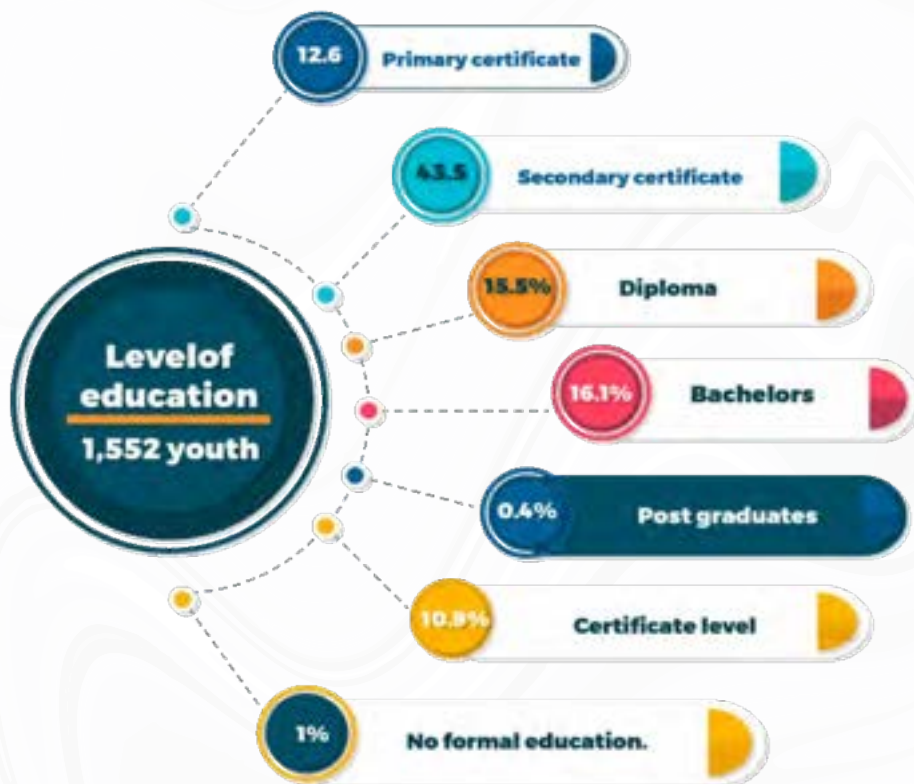
The FGDs and interviews focused on the core themes of investigation: youthhood, youth aspirations, dignified work and resilience as well as perspectives of youth on what policymakers and programme designers should do to support young people, especially in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The cross-sectional survey data was collected using SurveyCTO digital data collection platform. The survey was then widely circulated and individually targeted among youth in the selected counties. The survey was allowed to run for at least 30 working days before responses were retrieved and analysed.

Figure 2: Total Survey Respondents

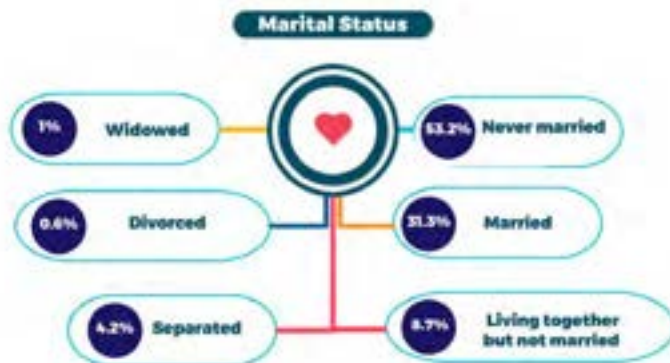
1,552 respondents were surveyed, 51.2% (n=798) were males and 48.3% (n=753) were females. The gender distribution was considered appropriate since the perspectives from both genders were captured.

Figure 3: Level of Education



Out of the 1,552 youth who genuinely provided information on their highest level of education, most (43%) of the youth in the sample had at least secondary certificate as their highest level of education, though 13% listed a primary certificate as their highest level.”

Figure 4: Marital Status of Respondents



The analysis showed that only 22% (n=344) of the validly interviewed youth are currently enrolled in school and 78% are out of school.

Out of 1,552, 53.2% were never married, 31.3% were married. 8.7% were living together but not married, 4.2% were separated, 0.6% are widowed and 1% divorced.

Data Analysis Approach

For qualitative data analysis, we adopted an interpretive analytical approach to examine the attitudes and experiences of young people, using content analysis, and inductive thematic analysis to generate insights. Our process was iterative to ensure recommendations are grounded in evidence, tested, validated, and triangulated. This preliminary analysis was guided by the creation of the qualitative data codebook. The data was analysed using an inductive coding process using NVIVO. The research team coded their detailed summary notes from the focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

We organised the qualitative data by themes and developed a list of insights of the collected data. At this stage, we also cross-referenced all findings with interview transcripts to ensure that we accurately represented the youth's voice and used their language. Throughout the reporting process, drafts were distributed to the entire research team to ensure the report's findings are fair and accurate. When analysing data, a gender lens was applied to understand the differentiated experiences of young women and men. Quantitative data from 1552 valid responses were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to generate descriptive patterns, correlations and gender analysis of all relevant variables.

Outline of the report

The report is structured as follows: Section 3.0-6.0 provides the findings on youthhood and youth aspirations; impact of COVID-19 on youth aspirations; youth perceptions of dignified work and youth resilience and adaptability. Section 7.0 outlines the conclusions and recommendations for policy and programmatic strategies based on the findings.

YOUTHHOOD AND ASPIRATIONS

Youthhood and youth's self-understanding

The youth in this study define their youthhood as a transition out of childhood and as a stage in life where individuals can explore life choices with freedom. Male and female respondents echoed the following sentiments:

“Being young means that a person is energetic and has freedom in the sense that we have the opportunity to explore various things without fear of judgement because we are not yet mentally mature. One has the freedom to make mistakes, to explore different career paths and to figure out what we want in life.” (FGD: Young Female, Kwale County)

The respondents also indicated youthhood as time where they experience pressure to achieve milestones such as marriage:

“Being young is all about a phase where I can explore in terms of career, and I can also choose as many relationships, but also it comes with a lot of pressure, to get married, to get money, to get a family and to start a life.” (FGD: Young Female, Kwale County)

It was also noted that although youthhood is seen as an age of opportunities, it is also characterised by frustrations that arise from crushed hopes and unmet expectations as was pointed out by one of the youth officers:

“These are people whose numbers are far much greater than the opportunities available for them. They come with a lot of hope but they find the reality on the ground is much different from what they expected. They have a lot of frustrations, for instance getting well-educated individuals with no job opportunities to absorb them. They begin enterprises, and they are hopeful to succeed, but sometimes it doesn't work. So, it's a fluid situation.” (KII: Youth Enterprise Development Fund)

The discussion in male and female focus group discussions consistently portrayed youthhood as a period of personal growth and development describing this period as a time to prepare themselves for adult life. That preparation according to

the respondents includes financial independence, a goal that both female and male youth noted as important for them. They also indicated preparation for building social connections that would extend through life such as romantic relationships, family bonds and other peer friendships. As a stage of self-discovery and exploration, the respondents understand their youth as a time to adventure as they seek livelihoods, work and achieve societal expectations echoed in various expressions, *“get married” “make money”* and *“start a family.”* While they were quick to note that this ‘adventure’ comes with challenges, young people exude some sense of optimism in being able to dream what they want their lives to be.

The young people also describe youth as a time to form identities, highlighting that they are energetic, ambitious, and have a profound sense of purpose. A young participant in a Kajiado Mixed-FGD discussion eloquently expressed this sentiment:

“The energy, the psych of life makes us youth. You have the energy and possibilities open up for you as a young person because we potential for future. It's youth who decide for other generation who will follow us. This is the time where I am flexible to take up so many activities and I am afraid that after 35, I will not be able to do some things”.

While the youth appear to harbour futuristic ambitions, their current engagements constitute pragmatic efforts to stay afloat in the present while still holding hope for the future. The youth's own understanding of themselves is shaped by their current experiences and circumstances, an observation that has previously been made by White and Wyn (2004) who argues that social and cultural contexts shape the experiences of young people. Such experiences frame young people's aspirations.

Youth's definition of success and top priorities

To understand what the young people regard as success and consequently what shapes their aspirations, they were asked what top priorities are for them. Top on the list was being financially stable (25%), followed by a good job (20.8%), then providing support to the family (13.9%), creating a good business (13.7%), and good education (10.8%) as shown in the figure 7 below:

Table 3: Top Success Priority

Top Success Priority	Frequency	Percent
Being financially rich	396	25.4
Good job	324	20.8
Provide support to my family	216	13.9
Create a good business	214	13.7
Good education	168	10.8
Own properties	88	5.6
Other Combined	55	3.5
Start a family	29	1.9
Provide support to my community	25	1.6
Have power, authority, and control	20	1.3
Independent travel the world	12	.8
Independence and freedom from parents	8	.5
None	3	.2
Total	1,558	100.0

The analysis by gender on the top 5 success priority areas showed the following.

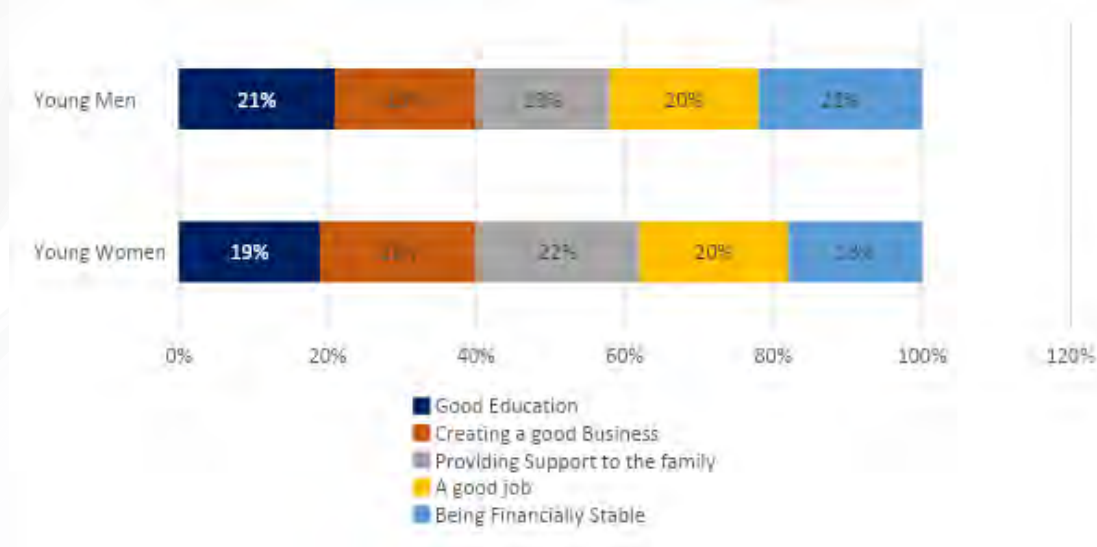


Figure 5: Gender Analysis of Top Five Priorities

Across the five top priorities, more men than women considered a good education and being financially stable as top priority while more young women considered a good job, providing support to family and creating a good business as top priority. Other priorities that were more important to young men include having power, authority and control, independently travelling the world, owning properties. More young women also regard starting a family and contributing to the community as pertinent.

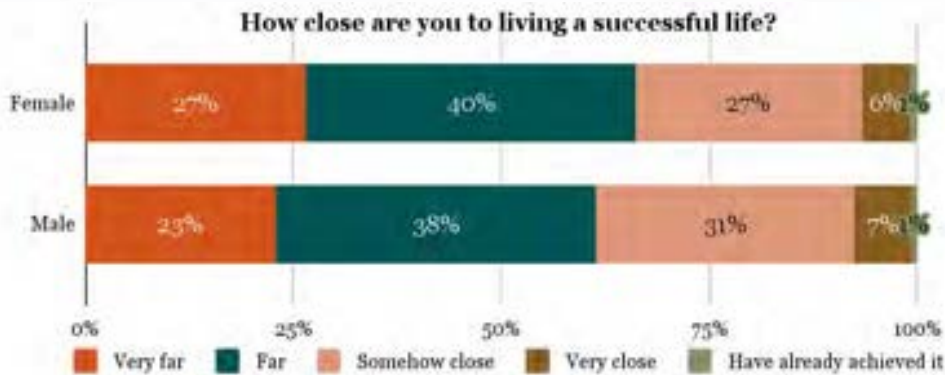


Figure 6: How close are you to achieving success by gender

In the focus group discussions, these findings were reinforced as respondents underscored the importance of financial prosperity, fulfilment of personal goals, and entrepreneurship were repeatedly highlighted. According to the young people, financial prosperity which includes a stable job, good income, and owning assets such as cars are marks of success. Financial stability anchors all other priorities such as family support and contribution to society and a good education, a good job and successful business as enablers for that.

“Success is when I have finished school, I have finished my degree, I have graduated, I have found a job and I can sustain myself and my relatives and my family and improve their lives”. (FGD: Young female, YWD Nakuru county)

Besides financial stability, the young people also cited a good education and good health as markers of success. They saw education as a means to achieving goals of career on one hand and also education as a mark of success in itself:

“Success is academic advancement, once I achieve that it is a step towards being successful or a step towards success.”
“Success is education, like me, I want to become a nurse, that is the reason why I decided to come back here so that I may get to my future”. “Achieving an education is also success and I want that.”

