



RIISING AGAINST ALL ODDS

YOUTH ASPIRATIONS AND RESILIENCE
TOWARDS DIGNIFIED AND FULFILLING
WORK IN AFRICA

Evidence from Seven countries in Africa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

African young people in Africa are crucial to realizing the Africa Agenda 2063, a continental policy roadmap for inclusive and sustainable development for the African people. Young people in Africa represent about 70 per cent of the continent's population (World Bank, 2023) and constitute a critical mass capable of spearheading the development agenda when given the space and voice. However, this population segment lack access to dignified and fulfilling work (D&FW), curtailing their effective contribution to the development agenda. An estimated 12.7% of youth aged 15 to 35, with more women at 13.3% than men at 12.3% remain unemployed (ILO, 2022). At the same time, while a majority of those employed rely on the informal sector, they are encountered by entrenched precarity that often results in labour underutilization and unproductive outcomes. Despite a flurry of interventions implemented by governments and development partners in Africa, there are still significant gaps in addressing youth unemployment and moving young people from doing just any jobs to accessing dignified and fulfilling work. In the context of youth-inclusive policy and programs towards dignified and fulfilling work, there is an urgent need for evidence that captures the stories of the aspirations, goals and motivations of young people, understand the pathways of maximizing resilience and adaptability as well as lessons on ways to expand work opportunities for young people so as to turn their state from surviving to thriving. Therefore, this reports synthesizes the evidence from our multi-country research, that examined the aspirations of young people, their perspectives of dignified and fulfilling work, their journey towards success and constraints they face in their quest for dignified and fulfilling work. Further, the report proffers recommendations for policy and practice towards empowering young people and amplify their voices.

Method

The study adopted a youth-led participatory approach involving a mixed method design that utilizes a cross-sectional survey with grounded theory, ethnography, and gender mainstreaming theory. The study was conducted across seven

African countries (i.e., Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal), purposively selected to coincide with Mastercard Foundation's ongoing youth intervention activities in those countries. There were 11,262 with nearly equal representation of men (50.3%) and women (49.7%) who participated in the study across the seven countries. Out of these, 51% of the participants indicated they were employed or at least engaged in some income generating work while 49% were unemployed. Most participants had attained up to secondary education at 44.3% followed by those who completed primary education at 31.7%. Only 8.6% of the participants had attained university education while 3.5% reported no formal education. About 18% of the youth interviewed were people living with disabilities (PWDs). The data was collected using survey CTO and analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 24.

Results

Aspirations of young people

An analysis of the aspirations of young people in Africa show six emerging themes: economic, social, education, migration, civic and personal independence. Economic aspirations were the most important to the young people, indicating a growing attraction to work and material wealth. For example, more than half of the participants reported wanting to get a good job (55%), becoming financially prosperous (53%), creating a sound business (46%) and owning property (cars, real estate and land) (36%). While on top of the list is aspirations related to material wealth, the youth aspire to support their families and their communities, with 33% wishing to start a family, 46% wishing to support their family, and 28% wishing to support their community. Education was the third most common theme of aspiration, followed by migration. Compared to the other countries, Senegal reported very few youths who described their topmost priority as having a good education. Rwanda recorded the highest number of youths wishing to migrate compared to other countries, with Ugandan youth being the least enthused about migration. Civic aspirations and personal independence

emerged but were strong factors only in Rwanda. Financial difficulties, corruption, social and gender norms, skill mismatch and exclusive policymaking were the reported barriers to youth aspiration. These barriers delay the achievement of youth aspirations and eventually leave them in a state of wait-hood as they hope for a breakthrough.

Dignified and fulfilling work

The data on youth's perspective of dignified and fulfilling work shows ten emerging themes across all seven countries, with the three most important being work that brings good income, is secure, and where employers respect young people. They believe dignified and fulfilling work should provide adequate financial remuneration that reflects their skills, efforts, and contributions. Other emerging themes include safe work, work respected by society without discrimination, and flexible work especially for people with caring responsibilities. The last three emerging themes are work that gives a sense of purpose, is satisfying and gives some sense of contentment and provides opportunities for growth and development. There is consistency in the quantitative and qualitative data on the emerging themes of dignified and fulfilling work. Young women's and men's perspectives of dignified and fulfilling work are similar with a slight variation towards more gender inclusive workplaces that allow for balancing work and family responsibilities. More women appreciated work that promoted gender inclusive workplace. There is also no significant variation across countries except in Ethiopia and Rwanda, where the dimension of income was not a priority, but job security and employer respect were.

Young people's perspective of dignified and fulfilling work is almost entirely synonymous with success, although, to a greater extent, in their conceptualization, they used dignified and fulfilling work as a means to success. The emerging positive pathway towards dignified and fulfilling work is non-linear and complex. Young people primarily engage in four activities: formal education, apprenticeship, "hustling", and migration (both intra- and inter-country migration) to develop knowledge and skills and build experiences as means towards dignified and fulfilling work. However, the pathway is often affected by barriers such as the lack of finance, unfavourable youth, and employment policy environment, the general lack of opportunities for young people and other socio-cultural factors

especially those based on gendered expectations.

Resilience and adaptability strategies

Resilience and adaptability strategies are critical for African youth's survival and success during socio-economic setbacks. These strategies, although presented as temporary coping mechanisms, enhance the process towards dignified and fulfilling work. The data shows that African youth have demonstrated a high degree of perseverance, optimism, self-regulation, and faith against the odds of life. They have also demonstrated remarkable flexibility in adapting to new situations and devising strategies as an alternative way to earn a living. These strategies included changing careers, starting side hustles, or embracing informal job opportunities to survive. The evidence shows that African youth are creative and use innovative approaches to exploit digital infrastructure to survive. The study findings also emphasize the significance of having supportive social relationships and networks. Most young women and men relied on their families, friends, and community groups for support and survival, highlighting the importance of building and maintaining strong social ties and the value of collaboration and teamwork in navigating challenging situations. Digital platforms were critical resilience and adaptability mechanisms for the youth.

It is evident from the findings that young people are taking charge of their destinies and are now focusing on job creation and becoming their own bosses through entrepreneurship. This finding contradicts the previous studies, especially in Nigeria, suggesting that young people primarily desired white-collar government jobs. The findings have demonstrated that young people are not keen on white-collar jobs but want to be their own bosses by venturing into businesses in fulfilling their aspirations.

Conclusion

Using youth-appropriate methodologies to understand the voices and perspectives of youth on their aspiration towards dignified and fulfilling work in Africa has offered a deeper understanding of the world of African youth and how they navigate their daily struggles amidst challenging times to create a better future for themselves, their families, and communities. Young Africans undoubt-

edly look to a future of work that is dignified and fulfilling, whether through entrepreneurship or being employed by others. Young people in Africa have risen against all odds to survive different socio-economic and policy setbacks by adopting different coping mechanism towards dignified and fulfilling work. Although they take the initiative and make every effort towards achieving their aspirations, they stated needing more opportunities, financial support, and a youth-responsive policies to give wings to their aspirations.

Recommendations

Based on the key findings of the study and the conclusion arrived, the study recommends the following:

1. *Youth-driven policies and programs*

At the national level, it is essential for public institutions responsible for the development of young people, including ministries and departments, to establish youth policy platforms. These platforms will not only harness the voices of young people on policies and programs that affect them but also ensure that all voices are heard and respected. As a starting point, the relevant public institutions should consider the voices of young people in the current research on dignified and fulfilling work and their aspirations for the future. This consideration will guide the reform of ongoing programs or the development of new ones to reflect these aspirations. The reforms must also consider the diversity of young people with affirmative actions to meet the aspirations of diverse young people, including gender, rural-urban, and disabilities. This approach will require a deliberate and urgent effort by governments to seek stronger partnerships with non-state actors and the private sector organisations in developing youth-driven policies and programs. At the broader system level, the approach necessitates legislative reforms that align with some of the indices of dignified and fulfilling work - workplace safety, gender, and disability inclusiveness.

2. *Funding for youth initiatives*

The issue of funding and capital to support youth businesses and initiatives is a key focus of this research. A crucial recommendation is the establishment of public funding regimes, specifically

tailored to national budget frameworks, to foster the development of business initiatives for young people. In cases where these funding regimes are already in place, it is essential to implement fair and transparent allocation mechanisms to ensure equity. Complementing public funding regimes, it is vital to enable the coordination and utilization of private sector funding and other development partnership fundings. This can be effectively achieved through a centralized location, overseen, and managed by young people themselves, operating within a supportive institutional environment.

3. *Supported peer-mentoring initiatives.*

The proposed initiative of supported peer-mentoring offers young Africans an opportunity to support and mentor each other in developing critical skills for work readiness, business development, academic work, and digital technology. Such an initiative will augment ongoing programs of the Mastercard Foundation across the African continent. This initiative can be further bolstered by the support of development partners and the private sector through dedicated youth-oriented not-for-profit organisations with the backing of the Government, thereby strengthening progress towards dignified and fulfilling work.

4. *Academia-industry collaboration to optimise work-readiness.*

The research underscores the pressing issue of youth unemployment, mainly stemming from the lack of work readiness. A significant finding is that many young people were either in school or undergoing training as part of their transition to adulthood and the labour market. To address this, fostering collaboration between academia and industry is crucial. This collaboration can lead to the review of curricula and the promotion of on-the-job training programmes. For instance, young people have shown a keen interest in online activities and opportunities in the information and communication media, mainly social media. The digital skills sector could serve as a focal point for supporting youth in enhancing their skills for work in an increasingly digitalized economic system.

BACKGROUND

Overview of Youth Unemployment in Africa

With over 70% of its total population below the age of 35, Africa is considered the youngest continent in the world (World Bank, 2023). Those within the age bracket of 15-35 years account for 27% of Africa's total population. Given this vast demographic, Africa's youth hold the key to Africa's development potential. Engaging young women and men is central to the realization of Africa's growth blueprints, such as Sustainable Development Vision 2030 and the Agenda 2063. Their ideas, knowledge, and creativity can influence the development and structural transformation that the continent needs. Accordingly, there is a need to understand their needs, interests, and challenges and take responsive measures to support and create an enabling environment where young women and men can thrive.

However, young women and men continue to face tremendous challenges, mainly, the lack of adequate work opportunities capable of providing dignified and fulfilling work. Youth unemployment in Africa has been presented with varying scales of complexity and urgency and often as a full-blown crisis (ILO, 2022; Mastercard Foundation, n.d; Sumberg, Fox, Flynn, Mader, & Oosterom, 2021). In 2022, the youth unemployment rate stood at 12.7% (ILO, 2022). While this statistic is lower than the global average, the contextual differences across the countries and the gendered vulnerabilities especially for women, complicates the unemployment situation.

Practically, because of the 'youth bulge', more young people now live in Africa than any other continent. At the same time, the persistent failures of the formal sector, both public and private, to create enough jobs to match the growing demand implies that a majority continue to work in the shadows, in low and unproductive jobs, sometimes even in unhygienic conditions, for whatever little income they can get.

Over 80% of Africa's employment is informal (Traub-Merz, Ohm, Leininger, Bonnet, & Maihack, 2022). While the informal sector is mainly heterogeneous, it is often characterized by factors such as difficult working conditions, casual work and short periods of contracting, low and irregular incomes, and lack of job security (Benjamin & Mbaye, 2014). Rural areas are mostly affected, but trends over the last decade indicate an increasing pattern of urban informality (Fox, Senbet, & Simbanegavi, 2016). Given that most young women and men in Africa rely on the informal sector, equally important is the significant differences in gender and across countries. Young women more than men tend to face worse scenarios of combined unemployment, underemployment and informality (See Table 1). These patterns are a product of the social norms and often reflect the barriers women face in participating in the labour market. While COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these disparities, they are characteristic of the labour market across the countries.

Table 1: Youth Unemployment (15-24 years), Selected countries¹

Country	Female (%)	Male (%)	Total (%)
Kenya	14.3	12.4	13.4
Uganda	6.9	6.2	6.6
Rwanda	18.7	16.3	17.4
Nigeria	14.4	12.6	13.4
Ethiopia	8.3	4.5	6.3
Ghana	7.1	7.2	7.1
Senegal	7.7	3.4	4.8
Average	11.1	8.9	9.8

Source: ILO modelled estimates for the year 2022

¹ The data source estimates young people between 15 and 24 years. However, in the current study we based our age range on 15 -35 years

Young people in Africa – Unpacking their dynamism

Historically, young people have been defined by age: 15-24 (UNDESA, n.d) and 18-35 (AU, 2006). More recently, these definitions have become fluid, adopting indicators that go beyond the fixed age limits to include social and development markers such as marital status, status of employment post-university, and whether one is fully independent and capable of fending for oneself (Honwana, 2012; Namuggala, 2018). Beyond the varying definitions, perceptions on young people across Africa also differ. Dominant narratives have framed young people negatively, referring to them as lazy and even troublemakers (Abebe, 2020; Atnafu et al., 2014; Holwana, 2014). These narratives have often perpetuated victimization, disparagement, and derision of young women and men's agency. However, more recently, new ways of understanding young people have emerged, recognizing their creativity, innovation, and contribution to growth and development (Ligtvoet, 2018; Yeboah, Sumberg, Flynn, & Anyidoho, 2016).

While appreciating that young people are not a homogenous but dynamic group, the new narratives recognize youth's agency in influencing development and change. Across Africa, young people are doing their best by making the most out of the limited opportunities, engaging in survival strategies, including through entrepreneurship and building networks to transform their lives (Yeboah et al., 2020). They have become trend setters, leveraging their potential and capacities for their wellbeing and for those of their families and doing all they can to achieve their future aspirations (Habti, 2022). Essentially, they exploit limited opportunities in various sectors such as ICT, construction, transport, the gig economy, and the creative industry. Evidence also indicates that young women and men are at the forefront of harnessing actions to combat climate change and influence inclusive growth.

Aspirations, Perspectives of Dignified and Fulfilling Work, and Resilience

Aspirations in this report refer to the forward-looking goals and ambitions that young women and men have and for which they are willing to expend their time, energy and resources in

pursuing. Aspirations are multidimensional and complex in nature, and often depend on personal characteristics, culture, social networks, media and socio-economic status of a person (Ogunjini, Daun, & Kariuki, 2023). Young people tend to define their aspirations based on their perceived abilities and limitations in achieving the imagined futures, as well as the certainties and uncertainties of achieving that future (Wang, Hegedorn, & McLaughlin, 2020).

Previous research has identified aspirations as capable of yielding a strong predictive power for future achievement (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020). For instance, a person with strong educational aspirations often appears to also have future desires for careers in occupations considered to be high paying and well regarded. Similarly, others who may see less of the connection between educational and future careers, would probably view careers in entrepreneurship or agriculture as viable pathways to achieving a successful future life. This understanding implies that aspirations form an important plank in determining career trajectories and possible future outcomes of young people. Beside these 'occupation-leaning' aspirations, young women and men also tend to have social aspirations such as desires for marriage; migration aspirations; moral aspirations; among others.

Closely linked to the question of youth aspirations, in this report, is the understanding of their perspectives on dignified and fulfilling work. The few studies that have attempted to unravel this important subject have been limited to young people's perspectives on agriculture (Ogunjini et al., 2023; White, 2012; Yeboah et al., 2020), migration and mobility (Porter, Blaufuss, & Acheampong, 2007), unpaid work (Abebe, 2007; Thorsen, 2013) and on participation in gambling, dancing and sex work (Namuggala, 2017). Although largely domain-specific, these studies offer interesting insights into understanding the type of work that young women and men value and perceptions of how they can achieve those jobs.

Socio-economic shocks such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic coupled with other interconnected challenges including poverty, limited access to quality training and education as well as social-cultural norms and practices, mean that young women and men in Africa are in a constant struggle in their quest for dignified and fulfilling work. Primarily, their success is determined by the extent to which they are resilient and able to cope

with the cacophony of challenges. In mapping their resilience and adaptability strategies, the report evaluates Africa's youth mechanism of survival and coping.

Gender dynamics play out in these realities. Compared to men, women face myriad challenges that affect their access to education, economic resources and their participation in various sectors. Even in sectors where women are the largest active participants, such as agriculture, they are still the lowest paid, working in difficult conditions (Twinorugyendo, 2019). Other social norms and harmful practices such as early marriage, work-based sexual exploitation, and in most cases the burden of unpaid care work at the household level exacerbate inequalities. Moreover, most women are excluded from policymaking and often do not take part in decision making on issues affecting their welfare. Due to these realities, gender considerations are crucial in understanding aspirations, perceptions on work and strategies for resilience and adaptability.

The above discussions set the scene for the main issues presented in this report. The current study sought to explore Africa's young women and men's aspirations, their perspectives on dignified and fulfilling work, and the journey towards success and achieving future lives including how they utilize resilience and adaptability. The study draws insights from data collected across seven countries: Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal between September 2022 and January 2023, and which was guided by the following key questions:

- i. What are the future aspirations of young women and men in Africa?
- ii. What are the perspectives young people in Africa on dignified and fulfilling work and their journey toward accessing dignified and fulfilling work?
- iii. What barriers and constraints that young women and men face in their quest for dignified and fulfilling work and in achieving successful futures?
- iv. What resilience and adaptability strategies do young men and women employ to pursue their aspirations?

METHODOLOGY

Research design and sampling

The study adopted a youth-led participatory approach that combined both quantitative and qualitative methods in data collection and analysis. This approach was anchored on PASGR's Utafiti Sera². The study was conducted among young women and men within the age range between 15--35 years (See Table 2 below) both from rural and urban areas and across socio-economic dynamics in the seven countries. The quantitative aspect of the study involved a cross-sectional survey while the qualitative aspect involved a mix of grounded theory, ethnography, and photovoice. The study was conducted across seven African countries (i.e., Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal), purposively selected to coincide with ongoing youth intervention activities in those countries. A multi-stage sample was used in each country to select regions/counties, local government areas, towns, households, and individuals. A representative sample was calculated for each country (see Figure 1) for the cross-sectional survey. There were 11,262 with nearly equal representation of men and women who participated in the study across the seven countries. A purposive sampling was adopted to identify participants for the focus group discussion and key informant interviews (See Figure 1 for the sample sizes).

People With Disability (PWDs).

Out of the 9,621-youth sample interviewed, 18% confirmed to be people living with disabilities (PWDs). The sample of the youth with disability varied by country as shown in the table below

Distribution of PWDs by Country

Country	n	Number of PWDs	Percent
Kenya	1,551	418	27%
Ethiopia	1,577	238	15%
Nigeria	1,657	174	11%
Uganda	1,637	318	19%
Ghana	1,639	618	38%
Senegal	1,560	0	0%
Total	9,621	1,766	18%

The disabilities were categorized into hearing, visual, cognitive, vernacular and selfcare. The distribution by country are as shown in the table below.

² Utafiti Sera is Kiswahili phrase that means Research Policy. It is PASGR's innovative approach that integrates rigorous research and evidence creation with active advocacy and influencing to enhance knowledge mobilization and uptake. The Utafiti Sera approach provides a safe platform for diverse stakeholders including researchers, policy actors, programme implementers and beneficiaries to interact and engage each other through co-creation, co-production of knowledge.