On health as a marker of success, a respondent indicated, *“success is being able to wake up in the morning healthy and not sick, doing my hustle, and coming back cheerful.”*

“I have to have the money, I have to be healthy not just physically but mental health matters. People who are successful suffer from mental health because of one thing, they have the money but they don’t have peace. So as much as you have money, it doesn’t mean you are successful. It just means you are rich, but not successful”. (FGD: Young Male from Kajiado County)

Therefore, achieving good health can be seen as an important component of holistic success, contributing to personal well-being and the ability to pursue one’s goals, interests and aspirations.

Youth also considered entrepreneurship as a great indicator of success. For example, a young male in Uasin Gishu County stated, *“Success is when I can run a multi-billion empire whereby I can create employment for many young people and solve a generational problem.”*

Young people cited non-traditional views of success like giving back to the society, leading a healthy and happy life, achieving level of independence, academic advancement and making the society a better place. For young people living with disability, they described success as the ability to live without barriers:

“Success for persons with disability is living a barrier-free life because their life is always a constant struggle. They face attitudinal, infrastructural, institutional, and cultural barriers which make it difficult for them to access education, healthcare, and employment. To be successful, they need to overcome these barriers or advocate for their removal.” (Male Representative from NCPWD)

These findings resonate with existing literature definitions of success which argue that young people have diverse and nuanced understandings of what success means to them. For some, success may be defined by academic achievements or career aspirations, while for others it may be related to personal relationships, community involvement, or personal growth and well-being (Mac Intosh, Martin, & Ewing, 2020). By understanding what success means to young people, we can set appropriate goals that align with their values and aspirations.

Youth Aspirations

According to Kenyan youth, aspirations are multidimensional comprising economic, migration intention, socio-cultural, education and training, and civic aspirations. The most significant aspiration of young people is their economic aspiration which relates to how they might secure dignified employment. The qualitative data confirms a growing body of evidence that young men and women envision a future in which they would expand or diversify their current economic activities, enabling them to support themselves and their families (Sumberg, Yeboah, Flynn, & Anyidoho, 2017; Yeboah & Flynn, 2021).

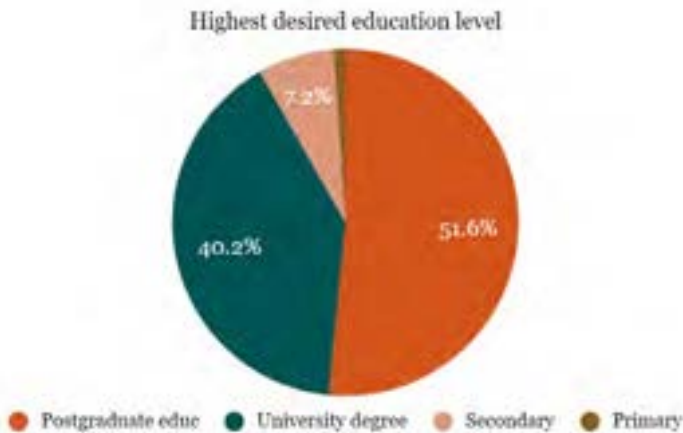
Across all the locations, young people have diverse aspirations grounded in the pursuit of securing financial stability and independence, themes that also emerged from their definition of success. First, young people are motivated by the desire to have a stable income, successful careers, and run their own businesses. According to them, these aspirations would enable them to be comfortable, afford basic living expenses, and be independent, supporting themselves and their families. The desire to take care of one's family to provide for them and ensure their well-being compels this desire for financial stability.

Second, some young people view migration to urban areas or abroad as a necessary step towards achieving better opportunities for personal and professional growth. Some want to move within Kenya, primarily to urban areas (52.7%), return to rural area (6.3%), and some would like to move abroad given a chance (19.8%). The young people believe that migrating to other countries was a more viable path to the professional work, income or education system they desired. For the majority, this meant migrating to Europe and America.

Despite the fact that the allure of 'big opportunities' is attractive for out-migration, participants expressed a desire to gain knowledge and transfer the skills and experience gained abroad in exploring possibilities and opportunities upon returning home. One participant from Nairobi County reiterated that *"If an opportunity comes to move out of the country, I will move to go discover something and come back. There are so many opportunities out there to be explored."* The desire to relocate is spurred by corruption, and unemployment as their key concerns.

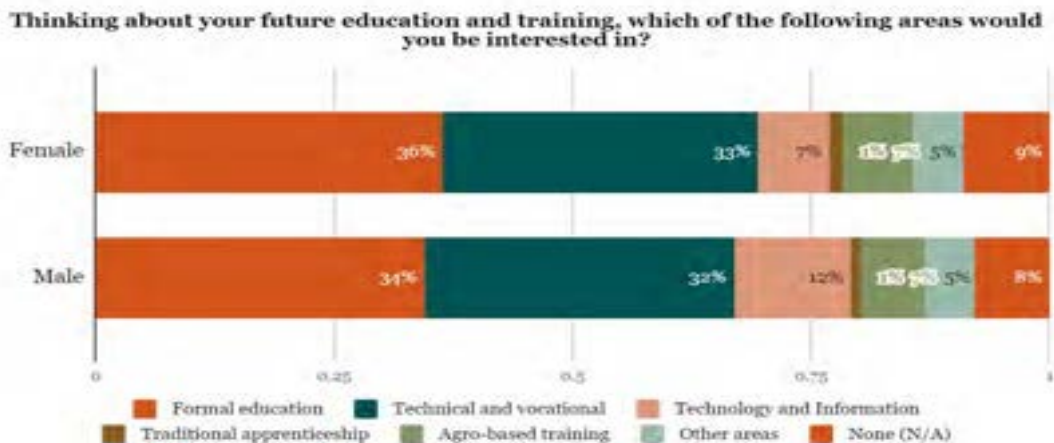
Third, youth perceive education as a pathway to obtain a good income and better job opportunities. Majority of the youth (51.1%) stated that they would like to obtain postgraduate education, followed by 39.8% who would like to obtain a university degree, 7.1% stated that they would like to obtain diploma as the highest level of education, 1.1% would like to obtain secondary as the highest level of education. Only 0.9% envision obtaining primary certificate as the highest level of education, as shown in Figure 10:

Figure 7: Highest Desired Education



In terms of training preferences, slightly more males compared to females indicated interest in formal education (50%), technical and vocational training (50.9%) and technology and information (62.4%). On the other hand, more females compared to males stated they would be interested in traditional apprenticeship (58.8%) and agro-based training (51.9%).

Figure 8: Areas of Training Interest by Gender



There is a general acknowledgement that completing education (to whatever level aspired) is essential for securing stable employment in the future. However, others felt that education alone cannot guarantee success. Without enough jobs they are worried that their qualifications would not translate into secure employment opportunities. For this reason, young people prioritised being street smart, proactive or assertive, regardless of the educational background.

Fourth, social-cultural aspirations were underscored. Majority of unmarried youth (83%) stated that marriage is part of their future plans. Further analysis revealed that more men (57.4%) than women (42.3%), indicated that marriage is part of their plans. Young people cited aspirations for marriage albeit many claiming that they felt unprepared for it and that other aspirations such as financial stability were a priority. Some young people expressed the desire of having their own family but indicated that marriage was a long-term objective and irrelevant to their lives at the present time. A young male in Kajiado County reiterated that *“For you to get married, first you have to be financially stable and at this age from 18 to*

30, you're still struggling financially, and again if you are two young people struggling financially, it won't be a happy marriage." For young men, they feel that they are not financially stable enough to start a family or get married, and that they lack the maturity and resilience needed to sustain a successful marriage. On the other hand, young women considered marriage not so important. Career and personal goals were prioritised over marriage and family. A young female noted, "I consider marriage not so important than career. Some of us have goals we want to reach, and there is that hierarchy of how you've planned your life, so most of us it's jobs, career, then maybe family or marriage later. Men nowadays will respect you more as a woman if you are working, you have a job, or if you are successful." This indicates a shift of gender roles and expectations in relationships and marriages.

Lastly, some young people have civic aspirations to vie for leaders and take on political roles as they desire to address challenges and the corruption they see in the political system. One male re-

spondent from Kajiado county acknowledged that politics in Kenya is heavily influenced by financial resources and connections, and that the chances of success for young people who lack these resources are slim. Regrettably, many politicians are perceived to have sacrificed their integrity and reputation in order to succeed, further dissuading some young people from pursuing political careers.

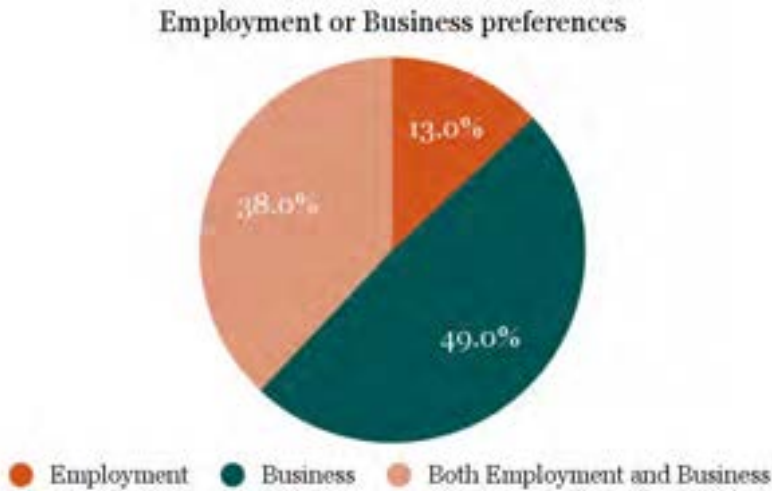
Across the board, young people demonstrated multidimensional aspirations. And asked what they considered as the top most priority goals in their life, the majority reiterated entrepreneurship and employment. Whether employed, unemployed, in school or trying to make a living, securing financial stability was a pressing concern for almost all Kenyan youth. Even though employment is guaranteed for a few, and challenging for all, many young people aspire to secure a stable and fulfilling jobs-often white-collar employment in the professional sector (lawyers, doctors, teachers and so on), suggesting that formal jobs offer stability and promise.

Table 4: Relationship with Community

	Response	Male	Female
About sense of community, how do you foresee your relationship with your community?	My community means a lot to me	36%	33%
	I would like to contribute to my community	56%	58%
	I do not envisage any responsibility to my community	8%	9%

Youth aspirations reflect both individual desires as well as collective involvement of family members. This could be attributed to young people's conceptualization of 'success', such as carrying one's family along by educating them or building them a house. These findings resonate with Appadurai (2004) suggestion that aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices); instead, (youth) aspirations establish the connection between culture and aspiration and "form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms". This indicates that understanding youth aspirations requires a deeper appreciation of cultural and social contexts in which they are situated. This research has exposed the multidimensional aspiration of young people while sitting them in their current social and economic context. Young people's aspirations are seen and understood not as isolated individuals pursuing their own goals, but rather, as part of broader networks of relationships and interdependencies.

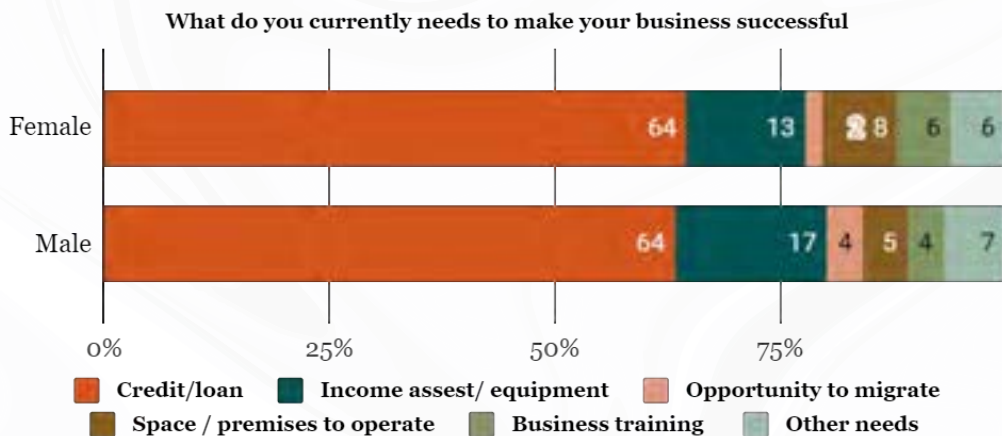
Figure 9: Business or Employment Preference



Majority of the young people would like to venture into business investment in future (49%), followed by those who would like to venture into both employment and business (38%) and lastly by those who would like to be only employed (13%), as shown in Figure 13 above.

Those in business and aspiring to own businesses had the following views on what they need to make their businesses successful:

Figure 10: What is needed to make business successful?



Strategies for Achieving Success

Young people in Kenya are actively taking initiative and employing a combination of strategies to adapt to the challenges of unemployment and economic constraints.

Kenyan youth adopt a collective approach to savings and investment. They reported forming savings groups, self-help or merry-go round groups, and contributing regularly to accumulate funds over a specified period. The aim is to utilize the savings to purchase plots of land for future resale, providing a potential source of profit. In the meantime, these groups were also providing loans to members, enabling them to meet immediate financial needs. A young Male, from Nyeri said, *“We have a group of about 13 people aged 35 and below where we do savings every month. We are planning to save Ksh 1,000 for three years, and once the money has been saved to a certain level, we are targeting to buy a plot. So,*

we will be buying plots and then selling them for a profit in future. For now, we are using the money to give loans to the group members". However, this strategy was only highlighted by youths who had regular jobs or some businesses, indicating that savings and investment require a source of income.

According to one female participant in Kisumu, a strategy of risk taking was underscored and supported by others. She expressed, *"We have a changed mindset, we don't mind taking risks, we just take risks on any business or any work venture that will come by. So, if it succeeds, fine, if it doesn't, then we look for another avenue."* This sentiment highlights the youth's willingness to embrace risk in various aspects of their entrepreneurial and work pursuits.

Another notable strategy by the youth is active innovation and creativity. They showed an attitude of exploring different ideas and opportunities, such as making and selling handcrafts to sustain themselves financially. Young people also engaged in online businesses as a means of earning income as opposed to entertainment purposes. They also demonstrated attempts to engage in agricultural activities, leveraging on food production in a sector that they have been underrepresented.

Young people emphasized a spirit of open-mindedness and willingness to adapt: *"By being flexible and trying to fit in any environment no matter how harsh it is so long as it's good for you and what you're trying to do is something which will bring positive results on your life"* (Young Male in Uasin Gishu). They embraced the idea that success often required stepping outside of their comfort zones demonstrating their tenacity and determination to overcome economic hurdles.

Building networks both formally and informally played a crucial role in their adaptive strategies of Kenyan youth. They understood the value of establishing connections and leveraging their contacts to access opportunities, resources, and support. This proactive networking approach reflects their understanding of the benefits of social capital in overcoming obstacles. They reported associating themselves with successful individuals, leveraging the wisdom and expertise of others to enhance their own personal and professional development. This strategy allowed them to get inspiration, learn from the experiences of others, avoid potential pitfalls, and access opportunities they may not have

been aware of on their own. A key informant from YEDF highlighted the growing trend of young people leveraging online platforms to connect with like-minded individuals and professionals in their respective fields. By expanding their social networks, they gain access to valuable knowledge, mentorship, and potential opportunities.

While acknowledging these strategies, the problem of delayed life milestones according to social cultural norms were noted. According to the director of the State Department for Youth Affairs, young people express a strong inclination to prioritize their career advancement and financial stability over certain life milestones such as marriage and starting a family. She said, *"Youths are delaying certain aspects of their social lives, for instance, you meet several young people who are employed or have profitable businesses, but when you bring up the topic of marriage, they seem to put it off."* The key informant emphasised that this decision to postpone life milestones was commonly influenced by the perception that achieving stability in career and finances would contribute to a more secure future for themselves and their potential families.

Migration due to limited job opportunities locally was mentioned as a strategy to achieve success. The youth's willingness to move to urban areas within Kenya or seek employment opportunities abroad was echoed by many focus group discussions' participants. According to them, migration presented an opportunity for jobs and more favourable economic conditions.

A KII representative noted youth's efforts to upskill. The informant shared firsthand observations from working in a program focused on skilling and empowerment. She noted that there was a growing trend among young people actively seeking opportunities to acquire new skills. Many were taking advantage of programs that offered training beyond their initial areas of expertise. This strategy, known as 're-tooling,' enabled them to expand their skill sets and enhance their competitiveness in the job market. This deliberate effort to upskill themselves aims to improve their adaptability and better align with the opportunities available in the job market. With the current Kenyan economy, having the necessary education and credentials is often a prerequisite for accessing employment opportunities. As a result, they are pursuing avenues to enhance their qualifications and increase their

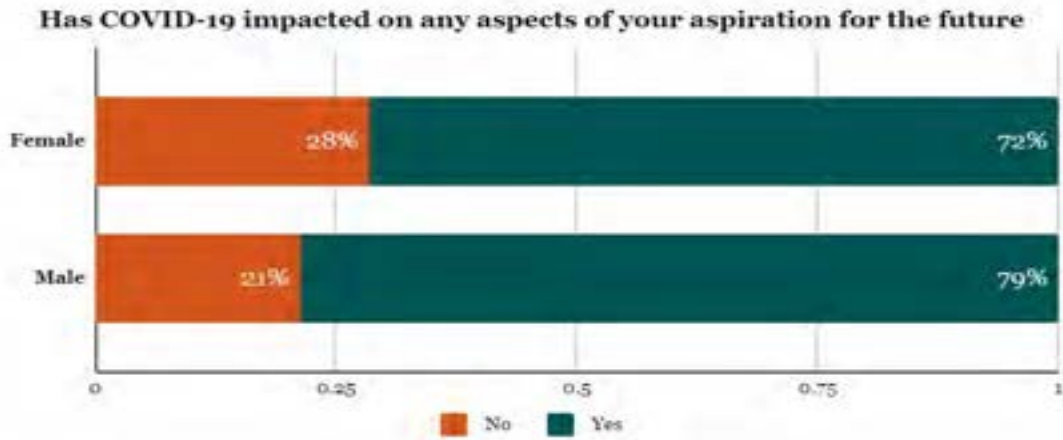
chances of securing meaningful employment.

Other unique strategies were also identified. A KII representative from FKE shed light on the desperate measures some young Kenyans utilize to meet their financial needs. These include fraudulent schemes commonly known as “wash wash” and even robbery. These actions, driven by desperation, not only have a detrimental impact on society but also pose significant risks to the young people themselves. The prevailing economic difficulties push some young people to engage in vices that go against the values and norms of society. Such activities may not be a reflection of their character but rather a consequence of the challenging circumstances they find themselves in leading them to make choices that jeopardize their well-being.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUTH ASPIRATIONS

Youthhood during pandemic

Figure 11: Gender Impact of Covid-19 on Aspirations



The COVID-19 pandemic influenced how young people perceived themselves. For instance, the respondents indicated that they were compelled by circumstances to discover hidden skills and talents. A young female respondent, Meru County stated; *“My mum lost her job, and so to help her out I started plaiting people’s hair which later led me into cosmetology as a side hustle.”* Another similar thought by a young male respondent in Mombasa County, saying, *“I discovered a new skill and taught myself something I couldn’t do, like coding.”* The majority also reported that the pandemic helped them to explore new paths, opportunities and possibilities, making them more innovative and creative. A young person in Nairobi County, explains:

“Covid made me rediscover myself differently. I was in the village and, most school-going kids were getting pregnant, they were exposed to so many challenges. It is at this point that I started a youth initiative foundation to talk to different girls and different boys in different localities. It is also at this time that we started a charity movement, and we would contribute small money to buy sanitary towels and boxers for the boys and girls.”

New skills emerged, *“I learnt to process liquid soap and we could distribute it to the villages. So, it’s made me discover so many things that initial-*

ly if it were not for Covid, it couldn’t have even crossed my mind.” A young female, in Mombasa county, expressed her growth in endurance stating, *“It has taught me to be tough and keep going, I can do anything as long as it is within the degree and respect of the society, and I believe I can survive anywhere.”* Similarly, a young Male, in Kakamega county described, *“It made me feel that in life I need to put more effort when facing challenges, my effort will help me.”* This suggests that young people developed some level of perseverance and maintained a positive attitude despite the challenges presented by the pandemic.

Young people have become more adaptable and can quickly adjust to changes, which is crucial during times of crisis. A young male, from Kakamega county, states, *“Covid made me feel that whenever a worse situation comes, I need to develop by changing abruptly to the situation, the way it is needed”.*

Others were forced to take on more responsibilities and adapt to new roles within their families, “Before Corona, I was like, I’m still a child, I wanted everything to be done for me. Corona made me realize I’m the oldest now at home, I have small siblings who look up to me, so I just have to behave maturely (Young Man, Bungoma County).” Some young people highlighted the importance of

being prepared for unexpected changes and uncertainties in life, “the pandemic was an eye opener to most of us, that you can as well have your white-collar job but at the same time you are running a business because the office work is subject to change anytime (Young Man, Homabay county).

The pandemic led to a positive mindset shift among young people. Young people realized the importance of saving and financial planning. A young person in Homabay outlined this aptly, “It was an eye-opener to know that savings are now important because people were working and not saving for the future, and all of a sudden you are told that your services are no longer needed and you didn’t save anything. The savings can become your initial capital to start a business” (Young Woman, Homabay County).

Additionally, lessons on diversification of income, as a fallback plan in case of job loss or other unexpected challenges were learnt. “What I learnt is that we should not rely on permanent jobs but instead we can get self-employment like you can start a business in addition to your permanent job so that you always have a fallback plan.” (Young person, Kisumu County). This was also echoed by a young person in Kwale, “it’s never about formal employment. All I knew was after school you get employed but Covid changed the narrative and we had to find ways to

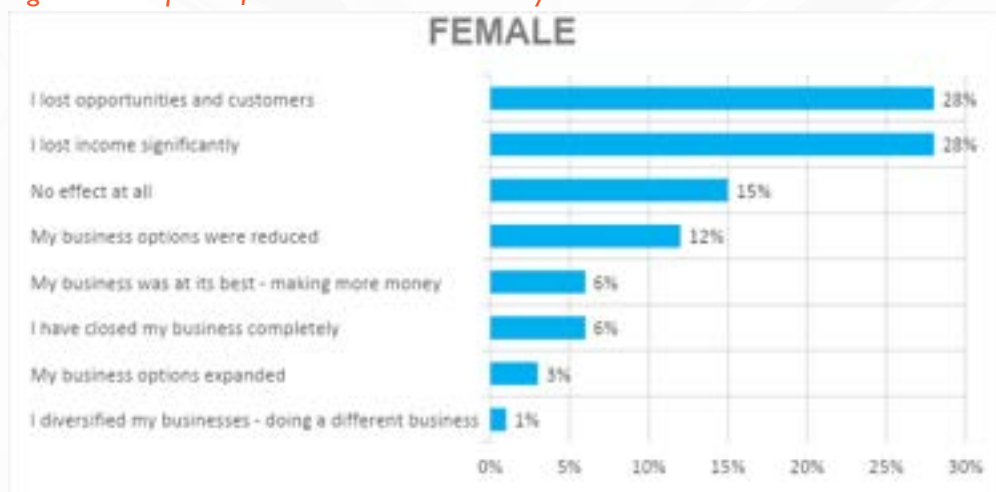
survive.” (Young Woman, Kwale county)

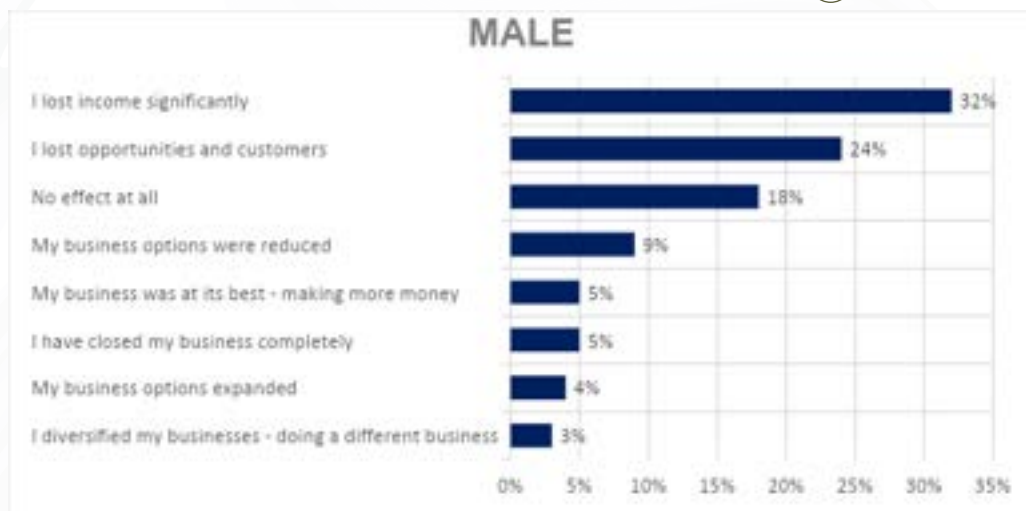
The pandemic also reaffirmed the significance of social connections. Young people realized the importance of family and friends, thus increasing appreciation for them. Consequently, family and friends, not money and possessions, are the most important things in life. A case in point was a respondent explaining, “We came to a point where we learnt family is something so important in life, this could be friends, mentors, peers, because we reached a point where you could not do it on your own, you need a helping hand to help you with that pinch of salt, that two spoons of sugar.” (FGD: Young Woman, Kwale county)

The pandemic had a profound effect on the perceptions and attitudes of young people, highlighting their adaptability, their appetite to learn and optimistic outlook. This allowed for personal and professional development and encouraged young people to explore new paths and opportunities. Recognizing that life can be unpredictable, the youth learnt to be proactive and forward-thinking in their planning and decision-making for the future, an observation presented in youth’s own voices in this study.

The youth were asked on how COVID-19 affect their businesses. The results showed the following:

Figure 12: Impact of Covid-19 on Business by Gender





The youth were asked on whether they currently run a business or not. 30% are currently running a business while 70% are not. Among those who are currently engaged in a business, a gender analysis shows that 53.8% were males while 46% were females. About 16.4% of the youth had not been affected by COVID-19, 30.4% lost their income significantly, 26% lost opportunities and customers, 10.6% had their business options reduced, 5.7% had their business at their best making more money while 5.3% had closed their business completely. *I had a kiosk, so it was brought down. I was so much affected that my business went down, for I had to look for another place to restart.* (FGD: young Female, Kisumu County). *I was thinking of investing in a business eatery which now I didn't achieve because I got laid off, I started up just a small business, which also didn't work.* (FGD: young Female, Nairobi County).

The pandemic had a significant impact on financial aspirations of young people's, making it increasingly challenging for them to save money for the future and pursue their economic goals. The loss of jobs and income instability reduced youth's ability to save and plan for their financial security. As was noted by a young female in Kakamega County, *"I had some savings, planning to start a business. Unfortunately when COVID-19 came, my job ended and there was no source of income. My dreams were shut down"*. Those who had accumulated savings to start businesses or invest in their futures found their dreams dashed as their income streams vanished. The uncertainty and economic downturn made it difficult for young people to maintain stable financial situations, forcing many

to put their aspirations on hold and focus on immediate survival.