Type of Disability	Description of the disability	Kenya (n=1,551)		Ethiopia (n= 1,577)		Nigeria (n=1,657)		Uganda (1,637)		Ghana (n=1,639)		Senegal (n=1,560)	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Hearing	Difficulty hearing	28	7%	49	21%	20	11%	26	8%	65	11%	0	0
Visual	Difficulty seeing	94	22%	45	19%	31	18%	63	20%	145	23%	0	0
Physical	Difficulty walking or climbing stairs	81	19%	31	13%	40	23%	84	26%	123	20%	0	0
Cognitive	Difficulty remembering or concentrating?	123	29%	52	22%	50	29%	68	21%	162	26%	0	0
Vernacular	Difficulty communicating e.g. Understanding or being understood?	61	15%	42	18%	20	11%	28	9%	93	15%	0	0
Selfcare	Difficulty with self-care such as washing, bathing or dressing	31	7%	19	8%	13	7%	49	15%	30	5%	0	0
Total		418	100%	238	100%	174	100%	318	100%	618	100%	0	0
Percentage of the disabled by country		27%		15%		11%		19%		38%			

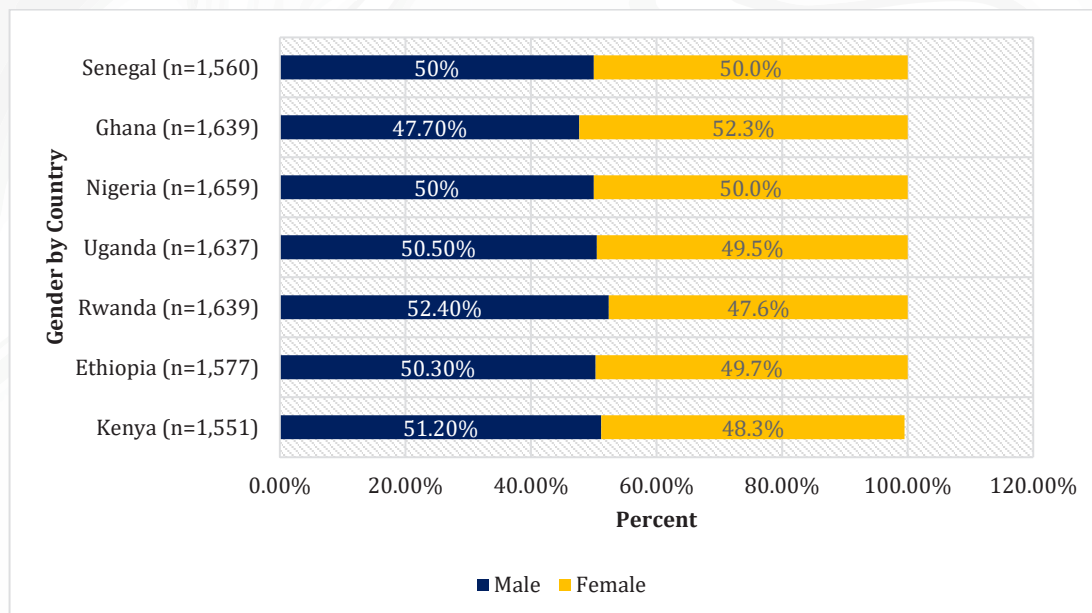
Age distribution of the sample by country

From the sample, 93% (9621) were 18 years and above. Ghana, Ethiopia and Nigeria sampled youth, including those below 18 years. The rest of the sample did not include any youth below 18 years. See Table 1 below for details of the age distribution. Rwandan data was not included in this estimation due to irreconcilable variations.

Table 2: Age distribution of sample by country

Country	15-17 years	18-23 years	24-29 years	30-35 years
Ghana (n= 1,639)	18%	39%	26%	16%
Ethiopia (n=1,577)	16%	49%	36%	0%
Nigeria (n=1,657)	5%	24%	28%	42%
Kenya (n=1,551)	0%	38%	41%	21%
Uganda (n=1,637)	0%	42%	34%	24%
Senegal (1,560)	0%	46%	28%	26%
Average	7%	40%	32%	22%

Figure 1: Distribution of study participants by country and gender



Data Collection and Analysis

Across the seven countries, surveys, administered through a structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data. A SurveyCTO toolbox with real-time, central data storage and management was used in the configuration and deployment of the survey tool as it provided data safety and accuracy. Qualitative data, on the other hand, was collected through focus group discussions (FGDs), youth panels, and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with selected participations. See table 3 for the distribution of participants.

While data from each country were analysed separately to produce country-specific insights, an overall analysis combining all country level data was done in an attempt to generate overall insights and come up with an 'Africa-centric' synthesis and outcomes. Simple descriptive statistics and regression analysis was used to analyse quantitative data while thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret qualitative data. In all cases, gender sensitive data collection and analysis was integrated in the research process. To create a comprehensive analysis, a triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative data was conducted.

Table 3: Summary of qualitative data distribution per country

Country	No. of FGDs	No. of IDIs
Kenya	31	17
Uganda	21	17
Ghana	8	30
Nigeria	24	24
Ethiopia	21	25
Rwanda	22	37
Senegal	12	22
Total	139	172

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study in each of the seven countries was obtained from the relevant authorities. In addition, throughout the research phases, key ethical principles including voluntary participation, consent and participant anonymity were adhered to throughout the research phase. Parental consent was provided for participants below 18 years of age.

YOUTH ASPIRATION AND YOUTH-HOOD

In contextualising youth aspiration, we examined the educational and employment status of participants. Except for Senegal data, 44% of participants had secondary education and 32% had primary education. Only 1% had postgraduate education with 4% having no formal education. Table 4 provides the education distribution of participants by country. In terms of employment, majority of the youth interviewed were employed in Nigeria (61%), Ghana (53%) and Kenya (50.1%) while majority of the youth were unemployed in Rwanda (56%), Senegal (55%), Ethiopia (53%) and Uganda (52%).

Table 4: Educational distribution of respondents

Country	No formal education	Primary	Secondary	Certification	Diploma	University degree/ Bachelors/ HND	Postgraduate
Kenya (n=1,551)	1%	13%	43%	11%	16%	16%	0%
Ethiopia (n=1,577)	3%	40%	41%	1%	3%	7%	5%
Nigeria (n=1,657)	10%	12%	48%	0%	13%	17%	1%
Uganda (n=1,637)	2%	46%	38%	5%	5%	3%	0%
Ghana (n=1,639)	4.3%	38.2%	43.4%	1.0%	4.9%	7.9%	0.4%
Rwanda (n=1,639)	1.5%	43.0%	49.0%	0.7%	4.6%	1.7%	0.1%
Senegal	25%	22%	19%	Middle school = 14%*		14%*	
Average	4%	32%	44%	3%	8%	9%	1%

Senegal's educational classification was slightly different from the rest of the countries

Being young and youthful

One of the objectives of this study was to understand how youth conceptualise youthhood. Across the seven countries, there was no unanimous definition of youthhood. The findings reveal that despite being understood in terms of biological age, youthhood has different meanings to young people in different contexts. The emerging markers of youthhood were physical strength and agility, state of mind, behaviour, freedom, independence, responsibility, exploration, social status, and productivity. Constitutional age was the participants' common definition of youth. Young women described youthhood more in relation to social expectations, such as being responsible at home with caregiving duties and dressing decently as indicators of a proper young woman. In contrast, young men described a proper young man as pro-

ductive, entrepreneurial and a hard worker. These perspectives strongly indicate stereotypes created by social norms shaping the definition of youth and impacting how youth identities are formed and viewed. Some of the examples of definitions extracted from the data are presented below:

“Okay from my own perception a youth is a young person, let me say vibrant person between the age of let me say 18-40.” (Young Male FGD, Enugu, Nigeria).

“A youth here starts at 15-45 years, because when you reach 45, you can no longer do things the youth do. For example, digging from morning to evening. It is hard to find a lazy youth. We are very energetic.” (Young Male FGD Kiboga, Uganda)

“So personally, I would say that the notion of youth does not depend on age, but it depends on mentality. You can be young and responsible and sometimes you can be an adult and not responsible.” (Young Male FGD, Saint-Louis, Senegal)

“In the community the adult person...consider a youth every single person (unmarried) even if he/she is 40 years old...” (Young Female FGD, Bureru, Rwanda)

“It is not easy for people to think of women as youths, since women are expected to act with respect and responsibility irrespective of their age. It is even harder when they have children, and become mothers, because you cannot be a “youth mother”.” (Young Female FGD, Serere, Uganda)

“Yeah, I think this gap is between 18 to 35, uh, somehow when you go there in rural areas, when a young lady delivers, once she’s called a mother, when something like youth projects comes around, they are not picked. They are excluded saying that she’s a mother, she’s no longer a youth. Even these men who married early before 35 years they’re also excluded. So, I think that thing also affects the youth, yeah. (Young Female FGD, Kwale, Kenya)

The understanding of youthhood in this case disregards the multifaceted nature of identity and belonging. Young mothers are for instance compelled to choose between being a mother or a youth and not socially expected to be both. It is therefore true as previous literature reveals that single identity social constructions result in self-exclusion from programmes intended to help youths (Namuggala, 2018).

There is also a disconnect between how youth defined youthhood and the societal perspective of who youth are. For example, when asked how the community perceives young people, a number of young participants stated:

“The youths and their mindset are a big problem. Many want free money from the government. They want to get into groups and hang out in the trading centres, playing board games instead of doing something productive” (KII, Rakai, Uganda).

“Youth usually smoke a lot. They are rascals who always move about. Grown people do

not engage in such conduct.” (Young Female, Kaleo, Ghana)

“Lazy, spoilt, sometimes useless.” (Young Female, Machakos, Kenya)

These findings resonate with Burman (2017)’s definition of youthhood as a period that is not only seen as a transition from childhood to adulthood but a state of mind. Similarly, in other countries, there are social contextual meanings of youthhood that differ from the age categorization. In Rwanda, for example, the data showed that youthhood age range differs from what is stipulated by the Rwandan Law. Some young men and women think that youthhood is a period of singleness. This corroborates the findings of Waldie (2004), who stated that in the eyes of a community, a young man without the resources to marry may remain a youth longer than another of similar age, which confirms that age alone is an inadequate descriptor of youthhood. Honwana (2015) asserts that this is the case for young people in Africa as they are in a constant waitness period where they are unable to achieve social markers of adulthood such as a secure job, marriage, and family. Even though, she argues, some may have achieved some of these markers such as having children, they cannot adequately provide for them. Indeed, a Kenyan official reiterated the lack of opportunities for young people while defining a youth.