These examples illustrate the disruptions that existing businesses faced. Those aspiring to start their enterprises encountered financial challenges that derailed their plans. The pandemic's economic repercussions led to closures, layoffs, and a decline in consumer demand, making it difficult for young entrepreneurs to sustain or establish their businesses. The loss of income and limited resources hindered their ability to invest, expand, or recover from setbacks caused by the pandemic. These examples highlight the resilience and determination of young people in the face of adversity, as they navigate the challenges and seek alternative ways to pursue their entrepreneurial ambitions.

COVID-19 negatively impacted young people's migration aspirations, either for work or study abroad. A young person, in Nairobi County, narrated, *"I had a visa to go work outside the country. Middle East and I had already done the interview. I was just waiting for my papers to be processed and then covid hit and migration was stopped, so I couldn't go and start the job. So that opportunity just passed they had to employ somebody else. I lost the opportunity because I could not migrate"*. The inability to migrate caused frustration and disappointment as young people were eager to pursue new experiences, explore opportunities, and gain international exposure. The abrupt halt in their migration plans had a profound impact on their career trajectories and personal growth.

COVID-19 disrupted the aspirations and plans of many youths, forcing them to adapt to new cir-

cumstances and challenges. This theme captures the various ways in which COVID-19 impacted the lives of youth, including delays in achieving goals, changes in career paths, and shifts in priorities to support family members. Similarly, it was also highlighted that COVID-19 impacted young people's social-cultural aspirations related to marriage and family. A note from a young Male in Uasin Gishu county pointed out that, *“COVID-19 has made me shelve the idea of getting married as I am currently surviving on a meagre salary. My little job became unstable so I couldn't marry and I couldn't get rich”*. For some, it delayed their plans due to economic uncertainty, and financial challenges. This implied that it was going to be difficult to provide for and support their families. This made others prioritise education and career before settling down in marriage.

Gender-related constraints and barriers to youth aspirations

COVID-19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on Kenyan youth, specifically loss of employment, disruption of education, psychosocial challenges, and loss of businesses. It further exacerbated pre-existing youth challenges (unemployment and poverty), creating new challenges and mental health risks. The study found that although almost everyone was affected, the effect on young men and women was different due to their pre-existing gendered disparities. The impacts of crises are never gender-neutral, and COVID-19 is no exception. Young women were disproportionately affected by the pandemic because of the complex, intersecting vulnerabilities.

Due to high unemployment and restricted movement, young women into situations where they were sexually exploited to secure employment. They reported facing gender-based discrimination in the workplace and limited job opportunities due to their gender. The prevalence of sexual violence in form of sexual harassment and exploitation of young girls and women in the workplace was highlighted in a statement by a young female participant from Bungoma County, *“When you're a young person, especially a girl, applying for a job at a particular office. You are qualified and have the necessary paperwork, you won't be given the job without giving something in return. You are told to use what you have [coy term for sex] to get what you don't have.”*

In addition, across the focus group discussions, young women reported an increase in gender-based domestic violence in their respective communities. Societal expectations of men to provide for their families may have caused conflicts in households where men were unable to do so. Other research has shown that when men's ability to perform their duties, their sense of masculinity is threatened which leads to violence as a compensating behaviour (Thamari, 2021). In the case of current study, this trend was noted.

Similarly, the influence of cultural factors in erecting gender barriers to youth aspirations was noted. Certain jobs or professions are still perceived as being suitable only for men, which limits opportunities for female youth to pursue careers in such fields. For instance, a young female FGD participant from Uasin Gishu highlighted, *“There are some positions when they're giving out jobs, they'll just say, no, this doesn't fit a woman to be in that position.”* A quote from young Female in Kakamege: *“Like in the engineering industry, they associate it with men, so when you are lady who has done engineering they start wondering what you're doing in engineering.”* Nonetheless, young men also face limitations in accessing job opportunities due to gender biases, with girls being preferred over boys.

Young people from the LGBTQ+ community complained about 'black tax' and 'gay tax' whereby relatives demand financial support as a condition for acceptance. In their attempt to live out their sexuality and be accepted, young people from the queer community are forced to carry the financial burden of their extended families. This has limited their ability to invest in their own personal and professional development, as they may need to use their resources to support their families, with consequent long-lasting effects on their well-being and prospects. As was noted by one participant from the queer community, *“gay tax, black tax is taxed by your family, for accepting you for who we are. When you don't give money, you are cut off. So, we are paying to be accepted in society. You are given responsibilities that are not your business, but parents make it your responsibility.* This insight sheds light on the complex intersection of financial obligations, societal acceptance, and the unique challenges faced by young LGBTQ+ individuals as they navigate their personal and professional lives.

Limited access to physical interaction, networking and recreational activities, affected young people's wellbeing. Young men were particularly affected because they were typically less accustomed to spending extended periods at home than their counterparts. A young Male from Kisumu County stated, *"There has been an increase in the number of youths suffering from anxiety and depression, due in part to the loss of employment and also the uncertainty that the pandemic brought. In 2020, a large number of youths were just beginning their lives in terms of employment or attending college. But then when the pandemic hit, it brought so much uncertainty that it led to an increase in anxiety, depression and mental health issues"*. Due to men's societal expectations and traditional inclination to suppress emotions and exhibit behaviours associated with strength and resilience, they were affected by more. Women often shoulder a significant portion of caregiving responsibilities within families which young women had to participate in during the pandemic. With school closures and increased need for home-based care, women faced added stress and pressure, balancing work, childcare, and household responsibilities led to mental health risks. Young men's economic vulnerabilities stemmed from societal norms of masculinity, which forbid them from speaking about their struggles and seeking help. As was stated by a young Male in Mombasa County, *"society has taught us not to speak about our struggles, the majority of men often suppress their emotions."* This expectation to silently endure challenges can lead to emotional trauma and hinder men from reaching out for support when needed, exacerbating mental health risks.

Young women were perceived as more vulnerable to the virus and were sent home from work first, potentially due to concerns about their health and safety. A young female in Kisumu County said, *"In our place of work, we were told that the ladies are more vulnerable. So, we were sent away, in fact, we were the first people to be sent out and told to sit at home"*. The contrasting experiences of economic challenges of young women and men highlight the influence of gender norms and societal expectations on individuals' well-being. It exposes how traditional gender roles shape the ways in which different genders are treated and supported during times of crisis. This finding calls for a more nuanced understanding of gendered vulnerabilities and the need for inclusive

support systems that address the diverse needs of all individuals.

In our analysis of gender differences in the division of labour, our results indicate that young men were able to engage in paid work to support their families whereas young women were left with limited opportunities to access income-generating opportunities. This is attributed to the fact that young women's hours of family-care obligations increased during the pandemic while young men engaged in more paid work and personal time. Despite this unfair gendered division of labour, women were not protected from negative relationship outcomes. These findings align with Waddell, Overall, Chang, and Hammond (2021) who concluded that COVID-19 pandemic undermined progress towards gender equality thereby negatively affecting the relationships and well-being of women. Young women reported a disproportionately high risk to their economic well-being, which pushed them out of the workforce and limited their labour force participation. This is because they assumed additional responsibilities, such as domestic chores and child care, as a result of school closures and lockdowns. These obligations further constrained their capacity to pursue employment or engage in income-generating activities outside the home. Young women often shoulder the burden of unpaid domestic work and child care, this therefore limited their time to pursue income-generating activities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, young women were faced by early pregnancies due to increased sexual violence and some were compelled to early marriages thereby curtailing their education aspirations. Due to disruptions in health systems and financial constraints, young women reported reduced access to healthcare and reproductive services as well as access to menstrual hygiene products. As a result, some young women faced additional stress; the risk of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. More young men on the other hand began to abuse drugs and other harmful substances. The pandemic led young men to increased risk-taking behaviours such as fraud (better known as *wash wash* in local slang) and gambling. Some women turned to prostitution as a means of survival.

The pandemic exacerbated the digital divide leaving some young people further behind. Specifically, rural youth reported lack of internet connec-

tivity and devices which negatively impacted their access to education and access to opportunities that youth in urban areas had. Young women in the rural area reported to have had less access to technology than their male counterparts. A young female in Garissa county *“I wanted to finish my masters, but when COVID came, I stopped going to school and where I stay in Garissa Garissa county, it was hard being online, internet was also inaccessible. Like one and a half years I had gap year.”* The gains made in gender equality were undermined by the pandemic (Fisher & Ryan, 2021). In addition to these constraints which young men and women faced in pursuit of their aspirations due to COVID-19 pandemic, five foundational barriers were identified as most broad ranging and prevalent. These barriers face the young people even outside of the pandemic occurrence and limit their aspirations: Financial difficulties, restrictive social norms, poor employment prospects, corruption and nepotism, and discrimination.

Financial challenges due to limited access to credit resources and income-generating opportunities were highlighted as the topmost barriers. Young people’s aspirations for higher education, vocational training or starting business require financial capability which is lacking. Sense of hopelessness, frustration, and being held back from achieving one’s full potential characterise the youth’s feelings due to these financial barriers. Although the young people indicated their openness to take risks, they are limited when it comes to starting new businesses or investing in personal development.

Restrictive social norms exacerbated the frustrations the young people faced. Parents put pressure on their children to pursue certain career paths due to societal expectations. For example, as expressed by a young woman, *“some parents believe that if you don’t pursue an education, nothing will help you, so they do not believe that our talents and skills can be utilised in other ways* (FGD: A young female from Meru county). This therefore limits opportunities for youth to pursue their passion and interests. When societal expectations do not align with the young person’s own interests, fear and self-doubt further limit their aspirational pursuits. Social norms that also expect men to provide lead to frustrations with consequent effect on mental health risks, gambling, violence and addiction.

Poor employment prospects came as a signif-

icant barrier to young people’s aspirations as repeatedly emphasised during the focus group discussions by both young men and young women. Poor employment prospects include inability to secure work, underemployment, poor pay, corrupt employment processes and sexual exploitation at work. A young female in Homabay County said, *“I have already finished school and now I am looking for a job, nobody is willing to employ you. They want to pay you a small salary, something that cannot sustain you well because they are complaining that is what they can offer”*. A female youth from Kakamega County noted that *“Our 8-4-4 system is based solely on providing us with content without practical skills, you may have a skill but no one to empower you”*. There was a strong perception that when jobs become available, they are often unfairly given to family members or fellow tribe members or to those who could afford to bribe the job givers.

Associated with poor employment prospects are institutional barriers that have far reaching effects on employment and youth’s preparedness for the job market. These barriers include prohibitive policies and practices that create obstacles to accessing resources and opportunities. For instance, as findings indicate that there is a lack of youth involvement in decision-making, government mistrust towards youths, and ineffective youth policies. Besides, the youth have talents but face obstacles in promoting them due to the absence of policies to represent their interests. A male youth from Bungoma County reported: *“in our current society, youth are not involved in decision-making, and the government lacks confidence in them so the youth policies are ineffective. There are no youth-representative policies in place, so if your talent is recognized and you wish to promote it, you cannot do so.”*

Furthermore, corruption and nepotism emerged as primary obstacles to young people’s aspirational pursuits. Corruption in employment, characterised by patronage and bribery, is viewed as a significant barrier to the aspirations of young people, placing them in what the young people described as a “tight spot.” Both young women and men reported systemic obstacles, such as the need for connections to secure a job, nepotism and tribalism as was succinctly expressed, *“in some places, even if you are qualified and have been shortlisted for a job, you are eliminated because you are*

not from the same tribe". Youth viewed nepotism and other forms of corruption as the greatest impediment to their career and business aspirations. While having connections was lauded as an asset, in other cases it proved to limit those who do not have connections. The following views from youths illustrate this issue:

"There is one animal that prevents us from succeeding in life, corruption like a graduate from a university who goes to look for a job and because he or she is from a humble background the one in the office wants to be bribed." (FGD: Young Male, Meru County)

"Nowadays, who do you know is a prerequisite for employment; do you know someone? If you do not know anyone, you are doomed". It doesn't matter whether you are smart or have experience." (FGD: Young Male, Homabay County).

Lastly, discrimination on the basis of gender and disability was highlighted as yet another significant barrier to youth aspirations. Young people with disabilities (YWD) reported facing negative attitudes and assumptions about their capability to perform job tasks, leading to discrimination and feelings of humiliation. In one of the YWD FGD groups in Nakuru, a young woman with mobility issues said; *"When you are disabled, people start questioning your capability to do the work. They start saying don't bring us, people who are coming to disturb us, we will find ourselves carrying them, lifting them or supporting them whenever they want to do something."* YWD expressed concern that they are overlooked for good jobs and that employers would not be willing to make the basic accommodations they require.

Opportunities and prospects occasioned by COVID-19

Although COVID-19 pandemic created significant constraints on the youth and their aspirations, it also presented some noteworthy opportunities and prospects in favour of youth aspirations. COVID-19 pandemic opened up unlimited possibilities for digital and technological utilisation by the youth. A shift from physical learning and interaction platforms to virtual platforms opened opportunities for businesses and new ways for learning. Opportunities for digital marketing, remote work, and the use of online platforms for learning and

communication emerged. Digital platforms such as Tiktok were utilised by young Kenyans to create content and generate income. A young male from the creative industry noted, *"that time I was idle, so I did lots of videos on TikTok and I was very active. People were always looking forward to my informative videos, which led to heavy usage of social media, then I started earning a living from it."*

Some youth became content creators reaping big from the short-form video hosting digital service. One of the informants from KEPSA noted, *"COVID-19 brought a decade of work ahead, we used to talk about the future of work in youth employment and it looked very remote, so when COVID-19 came, we realised how important it is to have digital technology presence as an under layer and that opened up very many opportunities for young people."* The youth who had access to electricity and digital devices explored online jobs and opportunities to work remotely. This transitioned them into working from home and engaging in various online employment opportunities. Remote working arrangements enabled persons with disabilities to work from home reducing the burden of inaccessible transport and infrastructure. The online platforms also created more opportunities for innovations in sign language interpretation and captioning which ultimately made communication easier for YWD. COVID-19 created an opportunity for social media monetization enabling young people to capitalize on their social media spaces, creating new avenues for income generation. As this view illustrates, *"COVID-19 boosted online marketing and advertising, and door-to-door service delivery. Some people do delivery when you order food online, clothing or any other item, some young people deliver to your house. When they bring it, they'll charge you a fee. We no longer go to the vendors, we call them and they deliver, that one has created employment"*.

Young people were compelled by circumstances to think innovatively in their entrepreneurial pursuits. They were provoked to think outside the box and come up with new ways to make money, fostering the growth of side hustles and small businesses. One respondent from Homabay County stated: *"Young people became innovative, there are things I discovered I was unable to do, but thanks to COVID-19, I am now able to do them. It has allowed me to earn more money from side*

jobs”. Additionally, it created opportunities for entrepreneurs who were able to pivot and adapt their business models to meet changing consumer needs. For example, restaurants shifted to takeout and delivery services, while retailers moved to online sales. This required entrepreneurs to be agile and creative, as well as to invest in new technologies and digital products.

In reference to personal and social development, COVID-19 presented opportunities for young people to benefit from government financial support, i.e government waivers, recruitment as community health workers/volunteers, increased family bonding, and support for mental health. The importance of mental health and support was underscored as stated: “Anxiety and depression made so many people aware of the need for recognition of mental health because there was so little acknowledgement that people have mental health problems. Therefore, we devised ways to virtually communicate with one another and acknowledge that you may be experiencing something mental without stigmatising it” (FGD: A Young Female, Kisumu County).

Awareness on pertinent policies was improved such that some youth interests and needs that were hitherto not taken seriously, were given attention. An intensification of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) recruitment and encouragement of youth to gain skills for work was by government agencies. It led to the expansion of TVET institutions and provided opportunities for young people to access trainee support, scholarships, and competency-based education and training. In addition, more organisations became aware of disaster response with positive implications on future disruptive events like the pandemic. Challenges facing persons with disabilities (PWDs) and the need for digital accessibility and policy directions were given some attention.

The pandemic spurred the need for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the future of work was occasioned by the pandemic. Some trends such as learning and working flexibly have positive outcomes for young people’s prospects. Other features of the future of work such as working remotely will enable young parents particularly to learn or work while also carrying out parental and domestic responsibilities without wastage of

time in daily commute. The future of work being digitised has accelerated the shift towards a digital world, with individuals learning new digital skills and embracing virtual communication and online platforms for work, studies, and social interaction. Supported by the rapid deployment of new digital solutions such as video conferencing, document-sharing tools, and expansion of cloud-based computing capacity, these needs present additional work prospects for the youth. For the youth, these new work shifts mean developing new skills, and flexibility to respond to changing market demands, evolving needs and complex environments.

Figure 14: Young Men Definition of Dignified and Fulfilling Work

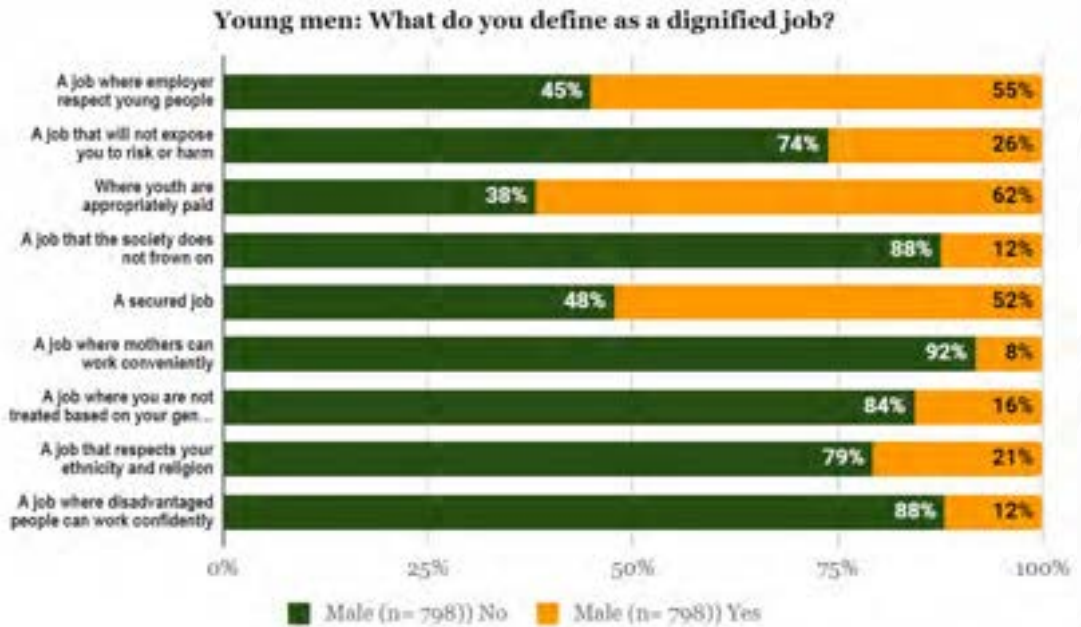
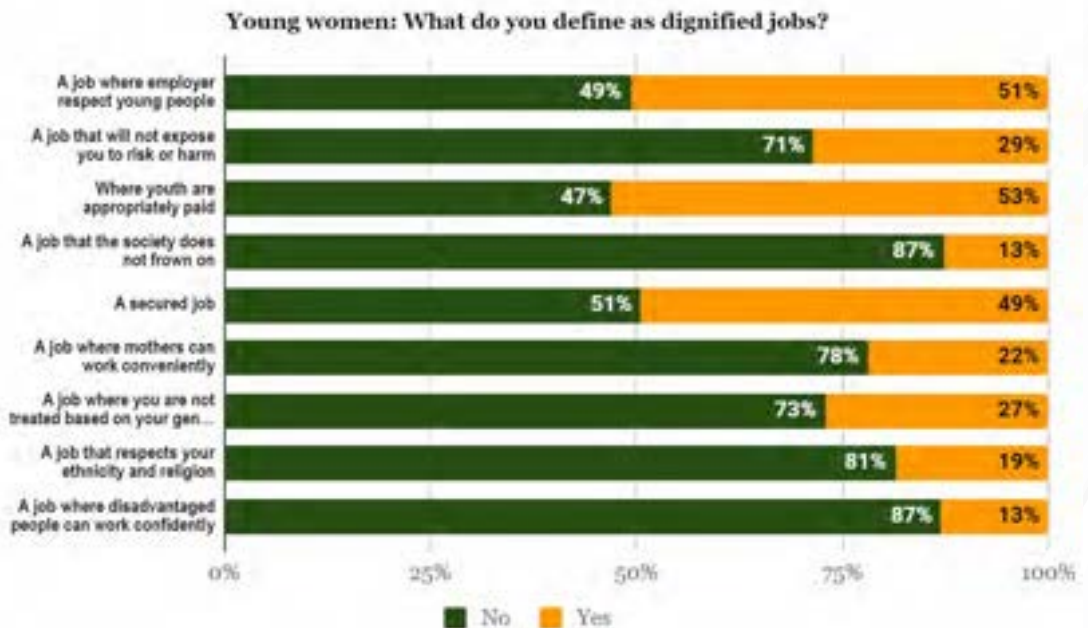


Figure 15: Young Women Definition of Dignified and Fulfilling Work



As young men and women indicated during the FGDs, appropriate pay is important to them as a key factor to dignifying and fulfilling work as it enables young people to meet their financial obligations. Young people consider the minimum wage to be a fundamental standard, but a dignifying job should go above and beyond that. Their work should therefore be rewarding, enough to cater for their needs and those of their family. One key informant explained, *“You may pay them good money but if it is not flexible to accommodate them, they may leave you, because what they describe as a good job should have*

a flexible working environment to think or try new ideas. You have to find a way of just bringing the best out of them". It is noteworthy to conclude creating an environment that fosters youth creativity and innovation is essential for job satisfaction and fulfilment.

Work that *respects young people* was also rated as dignified and fulfilling with slightly more young men (55%) acknowledging it than young women (51%). A *secured job was also* ranked as important by 52% of young men and 49% of young women. Three factors of work, *jobs that society does not frown on*, (12% young men and 13% young women) *jobs where mothers can work conveniently* (8% young men and 22% young women) and *jobs where disadvantaged people can work conveniently* (12% young men and 13% young women) were ranked lowest as important for dignified and fulfilling work. Even in these factors that were ranked lowest, it is notable that since women are most affected by motherhood responsibilities, more young women (21%) than young men (8%) indicated that as an important factor for dignified and fulfilling work.

Interviews and focus group discussions gave a broader view of young people's perceptions of dignified and fulfilling life. For instance, job satisfaction was discussed and expressed in different forms by the young people. Satisfaction was framed as access to a stable and well-paying job; a job that aligns with their interest and passion; a job that aligns with personal and professional goals; a job that is respected by others; a job that makes them happy and provides peace of mind.

Autonomy and independence are essential elements for satisfaction, such as starting one's own business, where the individual has more control over their work and schedule. A young Male in Kajiado shared this perspective, he explained, *"A job that you are passionate about and that gives you happiness and satisfaction as a person is dignifying and fulfilling because you can have a high-paying job that you are not passionate about"*. Similarly, another young female respondent in Bungoma stressed, *"It's a job that gives you peace of mind, there is no pressure, you are just peaceful with what you earn there, with colleagues around you, and the friends around you, you're comfortable including environment and the income."* Although appropriate payment is desired, young people seek employment that goes

beyond financial considerations and encompasses aspects that contribute to their overall well-being, fulfilment, and satisfaction.

Respect features prominently as another key aspect of dignified work, even if it is not well-paying. Young people believe that dignified work should respect and value them as individuals and employers should acknowledge their worth and appreciate their unique skills and abilities. Respect was also viewed in relation to kinds of work young people can earn from but that do not derive a sense of pride or social recognition. As one youth highlighted, *"some occupations, such as shoemaking, may pay well but are not necessarily respected or valued by society."* In contrast, being referred to as a teacher was viewed as more dignified and respected, even if the income may be low. As was reported by a young Male in Bungoma County, *"There are people who upon getting a job, they are not comfortable. A job like sewing shoes may attract many customers and generate income, but now, people refer to you as someone who sews, which is not good, it's better to say you are a teacher even if you don't get money because you are respected as a teacher"*. Social recognition and respect for the nature of the work performed contribute to the perception of dignity in employment.

Work that commands dignity would be one that one is treated equally and fairly regardless of seniority or position in the workplace. Specifically, for young women, dignity meant freedom from sexual harassment and exploitation. For young men, dignity meant protection of one's freedom and self-esteem. A young male in Machakos County stated, *"A job where there is no junior, there is no senior. We take ourselves as all equal, and that should always be the policy of every workplace"*. To a large extent, dignity was expounded by an informant in KEPISA who mentioned, *"It is work that gives you the capability to live a decent and dignified life and is respectful of your fundamental human rights. It does not take you into precarious situations but provides social protection measures like insurance."* Dignity in work is closely tied to equality, fairness, and the protection of fundamental human rights.

According to the young people, dignified work provides a sense of work-life balance. It provides a flexible work environment that allows for rest and balance in life, with enough time for rest and bal-

ance outside of work. Youth repeatedly stressed the need to balance between their job and personal life without sacrificing career goals. In her description, *“a job that does not limit you, you know as humans we need rest. A job that will not burn you out. As long as you have sufficient resting time, regardless of how much it pays or how much you enjoy it, you must rest.”* (A young Female, Kajado County).

Young people also alluded to a dignified job as one that gives them a sense of purpose and meaning, that is feeling like you are making a difference in the world or contributing to a greater cause. They believe that helping others is fulfilling. A young participant elaborated, *“dignifying work is making an impact in someone’s life, helps in solving problems in people’s day-to-day lives, be it emotionally, physically or financially. It is when I do something that creates a change that we desire.”* (LGBTQ person, Nairobi County) They emphasised the importance of not just having a career but also finding ways to help others and make a positive impact.

Moreover, the opportunity for growth and development was linked to dignified work. It entailed positions that allow young people to grow and develop professionally, and the chance to acquire new skills and face new challenges. A young participant in Bungoma criticised this idea when she stated, *“Most of you want to be in public service because you can develop and learn, but public service is stressful. You try to do the right thing, but you’re forced to do wrong, you try to do good, you are forced to do bad. This is because someone can come to you and ask you to do something for them, but if you refuse, he says it’s either you follow what he says or else you are dismissed.”* While the opportunity for growth and development was the starting point associated with dignified work, merely offering professional development opportunities does not ensure dignity if individuals are forced to compromise their values or engage in unethical practices. The quality of the work environment and the presence of integrity are crucial for work to be truly dignified.