“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. So, it’s a fluid situation.” (KII, Youth Enterprise Development Fund Officer, Kenya)

It is unsurprising then, that a 2018 UN report noted that young people across the globe live in an environment characterised by lack of opportunities. Despite the many interventions to respond to youth exclusion in the economy, there has been little or no change in their economic lives (Mlatsheni and Ranchhod, 2017). Consequently, young people are entrapped in delayed adulthood, a period where they are unable to transition to independence.

The societal narratives of youthhood represent a major disconnect between how young people view themselves (productive and ambitious) and how the community views them (lazy, reckless, and impatient) (Litgvoet, 2018; James and Sule, 2021). This can explain the plethora of literature on the narrative on youth bulge and political violence (Ismail and Olonisakin, 2021). Notwithstanding, young people are now creating new identities through participation in politics. This is despite their lack of financial resources, which hinders their ability to participate fully. To this end, while age is critical to understanding youth and youthhood, the results confirm that age cannot be taken as the sole factor in deciding what it entails.

There are three important emerging points here. One is how young people see and define themselves as people radiating energy and agility. Second, is how others see youth- especially adult society- as a disruptive group that is in a hurry and engaged in all sorts of social ills in excess. In other words, yes, youth are energetic, but the energy is usually disruptive. In traditional society, youth’s disruptive energy was tamed through marriage. This option is not currently available as economic circumstances mean that young people delay marriage to a later stage. The third, is the gender aspects of defining youth. Young women after 15 are not necessarily seen as young if they can marry. A young woman who gets married, even by an older partner, takes the age of the older partner and therefore is not seen as young. A 20-year-old young woman who is married is not seen to lie within the concern of policies targeting young people, whereas an unmarried 30-year-old woman

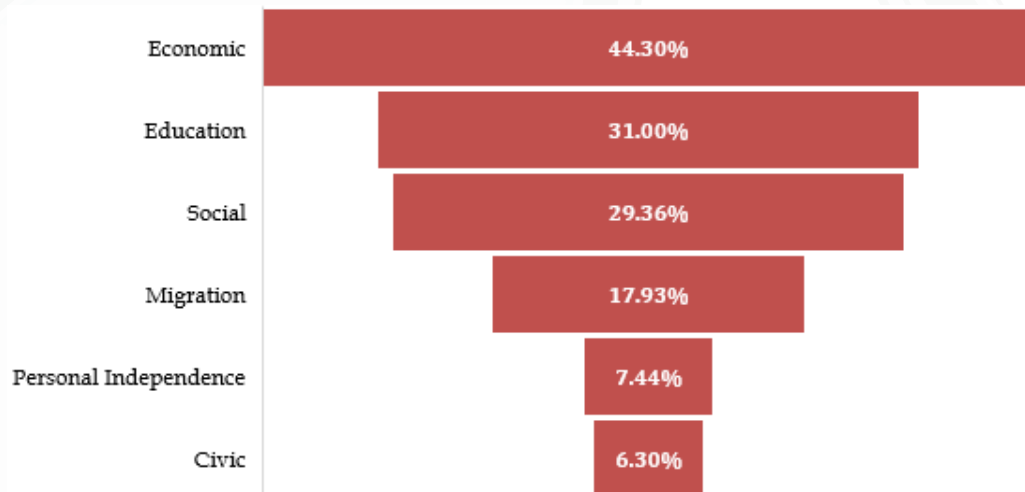
would follow within the concern of such policies. Good policy needs to include young women even when they are married or have children.

Aspirations

Aspirations are the driving force behind a person’s life path and well-being. The concept, which was introduced in the social sciences in the 1960s, is seen as a predictor of educational and career success. Conceptually, Appadurai (2004, p.68) defines aspirations as “capability” to navigate social life and align wants, preferences, choices and calculations with the circumstances into which a person is born.” In this study, we used a grounded approach to establish young people’s aspirations. Our findings revealed that the aspirations of young Africans are leaning towards their hopes and dreams rather than their capability to achieve their goals.

The data analysis on youth aspirations shows six emerging themes on aspirations across the seven countries as shown in figure 2. The three most important aspirations are economic, education and social. While top of the list are aspirations related to material wealth, young women and men aspire to get a good education and support their families and communities. Other aspirations are migration, personal independence and civic responsibilities. Economic aspirations were marked by getting a good job, becoming financially rich, and creating a good business while social aspirations were marked by starting a family, providing support to family and the community.

Figure 2: Africa Youth Aspirations



With the exception of Rwanda, more young men than women have economic aspirations while more young women than men have education and social aspirations as shown in figure 3. Rwanda reported more young females having more aspirations than young males across the board. While economic aspirations were common across the seven countries, Senegal and Rwanda reported more youths having social aspirations at 40% and 36% respectively, more than the other countries' average of 24% as shown in figure 3. In both countries, more young women than men had social aspirations.

Education was the second most common theme on aspiration at 31 percent with more young women (32.6%) than young men (29.6%) aspiring to get a good job. Compared to the other countries, Senegal reported very few youths wishing to get a good education with only 16.5 percent of them mentioning education aspirations. Young Senegalese men (16%) were even less enthusiastic about education compared to the young Senegalese women (17%). Ethiopia recorded the highest education aspirations at 44 percent with more young Ethiopian women (46%) than young Ethiopian men (42%) wishing to get a good education.

Figure 3: Africa Youth Aspirations by Country

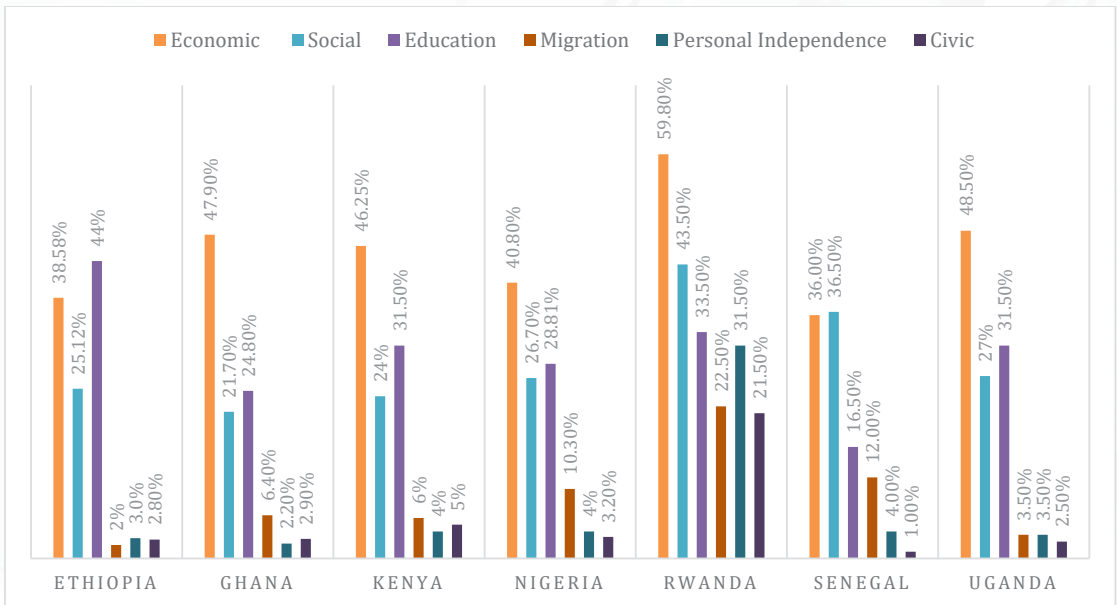
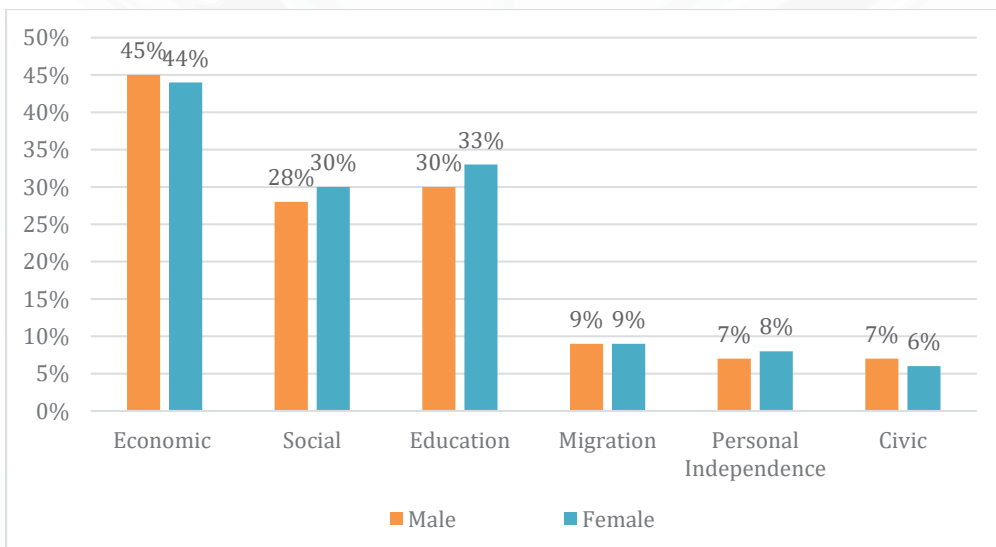


Figure 4: Africa Youth Aspirations by Gender



Rwanda recorded the highest number of youths wishing to migrate at 22.5 percent compared to Ghana (6.4%), Nigeria (10%) and Senegal (12%). Uganda reported the lowest number of youths wishing to migrate at only 2.5% with less young women (1%) wishing to travel compared to young men (4%). Civic aspirations and personal independence did not emerge strongly among the surveyed youth. In fact, only a big proportion of Rwandese youth showed interest in civic responsibility, with 27.5% of the surveyed Rwandese youth expressing interest in their country's governance. On the other hand, less than 4% of the surveyed youth in the six countries showed interest in their country's politics. As shown in figure 4, less young women than young men had civic aspirations. Conversely, more young women had personal independence aspirations. These quantitative results concur with the focus group discussions, youth panels, in-depth interviews, and key informant interviews that we had with young people and stakeholders on youth issues across the seven countries. The six themes on aspirations are discussed in detail in the next section.