Youth’s skills and skill gaps

The study showed that the youth possess skills for work attained through formal education and informal means. However, it was notable that although they had these skills, the young people

felt that the skills they possessed did not always match with the work prospects they envisioned. They also reiterated the need to re-skill or attain additional training. An outline of some of the skills possessed by young people include technical skills such as driving, welding, mechanical, electrical, and computer literacy. Creative skills include hair-dressing, makeup art, music, and poetry. Customer service skills such as sales, marketing, administrative and secretarial skills.

The following skill gaps were identified through interviews and focus group discussions: Young people aspired to own businesses, yet few mentioned having skills related to business management hence indicative of a skill gap in business management and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial and innovation skills set focuses on creativity, enterprising abilities, and an entrepreneurial mindset. These skills are increasingly important as young people adapt to new ways of operating, seeking growth, change, and innovation in non-traditional career paths. Encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship will help young people develop creative solutions to existing problems, ensuring the continued growth and evolution of their businesses or projects.

The study also revealed a gap in technical and vocational skills with research participants emphasising the importance of learning practical, hands-on skills, such as mechanics, plumbing, construction, and agriculture. They expressed a desire to attend technical or vocational schools to gain these skills, which they believe can lead to self-employment and enable them to develop practical and technical skills of trade-specific knowledge. Technical skills are crucial for executing the requirements of various jobs and industries, an untapped area of employment for the youth. Financial literacy skills were also found to be lacking as young people expressed the need to know how to manage finances and bookkeeping to enable them to successfully execute their business ideas. Although young people indicated that they have computer-related skills, there was a notable observation that improving digital skills is critical for the current world whether in business or in entrepreneurship. A gap in aligning digital skills to new work trends and the ability to utilise new skills still exists.

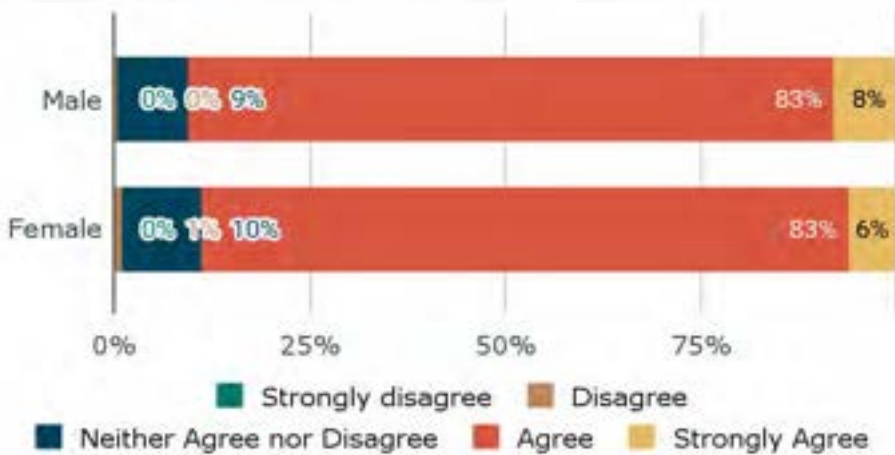
YOUTH RESILIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY STRATEGIES

Enablers of resilience

Enablers of resilience including perseverance, optimism, humour, social support, emotional regulation, and spirituality were weighed against whether the young men and women perceived that they possessed these qualities. In all the characteristics more than 70% strongly agreed and agreed that they possess the characteristics as follows:

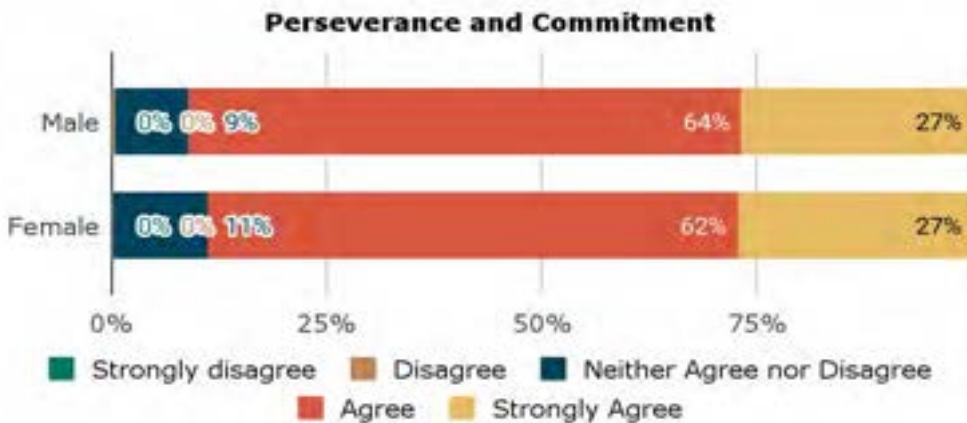
91% of young men (8% strongly agree and 83% agree) and 89% of the young women (6% strongly agree and 83% agree) indicated that optimism and positive self-image supported their resilience as shown below.

Figure 16: Positive Self-image and Optimism



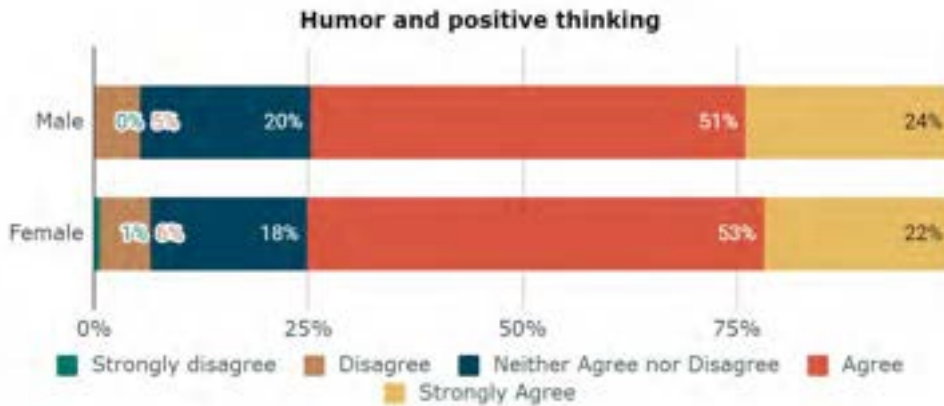
Other research (Dumont and Provost 1999) has shown that optimism cushions individuals from hopelessness in states of widespread social and economic disruption such as the covid-19 pandemic. Others have also argued that “Intrinsic curiosity and an optimistic outlook” are key ingredients that contribute to resilience, (Dvorsky, Breaux, and Becker 2021) an observation that was also evident in the current study. This optimism was also echoed in the FGDs as they narrated stories of optimism and positive image they bring in the face of covid-19 adversity and unemployment:

Figure 17: Perseverance and Commitment



Young women and men also use humour and positive thinking as protective measures for resilience and as means of responding to adversity as shown below:

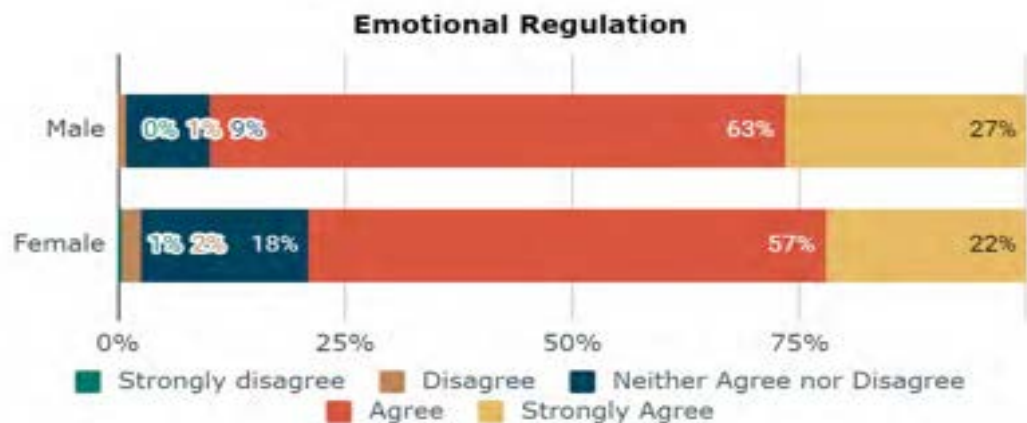
Figure 18: Humor and Positive Thinking



Cann and Collette (2014), Abbasi (2017) and Neenan (2017) studies show that humour promotes resilience as it is used to deflect difficult situations. Most young people, i.e. 75% young men (24% strongly agreed and 51% agreed) and 75% young women (22% strongly agreed and 53% agreed) said that they use humour or appreciate humour in handling their daily situations.

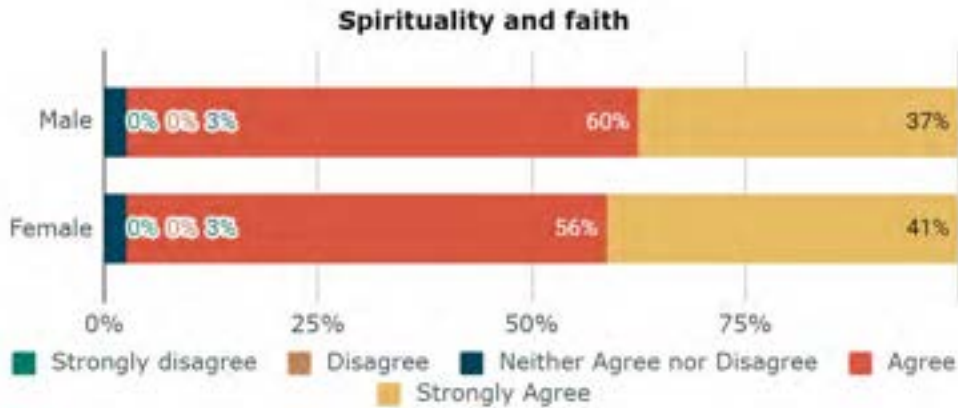
Additionally, the results on emotional regulation showed a similar trend with 90% of young men (27% strongly agreeing and 63% agreeing) and 79% of the young women (22% strongly agreeing and 57% agreeing) emotional regulation as shown in Figure below:

Figure 19: Emotional Regulation



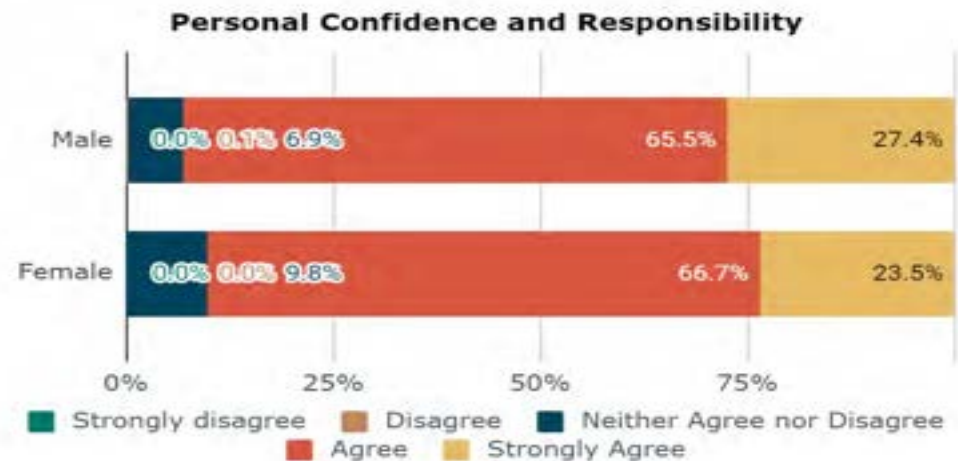
Equally, and as reported in focus group discussions, young people utilised spirituality and faith groups to strengthen their resilience. The figure below shows that a significant number of young men and young women consider spirituality as an enabler of their resilience.

Figure 20: Spirituality and Faith



As part of efforts to remain hopeful in challenging circumstances, young people want to be seen as achievers and they communicate that to others while manifesting their own confidence and sense of responsibility in the choices they make as shown below.

Figure 21: Personal Confidence and Responsibility

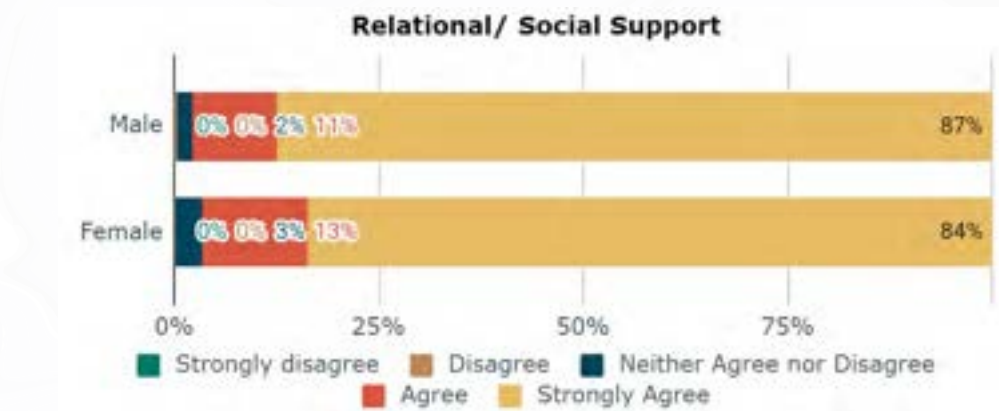


Of the above enablers of resilience, most young men and women alluded social to relational and social support as an enabler they utilised most in building their resilience highlighting the significance of social capital.