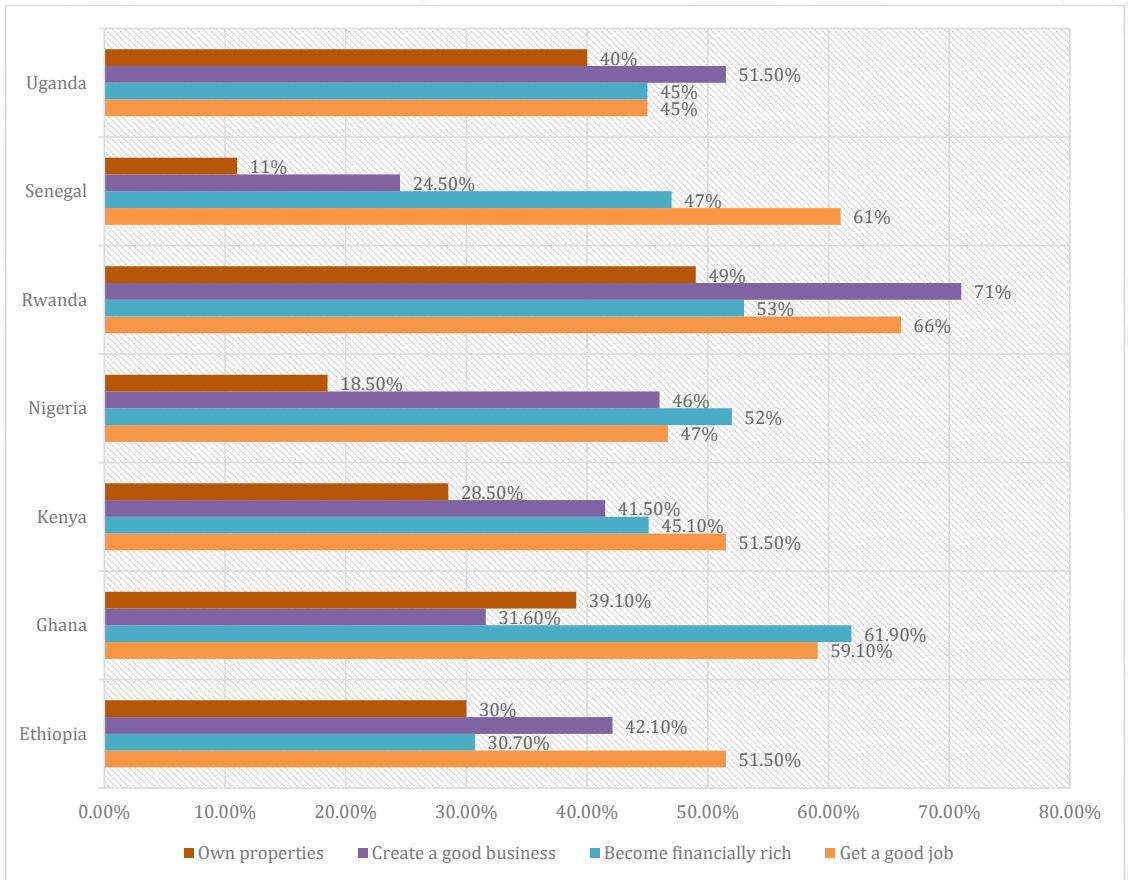
I. Economic aspiration

Economic aspirations were the most important to the surveyed youths, showing the importance that young people attach to financial independence. Almost half of all the surveyed youths across the seven countries reported having economic aspirations as shown in figure 4. The young women and men defined their economic aspirations as getting a good job (55.61%), becoming financially rich (41.11%), creating a good business (49.6%) and owning properties (cars, real estate and land) (30.87%). Apart from Rwanda, more young men than women wished to become financially rich and own properties. On the other hand, more young women than men wished to get a good job, save for those in Uganda.

While the data shows that a third of the surveyed participants across the seven countries wished to own properties, Nigeria and Senegal youths reported low numbers with only 18.5% and 11% respectively wishing to own properties as shown in figure 5. Uganda, on the other hand, reported the greatest number of youths (40%) wishing to own properties with more young men (44%) than women (36%) aspiring to own properties. More young women than men aspire to create a

good business except for those in Ethiopia, Kenya and Senegal. In terms of location disparity, more urban youth aspire to get a good job and become financially rich while more rural youth aspire to create a good business and own properties. When it comes to education level, our data shows that those with a higher education wish to get a good job while those with little or no formal schooling wish to start a business. On the other hand, more single youth aspire to get a good job while more married youth wish to start a business.

Figure 5: Economic Aspirations



The norms around youthhood include expectation of being responsible. Responsibility is marked by having a job/business and being financially independent. Hence, it is not surprising that the majority of the young Africans we interviewed want to get a good job, create a good business and/or become rich. An interesting finding from our data is that, across all the seven countries, Rwanda reported more young women than young men aspiring to get a good job, creating a good business, becoming rich and owning properties. This could be attributed to the women empowerment programmes in the country that have resulted in more women representation in the government. Burnet (2012) argues that the gender quotas in Rwanda have resulted in cultural change and attitudes towards women and wealth. Hence, perhaps, the large numbers of young Rwanda women expressing economic aspirations.

Many of the young men and women interviewees including persons with disability placed a high degree of importance on securing professional or salaried employment that are mostly based in urban centres. They were more concerned about jobs that provide them with the opportunity to make wealth. The occupations mentioned by the youth were professional including government jobs and prestigious jobs such as medical doctors. The young men and women interviewed indicated that these jobs are well-paid, prestigious, command respect, and provide good income and financial stability. A young Ghanaian stated,

“I want to be a medical doctor. It is a prestigious job. It has been my dream since childhood. Medical doctor job is well paid. It will give me good money so that I can take care of myself.” (Young Female PWD, Ashanti, Ghana)

While some associated a good job with government public service, they noted that it provided a steppingstone towards becoming business owners. A young male in Rwanda had this to say,

“If I find a job in the government, I can appreciate it. But my desire in the future is to become a businessman, especially in animal pharmacy or making a regular shop” (Young Male, KII, Rubavu, Rwanda)

This resonates with Lorenceau et al (2021) findings that the majority of African youth wish to work in the public sector in highly skilled occupations. As discussed later in the report on dignified and fulfilling work, young African women and men prefer government employment as it is stable and secure.

On creating a business, half of the young men and women we surveyed consider owning businesses as a key to fulfilling their economic aspirations of accumulating wealth. However, gender differences emerged in the type of businesses that the youth would like to establish. Young men spoke more of establishing businesses along the agricultural value chain (e.g., livestock and crop production, fuel station and trade in spare parts and construction materials while young women preferred businesses around beauty, dressmaking, and hotels. Young women and men told us,

“I want to be an entrepreneur. I want to be my own boss. I want to have a poultry farm, radio station, and a fuel station” (Young Male PWDs, FGD, Upper Western, Ghana).

“Now I am working for another person. My future aspiration is to have my salon and work for myself” (Young Female FGD, Rusizi, Rwanda)

A few participants noted that for one to start a business, they needed to have capital which could only be accessed by having a job. This explains why the majority of the young people mentioned having a good job and creating a business as the top-most aspiration.

“You must first have a job or capital and if you don’t have capital, you must seek employment so that you can get the capital.” (Young Male FGD, Kenya).

The implication of this relationship is that young women and men find themselves postponing their aspiration of becoming entrepreneurs because of the lack of financing for their business ideas. This suggests that young people could pursue entrepreneurship aggressively, if they had financial support to inject capital in their businesses.

Having a job and becoming independent from one’s parents, is a marker of maturity and youthhood. We observed that, while young people expressed their interest in getting a good job and creating a business, their main goal is to become rich, which they argue gives them freedom. Indeed, money and material things became a dominant point in our discussions on aspirations with some of our participants noting this:

“Okay, so with my understanding of good life, I see good life to be money, money, money. That is because when you have money, it doesn’t matter whether you are successful or not, you are respected everywhere you go. Because life is good for you. You can be successful. But without money, you lack some recognition. You go somewhere, you are a successful person, but people don’t mind you, because the money isn’t there. But when you are living a good life, you have established everything, you have your money, you can do anything you want. It’s like you can even hold the law in your pocket, so with that you are enjoying a good life” (Male Participant, Ashanti region).

“You will curse life if you once have money and then you become “broke”. You will hate yourself. People will laugh at you. Even the friends you have will vanish. No one wants a poor friend because you become a burden.” (Male FGD Sembabule, Uganda)

As observed above, more young males were vocal in expressing their desire to be rich than young females. This confirms previous research indicating cultural and social norms that expect men to accumulate wealth (Dimova, 2022). The ‘get rich or die trying’ mentality means that some young Africans are more willing to engage in activities which would otherwise be considered neither legal nor moral than to be poor. Both an official and a young person shared the sentiment,

“The dream of the youths here is getting rich. All they want is money. Even when they join politics or leadership, they consider that a road to wealth creation. They don’t look at career, experience, or job security. All they care about is money. ...whether they go to a witchdoctor and sacrifice, they want money. I would say all youth want to be rich and in a short time (KII, Uganda)

“So, I will say 50% want to be serious in their life and 50% do not want to be because they want it on the easy way and they do not want to learn that trade or skill like mechanic, furniture or carpentry, so they want to be a yahoo boy or a yahoo boy girlfriend.” (Young Female, Enugu, Nigeria)

This response is not far from earlier studies on the orientation of the youth towards material wealth acquisition. In a 2016 survey conducted by Aga Khan University, a third of the 1,854 urban and rural Kenyan youth surveyed expressed their willingness to engage in corruption to become rich. Half of the participants noted that it does not matter how one makes money as long as they were not imprisoned. In the same vein, we discovered that, a huge percentage of young Kenyans (83.9%), Ghanaians (70.68%) and Ugandans (59.5%) participate in gambling as a way of making quick money (Statista, 2022). This goes to show that some young women and men would do anything to become financially stable.

2. Education and training aspiration

Aside from economic aspirations, young women and men expressed their desire to pursue a further education and training. Slightly more young women than men desire to pursue higher education in all the countries except for Kenya where there was a statistical significance in more young men wishing to get a good education. Our findings show a regional disparity where almost half of the young East Africans surveyed indicated they wished to get a good education while less than a quarter of the young West Africans expressed the same desire. Young women and men in West Africa have lost enthusiasm in education due to the rampant unemployment. While they recognized the importance of education, a couple of young people told us that they do not aspire to get further education since they believe that it has no value. They cited examples of graduates who remain

unemployed and those that get underemployed in the areas they did not study in. A young Nigerian had this to say,

“To me, school is a scam. Because most of the graduates are task force people, the education aspect just lets us know our left and right. It just helps us to know how to write our name, to read and write and so many things. Education is just a backup.” (Young male YPD, Rivers, Nigeria)

This echoes Ansell’s (2017) argument that the narrative that education can reduce inequality is a misconception which can be deceptive. However, it is important to bear in mind that the majority of the young people sampled had secondary education as the highest level of education and wished to start a business. This can explain why only a few of the sampled youth aspired to pursue further education.

Notably, an in-depth interview with a Senegalese Executive Director revealed that the challenge may be in the education sector. She noted,

And you have a very significant portion of young people who enter the job market from the age of 15 and who do not have professional training. And young people who continue to attend middle school, high school and even university who are unable to obtain professional training. And many of them drop out before they get to college. And so, we see that the education system must be revised. Because it is a sector which has a very large portion of young people and which cannot offer young people professional training through which, once the young person has their diplomas, they can have easy and rapid access to the market. and unfortunately, this is not the case with our education system.” (IDI, Senegal)

This is consistent with Morsy and Mukasa (2019) findings on youth jobs, skills, and educational mismatch in Africa. They find that African youth are either under-skilled, over-skilled, under-educated or overeducated. Hence, young women and men in Africa end up in jobs that do not satisfy them and which they describe as not dignifying nor fulfilling.

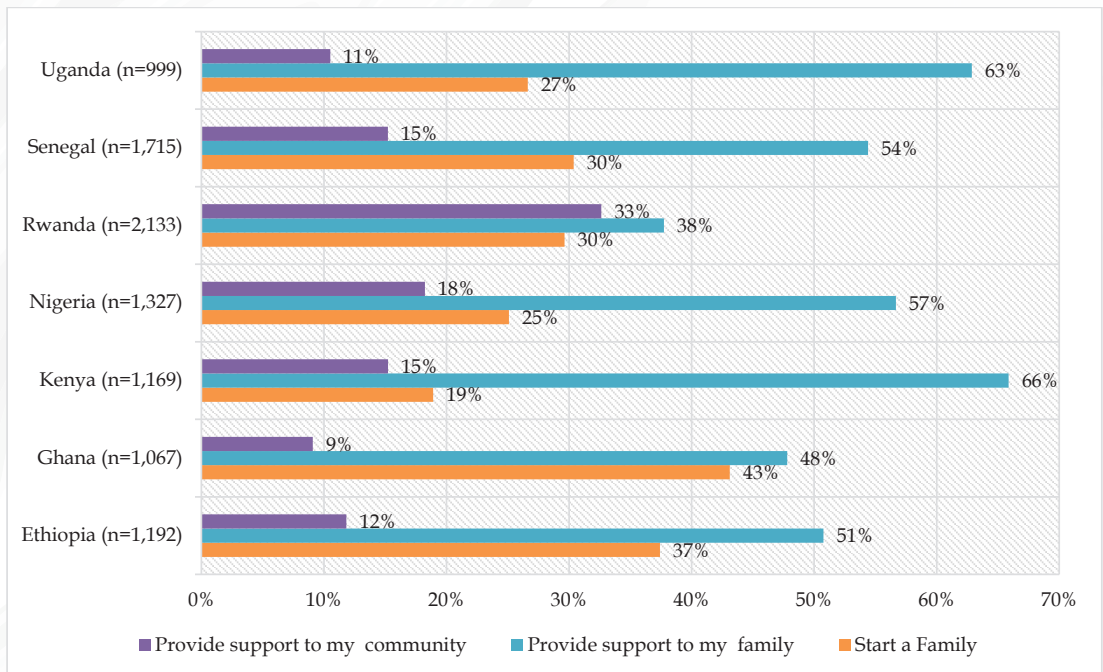
Our results also show a location disparity in which urban youth prefer to pursue higher edu-

cation while rural youth prefer vocational training. The latter considered those as viable options to structured formal education. To doubly benefit from education and employment, some looked at vocational training and skilling as well as diversification of prospects in both business and employment. They preferred to be self-employed after hands-on training in courses like mechanics, tailoring, bakery, hair styling, and electrical technician. They considered such vocational training and skilling as more assuring for one’s survival. In terms of technology and information training and agro-based training, slightly more young men than women would like to seek such training.

3. Social aspiration

Social aspirations emerged as the third strongest aspiration among young Africans. Majority of the youth in every country gave priority to providing support to their families, followed by starting a family and finally providing support to community. Its only in Rwanda where majority of the youth have priority to supporting community compared to starting a family as shown in figure 6.

Figure 6: Social Aspirations



The high social aspirations in Rwanda and Senegal could be attributed to the societal expectations and cultural norms that necessitate the need for young people to support their extended families and communities. Across the seven countries, more young women than men aspired to provide support to their families. This can be explained by the societal expectations of young women to provide caregiving duties to their families. Indeed, while the prongs of being independent or self-sufficient are part of young women’s definition of success and good life, we observed that young women seek acceptance by meeting social expectations of success. Except for Kenya, more young

women than men wish to start a family across the six countries. However, Ethiopia and Uganda reported an equal share of young women and men wishing to start a family. The young women we interviewed experienced more pressure from family and society to get married at an expected time. So, most young women aspire to marry early as it is a sign of personal fulfilment, achievement, societal expectations and respect. A young female in Uganda elaborated this,

“Everyone wants to marry; it is part of life. It is a sign of completeness and an achievement for women. It pleases the parents, and you earn respect from the community. If I have to decide between a job and my marriage, I will give up the job. Even if one marriage fails, I will go into another.” (Young Female FGD Sembabule, Uganda)

Another young female Senegalese affirmed this statement,

“When you talk about success, the first thing you think of is marriage. People think it’s an end in itself - having a husband, a wife, having children, even if you’re not rich, being married and having children is already a great success.” (Young female FGD, Dakar, Senegal)

As part of their socio-cultural aspirations, only 16% of the surveyed young people reported that they would like to contribute to their communities in the future. While some youths are enthusiastic and suggest that their communities meant a lot to them, others do not envisage any responsibility to their communities in the future. This finding is consistent across the study countries. There is some gender difference with relatively more young men reporting that they would like to contribute to their communities in the future than their young women counterparts. In terms of place or residence, slightly more urban youth than rural youth show greater desire to contribute to their communities in the future.

4. Civic aspiration

Civic aspiration’s theme was marked by participation in politics, contributing to community and country, taking responsibility for their actions and actively contributing to national and local development activities. There was limited interest in participating in governance issues across six countries with less than 10 percent of our interviewees expressing interest in having power and authority. This is despite the narrative around young people being mobilized for political activities and at times, violence. Remarkably, a quarter of young Rwandese surveyed showed interest in participating in politics. This could be explained by their optimism that the country is heading to the right direction as per a recent Africa youth survey (Ichikowitz and Ordu, 2022). Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Nigeria

reported very low numbers of optimism in the report. Thus, it is not surprising that young women and men in these countries are less interested in the politics of their country. Our data shows that, across the seven countries, young African women are less interested in engaging in politics. While the difference in engaging in politics between the genders was negligible across the seven countries, Nigeria reported a significant difference in young women’s interest in politics. Only 1% of young women compared to 5% of young men in Nigeria expressed their desire to engage in politics. This could be attributed to the expensive nature of politics. A key informant in Nigeria explained that,

“I think a lot of young people out there too can aspire to venture into politics though, the system is very expensive such that they can’t even start anything so most of the time they give up on such beautiful aspirations. I look forward to a day that our political arrangement will not become so much money enticing such that young people cannot even afford not even talk of other expenses, I pray that day will come when people participate more in governance too.” (Male IDI, Nigeria)

5. Migration

Contrary to a recent African youth survey (2020) on migration, where it is reported that over half of young Nigerians wish to migrate abroad, very few young people expressed this desire. More young Rwandese (24%) than young West Africans (only an average of 11%) expressed their desire to migrate abroad. On the low numbers reported in West Africa, Setrana (2021) notes that despite previously reported high desire to migrate among young Ghanaians, the frustrations and strict immigration policies in Europe and North America may have reduced the desire to migrate. The few West Africans who wish to travel mentioned going to Europe for better economic opportunities. A Ghanaian gave the following reason for wishing to migrate:

“For me my aspiration is to leave the country. Yes, that’s it. With this kind of economy and living situation we are now facing in Ghana, it is difficult to even find jobs” (Young Male FGD, Ashanti, Ghana).

While both young men and women desire to migrate in the future, the qualitative findings show that this is more common among the young men. Across the seven countries, more young men wished to go abroad compared to young women.

Barriers to Aspirations

Our findings reveal that African youth face a myriad of challenges in achieving their aspirations. The five most common barriers reported were lack of finance, corruption, social and gender norms, skill mismatch and exclusive policymaking on youth issues. We present and discuss the identified barriers below:

1. Lack of Finance

Majority of our participants mentioned poverty/lack of finance as the biggest barrier to achieving their aspirations. An overwhelming 91.1% of Ethiopian youth consider lack of money (poverty) as a major constraint. Young people from poor backgrounds often prioritize finding any job that can provide immediate income to support themselves and their families, regardless of the nature of the job or its prospects for growth. On the other hand, youth from more privileged backgrounds have higher expectations into finding employment that aligns with their social status and show reluctance to take up jobs perceived as low paying.