Banking on social Capital

Despite the challenges of getting fulfilling work, COVID-19 lockdowns and disrupted social life, the young men and women reported having been part of social groups that lessened these difficulties. Small family or community groups as well as social media groups provided a forum for social support. Most young people utilised social support and relationships in their resilience journey. 87% of the young women and 84% of the young men indicated that social support was an important resilience enabler for them shown in Figure below.

Figure 22: Relational/ Social Support



The young people had social networks including friends and family which created opportunities such as job links, training, and discovering and building on talents. They saw social networks as a source of great support for them in receiving emotional support, mentorship and positive advice and comfort. Several interviewees mentioned working together with others, forming groups or networks, and utilising their social connections to help each other during the pandemic. Those we spoke with emphasised leveraging their social networks and the networks of those close to them to achieve their goals and advance their careers. The following quote illustrates,

“I’ve received a lot of support, especially from family and friends. Sometimes you find yourself in a difficult situation, you don’t have the finances, moral support or even advice. Without the support, I don’t know where I would have been. I’ve received support from my friends, relatives, and family. That’s what has kept me going”. (FGD: young person, Nairobi).

Although this was echoed by the young people, they also indicated that family support may not be guaranteed if one comes from financially precarious or unstable households. In such cases the young person becomes the supporter instead of the one being supported. One respondent highlighted a potential issue with family support, specifically in the context of polygamous families where resources are constrained with existing relational tensions. In some cases, young people intimated that parents are not always supportive:

“I think it’s high time families change their mindset. You know that traditional family mindset that, oh, I’ve educated my child until the university, so she must just be a doctor, a teacher, a nurse. We change that mindset and embrace whatever our children want to do. Nowadays the youth embrace anything, you find a graduate, but he’s so much engaged in agriculture that he’s not even looking for a white-collar job.” (Young Female, Kisumu County).

Many young people are aware of social protection structures within government and among non-governmental stakeholders. These structures such as funds to support youth entrepreneurship and employment are available but are not effective or accessible to many. Several young people hinted that they need networks to access these, and the process is frustrating. Concerns of nepotism and corruption in job search processes were raised. So, while the youth utilise social networks, the same networks may become inaccessible or only helpful to a few. For example, in Kajiado county, youth stated, *“from the government’s side, I will say no because of the frustrations I received. The government needs to have a good platform that is ready to help young people because the system that the government has it’s a struggle for young people. Youth don’t get assistance because even the youth fund is given to older people”.*

Young people see their peers as being helpful and motivating, but also as competitors and not necessarily sources of support. Even though peers provide moral support needed, the young people are worried about negative peer pressure which can be a significant hindrance to success. At the

same time, negative influences on success because of negative attitudes from friends was highlighted: *“There was a case in Busia in which a young man established a business, but when he told his friends how well he was doing, instead of receiving support, the friends devised a plot to kill him, and he was ultimately murdered.”* (FGD Young Man, Kisumu County)

Youth adaptability

Despite uncertain prospects, young men and women demonstrate various adaptive capabilities as shown below:

Figure 23: Young Women's Adaptability

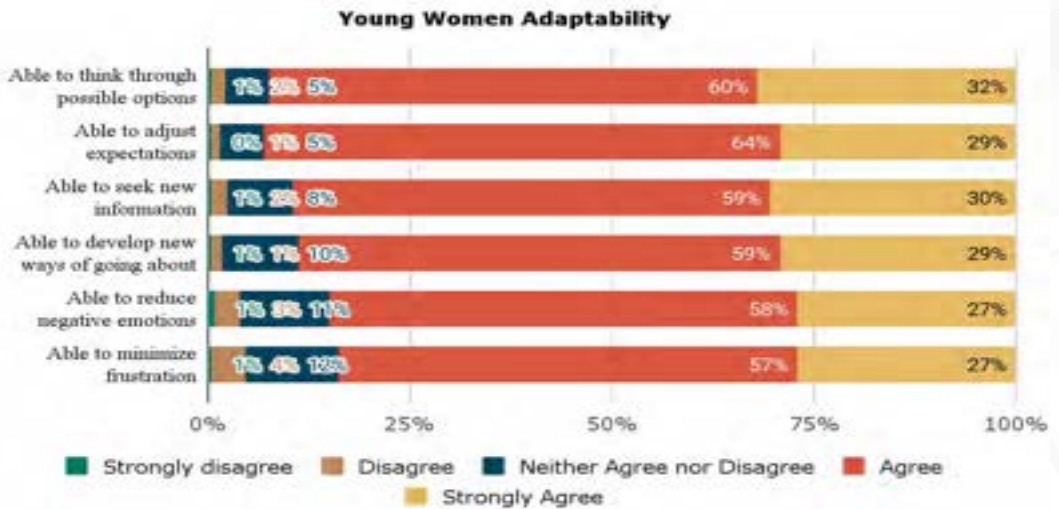
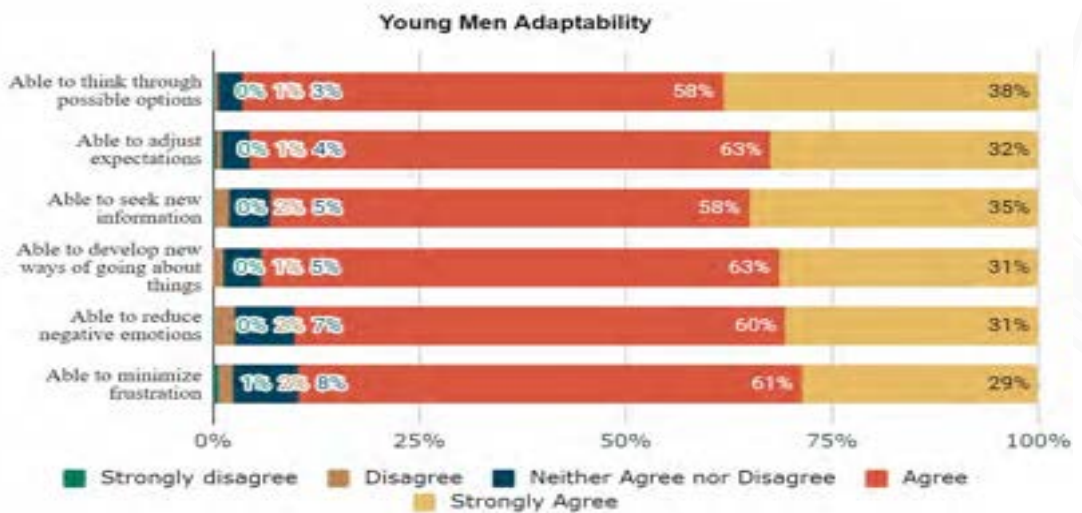


Figure 24: Young Men's Adaptability



In their own self-assessment, the young people indicated high adaptability skills including the ability to think through possible options, ability to adjust expectations, ability to seek new information, ability to develop new ways of going about things, ability to reduce negative emotions and ability to minimise frustrations.

The qualitative analysis backs these as youth expressed their flexibility, and creativity. Youth adapted to new situations, finding alternative ways to earn a living. A young respondent explained, *“When COVID-19 came, I was doing security work, but the job ended. I started cooking chapati and mandazi by the roadside and selling them. Sometimes I could get arrested by either police or county officials and taken to City Hall. So, I have to give them Ksh 500 so that I am not arrested. That’s how I survived selling Mandazi and chapati in the streets.”* Other participants similarly explained, *“Being laid off, we were just doing anything that comes by, regardless of our profession or what we like to do, accepting anything and everything that comes our way, as long as it can put food on the table and pay the bills.”* Additionally, some young people explored new careers and new businesses pointing to alternative ways of surviving and making do with the conditions they found themselves in. Notably, young people especially in the urban centres who had access to technology and digital devices increased their digital engagements and online ideas for generating income. A young person, Nairobi County says, *“It made us more aware of technology. We could now use technology to do things online, online meetings, online learning, online business, and online marketing. This was an advantage or an opportunity to every one of us, whether you’re a businessperson and motivational speaker, anything, you’re selling a product, you post it online, people buy it.”*

Youth in the rural counties embraced agriculture as an alternative way of survival. *“When I saw that there was no hope, I started my own poultry farm and started rearing chicken”,* YWD respondent, Nakuru county. Some participants saw agriculture as a viable means of reducing life expenses by growing their own food and increasing their income.

Conclusion on Youth Resilience and Adaptability

Resilience and adaptability of young people in Kenya show that they have capacity to respond to challenges and identify new opportunities. This suggests a need for greater investment in initiatives that promote personal and professional growth, as well as efforts to enhance the adaptive capacity of young people in response to the changing employment landscape. Additionally, the

emphasis on alternative ways of survival such as agriculture and digital skills suggests a need for greater flexibility and diversity in employment opportunities that can accommodate the evolving aspirations and needs of young people. It appears that promoting the resilience and adaptability of young people is essential for unlocking their potential and supporting their aspirations for a fulfilling and successful future as was demonstrated by the following insights from the study:

Transformative capacity: Kenyan youth possess extraordinary transformative capacity and, when provided with a supportive environment, they can serve as catalysts for the development of inclusive and resilient societies during crisis response, recovery, and preparation for future disruptions.

Adaptive capacity: Kenyan youth strengthened their adaptive capacity by being flexible, embracing change, taking initiative and adjusting their plans or strategies in response to new circumstances.

Resilience: Kenyan youth identified human capital-related resilience qualities, which included persistence and determination, learning and growth, a positive mindset and identifying creative solutions. The findings highlight the resourcefulness and resilience of young people in Kenya, who are taking proactive steps to overcome the challenges they face. The focus on entrepreneurship and innovation suggests a desire to create opportunities and generate economic growth, while the pursuit of higher education and professional development reflects a desire for personal growth and development. Additionally, the emphasis on social support networks and formal and informal networks suggests a recognition of the importance of community and collaboration in achieving goals. Overall, these insights suggest that investing in the potential of young people in Kenya can have significant positive impacts on both individual and community well-being, as well as broader social and economic development.

CONCLUSION

Youthhood is a complex and confusing phase characterised by personal growth, employment anxieties, and aspirations for the future. For Kenyan youth, this period presents tensions of achievement and failure. While the young people understand their responsibility to develop skills and lay foundations for their careers, challenges related to lack of access to essential resources dampen their efforts. In their own voices, the young people reiterated that with the right support and resources, youthhood presents a time of great opportunity and potential for personal fulfilment and success.

COVID-19 pandemic brought forth both positive and negative experiences to young people's aspirations. On the positive side, it strengthened their self-reliance, resilience, and adaptability to new circumstances leading to innovative means of survival and 'hustling' spirit which continues to be valuable beyond the pandemic. The pandemic also resulted in the discovery of new youth identities, skills, and capabilities useful for pursuing future aspirations. Increased technology uptake, adaptation to change, personal and social development, as well as an opportunity to experience the future of work (remote and digitised modalities) was presented by the pandemic. On the negative side, the loss of businesses and employment prospects, disruptions to education and training greatly affected the youth. As a result of the pandemic disruptions such as lockdowns, there were increased cases of mental illness, gender-based violence, unwanted pregnancies and early marriages, and drug and substance abuse. Overall, there was also evidence of missed key development milestones; limited access to meaningful and secure employment, delayed education plans, difficulty saving money for the future, and the entrepreneurial plans delayed, postponed or completely derailed.

To be successful, according to Kenyan youth, means to secure good jobs and establishing businesses. Besides this, a significant finding from the study revealed that young people perceive success as not only a means of achieving their business aspirations but also creating employment opportunities for others. These aspirations drive them towards financial security that would unlock the ability to give back to society particularly by supporting family and friends. Creating employment opportunities for others was echoed by the young

people demonstrating desire for impact beyond themselves. While the youth aspirations are rooted in a desire to create an impact in the community, the study showed that the path to achieving these aspirations is non-linear and complex due to multiple barriers. These hurdles include personal impediments such as fear of failure, mental health challenges, gambling, addiction and substance abuse; financial constraints including lack of school fees for further education, and insufficient credit for business start-ups; employment related challenges such as limited job prospects for youth pursuing career paths with low job opportunities, high competition, and inadequate practical skills; and institutional and systemic barriers including corruption, ineffective youth policies, government mistrust towards youth and lack of youth involvement in decision making.

The study also found that despite these challenges, Kenyan youth are determined to overcome these obstacles and achieve their aspirations through various strategies like innovative business ideas; taking risks on any business or work venture; pursuing multiple income streams; pursuing higher education through scholarships; establishing self-help and savings groups; pursuing work opportunities abroad; leveraging on their social networks, and participating in government programs like *Kazi Mtaani*.⁵

Significant gender norms and barriers were identified in regard to young peoples' aspirations and resilience. The COVID-19 experience reinforced traditional gender roles and expectations that position men as the primary breadwinners and women as the primary caregivers. During the pandemic, women were sent home from work first because they were perceived as more vulnerable than men, while men were expected to be tough and resilient, perpetuating traditional gender norms. Young women faced additional barriers to employment due to sexual exploitation, limiting their employment opportunities and hindering career advancement. Challenges faced by young women reflected patriarchal attitudes and power imbalances in the workplace which amplified young women's vulnerabilities. Cultural norms and biases constrained the opportunities for female youth to pursue certain careers as some occupa-

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This program for youth by the Government of Kenya is no longer operating.

tions were still viewed as appropriate only for men such as drivers construction workers. Young males were also limited in their access to employment opportunities due to gender preferences, with young women favoured over young men in some cases. Similarly, young members of the LGBTQ+ community faced financial burdens in supporting their extended families as a result of societal pressure to secure acceptability, limiting their capacity to invest in their personal and professional development.