Despite the many government and development partner interventions in providing young people with access to financing, young people still suffer because of the conditionalities associated with these programs. For example, a Ugandan youth noted,

“BRAC gives us loans so we startup businesses or expand already existing businesses. Vision Fund also used to give loans to help expand their businesses. People in the community didn't like the interest rates they charged as they seemed very high. But youth specifically were systematically disqualified. Also, these organizations help those who already have something but not the youth in the community. Before you are given the loan, you present security like land to the organization”. (Young Male FGD, Kiboga, Uganda)

Lack of finance presents a significant challenge to achieving financial independence. Having established that most young Africans wish to become financially rich, intervention programmes should be targeted towards improving young people's capacity to achieve this goal. This can be done through support for education and vocational training and providing patient capital for small businesses without stringent conditions.

2. Corruption

Secondly, in all the seven countries, corruption was mentioned as presenting the greatest bureaucratic hurdle to young people. A disillusioned young person maintains that “all that works in the country is the ‘long leg’, not diplomas, skills or professionalism.” (Young male FGD, Louga, Senegal). The same feelings were shared in Kenya and Rwanda,

“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.” (young male FGD, Homabay, Kenya).

“While looking for jobs, we encounter nepotism which acts as a barrier to achieving our desired jobs” (Young female FGD, Rubavu, Rwanda).

This presents a challenge to youth employment interventions that are implemented in the continent. From their lived experiences, young people know that despite participating in education and training skills development programmes, the system is hellbent on making sure they do not succeed in the labour market.

3. Social and Gender Norms

Several of our participants mentioned social norms as a barrier towards achieving their aspirations. For some young people, they felt that men have faced more challenges than women. As a result, young men end up feeling pressure by the society to become responsible and provide as soon as possible. A young Senegalese street vendor points this out:

“Men get up early to go to work, while the women stay at home to do household chores only. The man has to go out to sell...returning home regardless of how much he earns for the day. So, it’s quite a problem for him to feed his family properly.” (Male FGD, Dakar, Senegal)

Gender norms in most parts of Africa dictate that men are household heads, own and control resources and make important decisions while women are submissive (Ninsiima et. al., 2018). This at times puts pressure on young people to get rich quickly thus involving themselves in illegal activities. As a young Kenyan stated”

*“They expect so much from you, from the parents, from, uh, other youths, the peers. You find that there -- there are some people that you are in school with. You find that others are **driving**, others don’t even have bicycles. So, you see, there’s a lot of thinking, there’s a lot of thinking and -- and a lot of pressure” (Young Male FGD, Nairobi, Kenya)*

On the other hand, young women explained that their success is curtailed by several factors relating to their gender, gender roles and social expectations. They fail to achieve anticipated success because many of them are stopped by their husbands from leaving home to go and work. Such restrictions cut young women off from their contacts and networks. Men (husbands) exercise their control over women (wives) in fulfilment of social expectations of men being household heads and thus power centres on them. Women are expected to conform to men’s decisions or else it may sabotage their marriage. For others, marriage and children’s responsibilities make it difficult for them to aspire to a career. A young female observed,

“If you are a young housekeeper; you have children and you don’t have anyone to look after them, you won’t be able to go to work, even if you have qualifications. So, marriage is a problem for women. This is a widespread opinion in urban areas. To get a job, when you are a mother and your child falls ill, you have to go on leave and that is a loss for the company”. (Young Female FGD, Louga, Senegal).

In addition, societal norms have placed women and men in different categories when it comes to work. Gender roles have denied women opportunities to advance their career. Young women in Ethiopia highlighted that certain industries or sectors such as construction, manufacturing and agriculture are perceived to be more appropriate for men, while others in the service industries like hospitality or domestic work are seen to be suitable for women. This creates occupational segregation and gender-based discrimination in the labour market. Moreover, young women complained of sexual harassment at workplace that affect them not only careerwise but also in their relationships with their partners. Thus, social norms present a significant challenge to addressing the aspirations of young people.

4. Skill Mismatch

Poor education was often cited as a reason why young people do not have the necessary skills for the labour market. Many of our participants mentioned that their curriculum was focused more on theoretical concepts. They felt that they did not feel confident enough to enter the job market. As many studies have reported, there is a problem of skill mismatch in Africa resulting in underemployment. As one young Senegalese stated,

“The training I received at university doesn’t allow me to do anything at all. My older sister, who is at the Faculty of Law, got her degree but was recruited by a company as an accountant. A student with a Master or PhD degree can end up selling coffee in the street. So, the government needs to prepare them better.” (Young Male FGD, Dakar, Senegal)

This requires immediate attention with the need for support of academia-industry collaboration to tailor the curricula to meet market skill requirements. Prospective students and current students need knowledge about the labour market and career possibilities to focus on and be equipped with the skills required to succeed in the contemporary gig or knowledge economy as part of the transition from youth to adulthood.

5. Discrimination against special groups

Discrimination against people with disabilities in the workplace was a great concern among youth with disabilities. Young people with disabilities face negative attitudes and assumptions about their capability to perform job tasks, leading to feelings of humiliation. Some YPWD are concerned that they are overlooked for good jobs and that employers would not be willing to make the basic accommodations they require. In one of the YPWD FGD groups in Kenya, a young woman with mobility issues said that:

“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.” (YPWD FGD, Nakuru, Kenya)

Interestingly, young people from Kenya’s LGBTQ+ community also complained about societal expectation of gay tax (the idea of your relatives becoming your financial business) as a great barrier to success. In their attempt to prove 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 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... (LGBTQ+ FGD, Nairobi, Kenya)

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.

6. Lack of youth-centric policymaking

Key informants in government stakeholders agree that despite efforts undertaken to address some of the most pressing issues facing young people, their needs and interests are not adequately addressed. Government units have little

to no budget to facilitate logistics and lack the expertise to be able to implement quality programmes for youth livelihoods. Participants from government and non-government organizations mentioned that there are a number of youth related policies, programmes, packages, and activities that have been initiated by various stakeholders to build on, mostly involving the formation of youth livelihood groups, entrepreneurship, activities and linking livelihood groups with micro-finance institutions and saving and credit schemes. Yet, most of these activities appear to be uncoordinated as they are cascaded down to lower community levels. Experts from NGOs added that the government does not realize the need to involve youth in all its activities including policy formulation and decision making.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES OF DIGNIFIED AND FULFILLING WORK.

The data analysis on youth’s perspective of dignified and fulfilling work shows ten emerging themes across all seven countries, as shown in Table 5, with the three most important being work that brings good income, is secure, and where employers respect young people. Other emerging themes include safe work, work respected by society without discrimination, and flexible work for people with caring responsibilities. The last three emerging themes are work that gives a sense of purpose, is satisfying, and provides opportunities for growth and development. There is consistency in the quantitative and qualitative data on the emerging themes of dignified and fulfilling work with an insignificant country variation. There is no significant difference between young women’s and men’s perspectives (See Table 6). We explain and discuss each emerging theme with examples from the data.

Table 5: Youth perspective of dignified and fulfilling work by country and ranking (ranked 1-10)

Dimension of dignified and fulfilling work	GH	NG	RW	KE	ET	UG	SN	Rank
Work that pays well (Good income)	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	1
Work that is secure (job security)	2	2	4	*	1	4	3	2
Work where employer respects young people	3	4	3	2	3	3	1	3
Work that is safe and not risky (workplace safety)	4	3	4	2	5	2	5	4
Work without discrimination (gender, ethnicity, disability, religion)	6	5	6	*	4	5	4	5
Work that is respected by society (reputation)	5	6	2	*	6	6	6	6
Work that gives satisfaction	*	*	*	4	8	*	*	7
Work that is flexible with caring responsibilities	7	7	3	*	7	7	7	8
Work that gives a sense of purpose and meaning	*	*	*	3	*	*	*	3.0**
Work that provides opportunities for growth and development	*	*	5	5	9	*	*	8

* Did not emerge; ** valid in only one country.

GH- Ghana, NG- Nigeria, KE-Kenya, RW-Rwanda, ET-Ethiopia, UG-Uganda, SN-Senegal.

Work that pays well.

The most significant attribute of dignified and fulfilling work expressed by African youth is work that pays or brings adequate income to meet their needs. Participants ranked this theme number one in all countries except Ethiopia and Senegal, where the security of the work (job security) and demonstrated respect by the employer were prioritised. There is consensus between young women and men that good income is the most significant attribute of dignified and fulfilling work. They believe dignified and fulfilling work should provide adequate financial remuneration that reflects their skills, efforts, and contributions. The following extracts from the data are examples of how African youth defined dignified and fulfilling work relative to earning a living income:

“For me, ... dignified and fulfilling work is one that gives you good money to cater for yourself. It is when you are working, and the work gives you good money to cater for yourself and your family” (Female, Ghana FGD).

“Money is a motivation to work. So, if you get good money, you will be motivated to work. So, it has to be something I enjoy, but it also has to be paying me well. ...I cannot eat the enjoyment” (Male, Kenya FGD).

“A dignified and fulfilling work from our perspective is first of all work that pays your bills... your house rent, your car fuelling, good clothes, etc. gives you time also to rest... pay you enough to solve your basic problems, like family problems, and pay you enough to

make you have some savings. Then, in that work, you are not embarrassed or harassed” (Male, Nigeria KII).

*“What I consider as dignified work is a **work that allows me to make enough** money for myself and support my family” (Female, Ethiopia FGD)*

The three examples above reflect the value of earning a living income when defining dignified and fulfilling work among African youth. This finding is consistent with the growing literature on the future of work in Africa, as Fox and Gandhi (2021) expressed in their review of youth employment progress and prospects in Africa. They argued for the need to include measures to increase productivity and income earnings, especially within the informal economy. Similar views were expressed in an earlier study on dignified and fulfilling work in Africa (Doh et al., 2023). The youth’s emphasis on earning a good income as indicative of dignified and fulfilling work will potentially prevent what Pun, Chen, and Jin (2022) described as “working but poor” in their study of youth poverty in Hong Kong.