Kenyan youth define dignified and fulfilling work as a job that achieves satisfaction, earns respect, offers fair compensation or good income, fosters a sense of purpose and meaning, offers an opportunity for growth and development, and provides a sense of work-life balance. This definition resonates with their perception of success. To achieve success, and dignified and fulfilling work, young people rely on their social network, including friends, family, well-wishers. According to the young people, the social network provides them with emotional and financial support and helps in creating opportunities for work, including job linkages, skills training, and building on talents. The study found that a diverse range of skills are needed to respond to changing circumstances. These skills identified by the youth include, entrepreneurial and innovation skills, technical and vocational skills, financial literacy, job market competencies and digital literacy.

Finally, the young people exhibited resilience and adaptive capacity as demonstrated through flexibility to try new income generating work, and a positive mindset to grow new skills. They also demonstrated the capacity to recognize and capitalize on new opportunities and embracing alternative ways of survival such as engaging in agriculture and increasing their digital footprint.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth Support and Access Recommendations

Levelling the Employment Field

1. Young people advocated for the implementation of professional standards against discrimination to be enforced, especially based on gender, age, ethnicity and disability in the workplace. Government should therefore reinforce and support anti-discrimination measures.
2. Investing in youth-targeted mentorship programmes to enable access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources needed for meaningful access to dignified and fulfilling employment. Establishment of platforms for peer learning and business mentoring for aspiring entrepreneurs, both within and outside of formal learning structures, can provide the needed mentorship support for youth. Youth desire support through apprenticeship and internship programs such as opportunities for temporary employment or programs that offer skills training, educational opportunities and mentorship that support youth in developing the skills and knowledge they need to succeed.
3. Programmes providing financing for young entrepreneurs need to be re-evaluated and redesigned to address structural obstacles that impede adoption such as requirement for collateral and years of experience.
4. They want to be supported financially with scholarship funding to achieve educational aspirations and business capital for business entrepreneurs.
5. Youth face bias and unnecessary barriers when seeking employment, particularly in the requirement for work experience. Youth fervently demanded a change and a more equitable employment environment that rewards hard work, talent, and ambition. They highlighted the need for employers to provide equal opportunities and accommodations for all youth, regardless

of their abilities or disabilities.

6. Youth with disabilities demanded basic investment in provisions like mobility support to increase their access to employment. A young person with a disability said, *“I have a disability but it does not affect my ability to perform in a work environment, all we will need are adaptation measures.”*

Improving Educational Access and Quality

1. Kenya’s TVET system should be redesigned with a focus on improving the quality of teaching and infrastructure, opening pathways from TVET to university, providing training in soft skills, and tailoring the curriculum to workplace needs by involving labour market stakeholders in curriculum design and training and mentoring programmes.
2. Youth are concerned that the current education system does not equip them with the right skills that will make them competitive in the job market. They criticized overreliance on exams and rigid structures that fail to recognize competitive skills. They are also dismayed that the education they are receiving may not prepare them for the job market or give them a chance for employment. Therefore, they called for a change in the education system emphasizing learning skills that are applicable and beneficial resulting in a better generation that will not face the same employment challenges.

Increasing Voice and Civic Engagement

1. Ensuring the participation of diverse youth perspectives in policy dialogues. This involves the establishment of policy dialogue platforms that provide secure spaces for all youth to contribute. Accountability mechanisms to monitor implementation of youth-centric policies need to be in place with participation of youth.

2. Involving youth in the policy development design and implementation of all of the recommended policies. Currently, youth participation in program design is lacking, and as a result, programs do not cater to youth aspirations. As one young woman in a focus group in Nairobi put it: *“I feel more supported when my decisions are incorporated within the society, I feel more comfortable when at least I can take part in decision making. I’m so much appreciated, in consultation, with regards to issues that are of the community that I’m coming from”.*

Entrepreneurship Support

1. An enabling environment for doing business, including making it easy to obtain business permits, and other necessary documentation as well as supporting youth with innovative ideas and talents. Youths need support in navigating the bureaucratic processes and regulations that can be a barrier to starting a business. Most importantly, government funds and initiatives should be implemented fairly and transparently, without favouritism or discrimination.
2. Young people want access to role models and mentors who can provide guidance particularly to help them navigate uncertain pathways like entrepreneurship and employment. Across the board, young people felt they lacked this support. *“We need mentors with whom we can maintain a close relationship, someone to hold your hand and show you the direction where you are headed. You cannot just do things blindly, you will meet bumps on the way, this support will help us navigate any challenges that may arise”.* (FGD: Young Female, Mombasa County).

Psychosocial Health Support

1. Following the mental health challenges that young people experienced due to the impact of COVID-19, they called for the provision of mental health facilities to be made available and accessible, to support in management and prevention of stigma. This could be an important step towards

creating a more supportive environment for young people.

2. Integrating psychosocial care services into youth programs to support young people as a preventative measure against mental illnesses.

Policy Environment Recommendations

1. Regulatory and Policy Support: Advocacy for policies that support entrepreneurship and ease regulatory burdens can create a conducive environment for scaling businesses. Working with government entities to simplify licensing processes, reduce bureaucracy, and address legal and regulatory challenges can significantly benefit young entrepreneurs. Tax reliefs for youth-led start-ups and permit waivers from local government and parastatals will boost youth-led businesses. The youth noted that the process of registering a business is very accessible to most youth and straightforward but some youth do not have this information.
2. When designing youth policies, we cannot focus solely on this demographic but we must acknowledge that they are embedded within a larger ecosystem of non-youth actors, thereby designing policy responses that operate at the ecosystem level.
3. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring that young people have a diverse set of skills. A greater emphasis should be placed on building resilience, especially at the domestic and community levels.
4. In the foundational design, programs must acknowledge that young people do not exist in isolation. They live in a complex social ecosystem in which the support they receive from their social network (family, friends, and community) has a direct impact on their aspirations. Programs must involve not only young people independently, but also family members and community leaders, to be effective.
5. It is important to take an intersectional approach to understand the impact of Covid on young people. This is because

gender intersects with other factors like socio-economic status to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. By acknowledging and addressing these intersecting factors, we can better support all young people in accessing the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

6. Youth-friendly employment policies like paid internships and job security should be enhanced. This is to ensure that the systemic loopholes that make youth opt for business as opposed to employment are closed. Youth who opt for business should do so out of choice and not circumstances.

Youth centric and youth-led initiatives

1. Pandemic recovery and resiliency solutions must be youth-led, adaptable, and sensitive to the diverse requirements of young women and men, and they must promote youth leadership as a form of human capital.
2. The digital divide is readily apparent and young people particularly from rural areas are highly disadvantaged in terms of technology access and uptake. This Inequitable access to digital opportunities must be addressed. New approaches are needed to close the digital divide.
3. Kenyan youth face a multitude of barriers to employment that can be addressed through collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders. At the social-cultural level, gender bias calls for concerted efforts are required from society to challenge and change these discriminatory practices. On a personal level, building self-confidence and empowering young individuals to believe in their skills and abilities is crucial. Mentorship programs, skills development workshops, and career guidance initiatives can play a vital role. At the systematic level, collaboration between educational institutions, industry experts, and policymakers is essential to bridge the gap between education and employment.
4. While the rapidly changing nature of work has made it hard to accurately predict what skills would be most in demand in the

future, there is no doubt that youth will need to develop resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of resilience as a crucial skill for youth as they navigate their worlds of education and work.

5. Opportunities for funding and supplying the government should be decentralized. The youth decried the culture of kick-backs and 'tenderpreneurs' which marred the process regardless of access to government procurement opportunities for women and youth

Relevance to Mastercard Foundation Programs

When asked to describe their business aspirations, several young respondents indicated that they aspired to establish successful enterprises they are passionate about and to build business empires that would provide employment opportunities for other young people. The unifying aspect of their aspirations is that they all desire to scale. Many young people have a strong entrepreneurial drive and a desire to create successful businesses. They are motivated not only by personal success but also by the opportunity to make a positive impact on society. Could the future of employment consist of assisting these young entrepreneurs to accomplish the scale they desire for their businesses? If so, what kind of support would they need? Perhaps the future of employment could indeed involve supporting young entrepreneurs in achieving the scale they desire for their businesses. Aspiring entrepreneurs often face numerous challenges when it comes to scaling their ventures, and providing the necessary support can be crucial in enabling their success. Programmatic considerations in reference to the following areas are recommended:

1. Access to Capital: Scaling a business typically requires significant financial resources. Young entrepreneurs may need assistance in accessing capital through various means, such as venture capital, angel investors, grants, loans, or crowdfunding platforms. Providing guidance on securing funding and connecting them with potential investors can be highly beneficial.
2. Business Expertise and Mentoring: Scaling a business involves complex decision-making

- ing processes and strategic planning. Young entrepreneurs would benefit from mentorship and guidance from experienced business professionals who can help them navigate challenges, refine their growth strategies, and make informed decisions at different stages of scaling.
3. **Networking and Partnerships:** Facilitating networking opportunities with industry leaders, potential clients, and partners can contribute to the growth of young entrepreneurs. Building connections within the business community can open doors for collaboration, strategic alliances, and accessing new markets.
 4. **Access to Markets and Customers:** Assisting young entrepreneurs in reaching larger markets and expanding their customer base is essential for scaling. Support can involve market research, marketing strategies, access to distribution channels, and assistance in leveraging technology and digital platforms to reach a wider audience.
 5. **Technology and Innovation Support:** Emphasizing the importance of technology adoption and innovation can help young entrepreneurs scale their businesses more efficiently. Providing access to technology resources, mentorship on digital transformation, and fostering a culture of innovation can enable them to stay competitive in rapidly evolving markets.
 6. **Operational Efficiency and Systems Development:** As businesses grow, streamlining operations and developing efficient systems becomes crucial. Young entrepreneurs may require support in areas such as human resources, financial management, supply chain optimization, and process automation to enhance productivity and scalability.
 7. **Collaboration and partnerships:** Collaboration with industry and government can foster partnerships between MCF, industry stakeholders, and government entities to create an enabling environment for youth entrepreneurship. This can involve advocating for favourable policies, streamlining regulatory processes, and facilitating market access for young entrepreneurs.
 8. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Implement monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the impact and effectiveness of youth entrepreneurship programs. This will help identify successful approaches, address challenges, and make informed decisions regarding future funding allocations.
 9. **Social network support engagement:** We discovered that the support young people receive from their social network (parents, friends and peers), whether positive or negative, financial or emotional, has a direct impact on whether or not they pursue their desired aspirations. Their experience challenges MCF to reexamine how they approach supporting young people: not only work with them directly but also bring their social support network into the picture. MCF should adopt a holistic approach that not only focuses on working directly with young individuals but also recognizes the importance of engaging and involving their social support network.
 10. **Develop initiatives that actively engage parents in the entrepreneurship journey of their children.** This can involve workshops, training programs, and networking events that aim to educate parents about entrepreneurship, equip them with the knowledge to support their children's aspirations and address any concerns or misconceptions they may have. This can help foster a supportive and encouraging environment for young entrepreneurs.
 11. **Peer Support Networks:** Facilitate the creation of entrepreneurship-focused clubs, forums, or online platforms where young people can exchange ideas, seek advice, and support each other in their entrepreneurial endeavours.
 12. **Mentorship and coaching:** Young people we interviewed overwhelmingly showed a high level of interest and a need for mentors to guide them. None of the respondents reported any experience of mentorship. It appears doing so would require personal initiative which may be challenging as it requires knowing whom to approach and how, while not every young person has that knowledge. Perhaps, this

is the appropriate role for MCF to act as a matchmaker, identifying and approaching those in the community who could serve as mentors most effectively given the requirements expressed by young people. MCF can consider establishing mentorship programs that pair young entrepreneurs with experienced mentors from their desired industry or field as well as serve as role models helping them build their confidence and resilience.

13. **Work/business-focused skilling and re-skilling:** When describing the skills they felt they required to succeed, youth emphasised that what they required is not a specific set of skills, but rather a variety of skills to enhance their flexibility. This sparks an interesting conversation for MCF regarding the level of skilling needed by young people. What steps can be taken to promote the development of a diverse range of skills among young people? What partnerships can be established between educational institutions, businesses, and the government to facilitate the acquisition of flexible skills for young people? MCF consider undertaking an integrated approach that combines formal education, vocational training, entrepreneurship development, and experiential learning opportunities. By integrating different types of skill-building experiences, MCF programs can address the need for flexibility and provide a comprehensive learning journey for youth. Given the importance of technology in today's workforce, the MCF programs can prioritise digital literacy and technology skills development. This can equip young people with the digital competencies necessary for various industries and foster their adaptability in a rapidly changing digital landscape.
14. **Wellness and psychosocial support:** The pandemic underscored the need for mental health and social support. Ultimately, investing in the well-being and development of young people is critical not only for their future but for the resilience and prosperity of society as a whole. Over time, interventions supporting youth overlook young person mental health and abil-

ity to cope with challenging circumstances. Young entrepreneurs also overlooked their mental health and coping abilities. MCF should consider assessing the specific mental health support mechanisms currently available for young people and whether there are adequate resources, such as counselling services, peer support networks, or mentorship programs, that address their mental health needs.

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6th Floor, I & M Building
2nd Ngong Avenue, Upper Hill
P.O. Box 76418-00508 Nairobi, Kenya

Website: www.pasgr.org

Email: info@pasgr.org

Tel: +254 (0)20 2985000

+254 (0)729 111031

+254 (0)731 000065