Work that is secure (job security)

The second most cited attribute of dignified and fulfilling work is “work that is secure”. Participants used the phrase “work that is secure” to mean stable work where they are assured that regardless of any eventualities, they are entitled to work, and can access work at any time. Young people also described stable work as work where an employee cannot be laid off abruptly and guarantees social protection when accidents occur. For example, a participant in a focus group discussion in Ghana stated:

*“I want to add that when we talk about dignified and fulfilling work, we also need to include work that can **provide you with protection for your life**. If you work and get injured on the job, is there protection to cover your life? Life is not all about money. First, your health and life are important, and you need to protect your life from all risks” (Ghana, FGD)*

In Ethiopia, participants described secure work as those within government and public service jobs as they guarantee security and permanency. This idea is, however, changing among most young

people who explained secure work as having your own work. For example, in search for a more secure work, a participant reported the following:

“A young man is now in the business of shoemaking. He used to be a teacher and left his previous profession to join his current business. He told us that he bought a minibus with the money he saved from his business by shoemaking. He lives in a decent house and enjoys a better life. Leaving the teaching profession to engage in the shoe-making business requires courage but was a good decision on his part” (Ethiopia, KII)

Youth employment and job security is a topical conversation among researchers and policymakers across the world. Consistent with the perspectives of African youth regarding the need for more secure work opportunities, Berloff, Matteazzi, Şandor, and Villa (2016) have also noted a sense of growing job insecurity among young Europeans and suggested the need for policy measures to enhance employment security. Fox and Gandhi (2021) made a similar observation on job security among young people in Africa and the need to offer stronger “employment security through the creation of formal wage jobs” (pg.13). Adeosun and Owolabi (2023) have also observed the challenge of job security among young Nigerians in owner managed organisations.

Table 6: Youth perspective of dignified and fulfilling work ranked by gender

Dimension of dignified and fulfilling work	Male	Female
Work that pays well (Good income)	1	1
Work that is secure (permanent)	3	4
Work where employer respects young people	2	3
Work that is safe and less risky	4	6
Work that is respected by society	5	7
Work without discrimination (gender, ethnicity, disability, religion)	6	5
Work that is flexible with caring responsibilities	7	8
Work that gives a sense of purpose and meaning	*	*
Work that gives satisfaction	*	*
Work that provides opportunities for growth and development	3	2

* Not disaggregated by gender because of limited data on the issue

Work with respect and diversity

Respect for young people in the workplace by the employer emerged as the third most important characteristic of dignified and fulfilling work. This was closely followed by work that is respected by society or work with a good reputation in society. The youth explained that dignified work is all about showing respect and valuing people as individuals. They indicated that employers should recognize their worth and create an environment that appreciates their contributions. In their view, social recognition is also an important factor when thinking about dignified and fulfilling work, and certain occupations may require more societal respect or value. For example, shoemaking may offer high pay, but it may not be as respected as being referred to as a teacher, even if the income is relatively low. Overall, the data indicates that dignified and fulfilling work depends not only on monetary compensation but also on the social recognition and respect associated with the profession. The extracts below are examples of statements that reflect respect as an important indicator for dignified and fulfilling work.

“Work that is respected, it makes you feel like you are at work. There are people who get a job but are not comfortable. For example, you may be sewing shoes, despite many customers, and money, people refer to you as someone who sews, which is not that good. It’s better to say you are a teacher even if it doesn’t pay well, but you are just respected that you are a teacher” (Kenya, FGD -Male).

Youth also used respect to mean work environment that respects diverse gender, age, ethnicity, disability, and religion practices in the workplace without discrimination (See Table 2 above). In terms of respect of age where young people are often looked down upon in the workplace, participants in a focus group discussion reiterated:

“Being respected where you work. There is no junior, there’s no senior. We take ourselves as all equal, and that should be the policy of every workplace ...dignified work is work that does not discriminate against gender, religion, tribe, and place where also, you feel safe to work” (Kenya, FGD -Female).

Workplace respect is central to how people are motivated and feel embedded within an organisation (Mohammed, 2022; Ng, 2016). Workplace respect also has implications for preventing violence and promoting employee job satisfaction (Boafo, 2018). Therefore, the current findings on youth perspective of respect within the workplace as indicative of dignified and fulfilling work aligns with ongoing discussions to promote respectful workplace policies. Closely linked to respect within the work environment is the societal reputations associated with dignified and fulfilling work. Young people aspire to do things that society values and respect. As a result, they strive to have good education in order to attract work that makes meaningful contribution society and meets societal expectations (Afroze, 2022; Langevang, 2008).

Safe work

Participants in the study further described dignified and fulfilling work as a safe work. They explained safe work as work that is less risky to their health and wellbeing. For example, a participant in a focus group discussion stated:

“A dignified job is a job whereby the safety of the employee is taken care of. There are some works where you have to dress in a way that you have to entice your customers, so you should dress appropriately as what the society defines. ...A job that is not limiting you. We are humans and we need to rest. A job that won't burn you out. So, as long as you have enough resting time, because as much as much it gives money or enjoying it, you still have to rest. (Kenya, FGD -Female).

Flexible work

Furthermore, African youth described dignified work as flexible work that accommodates workers' needs. Work that is flexible and accommodating to the dynamics of public and private space expectations is preferred mainly by women. As young women take on roles in public spaces, they are still expected to accomplish social expectations, for instance, through marriage, caring responsibilities, and other domestic roles and expectations. The notion of work flexibility is consistent with recent calls to rethink post-pandemic work environments that accommodates both personal and professional spaces (Kane, Nanda, Phillips, & Copulsky, 2021; Ray & Pana-Cryan, 2021).

Work creates sense of purpose, satisfaction, and opportunities for growth

Participants in the study described dignified and fulfilling work as work that gives a sense of purpose, is satisfying and provides opportunities for personal growth and development. Kenyan, Ethiopian, and Rwandan youths mostly amplified these aspects of dignified and fulfilling work. Participants explained that dignified work gives a sense of purpose and meaning when it makes one feel like they are making a difference in the world or contributing to a greater good. They emphasized the importance of having a career and finding ways to help others positively. Participants further noted that dignified and fulfilling work should

offer growth and development opportunities. Dignified work is seen as more than just a means to earn a living but as a pathway for continuous learning and improvement. They value jobs that provide avenues for skill enhancement and career advancement. They seek opportunities to develop their talents, broaden their expertise, and take on new responsibilities within their professional roles.

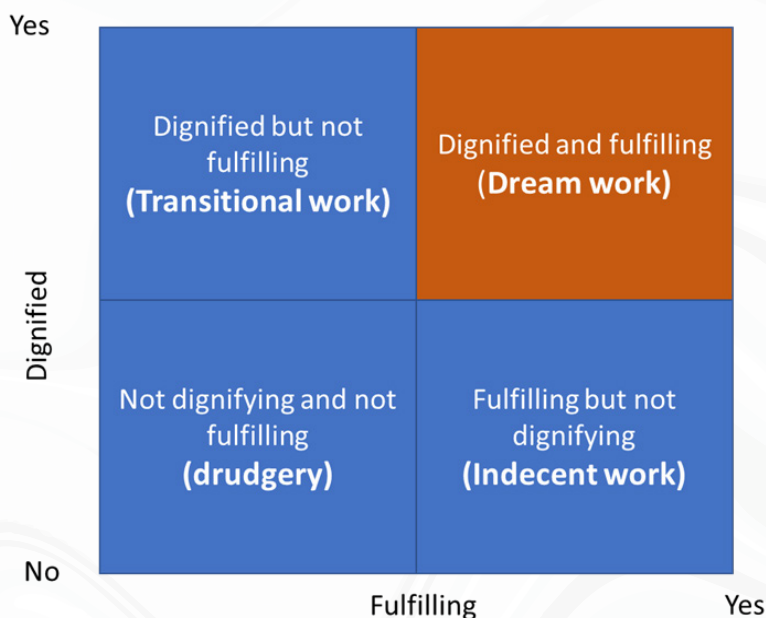
A descriptive typology of dignified and fulfilling work.

Although the perspective of youth primarily characterised dignified and fulfilling work as a twin concept mutually reinforcing each other, there were a few occasions where they distinguished between the two concepts. In their explanation, dignified and fulfilling work can be described as mutually exclusive where one can be engaged in a fulfilling work, but the work may not be dignifying. Dignified work related more to the work environment, including respect, safety, and income. However, participants used fulfilling work to mean work which aligns with their aspiration for life and one in which they derive satisfaction (dream job). For example, a young woman narrated her experience in the story below:

*“I quit a job that was **fulfilling**, but it was not **dignifying**, and I had to resign because they didn't appreciate me as a person. They had a template of what I am supposed to be. A job is dignifying if you do it with passion, respect and value you as a person, your life and time too. It should not be a job that makes you choose between a loss of a job, or a family etc. Equal treatment and **without sexual harassment** as well” (Female, Kenya FGD)*

Compared to other countries, the distinction between dignifying and fulfilling work was pro-found in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia. Although there is insufficient quantitative data to measure the spread of these perspectives in the current study, the analysis of the available qualitative data shows four emerging types of dignifying and fulfilling work, as presented in Figure 7. In the analysis, we created an emerging typological theory by interacting the two concepts of dignified and fulfilling work as exclusive but mutually reinforcing.

Figure 7: Typology of Dignified and Fulfilling work



As shown in Figure 7, work may or may not be dignified given specific defining indicators presented on the vertical axis and labelled YES or NO, without being fulfilling. Similarly, work may be fulfilling without being dignified, as shown on the horizontal axis. We labelled work that is not dignified and fulfilling as an “drudgery” considered also as forced labour with adequate compensation (Kazak, 2019). Such work is not just risky but also pays very little. Although, there are no sample in the current study within the category, unemployed youth think of their situation as not dignifying and not fulfilling. For example, a well-paying work where young people use their talents but is also subjected sexual harassment. We labelled work that is dignifying but not fulfilling as ‘transitional’ or ‘transitory’ work. In such work, although the environment is safe and pays a living income, it does not align with the aspirations of the youth and feels like “hustling”. For some youths, ‘hustling’ was essential to make ends meet or as a critical strategy for survival. For example, a participant in Kenya noted: “my mum lost her job, and so to help her out I started plaiting people’s hair which later led me into doing cosmetology as a side hustle”.

We label the instance where work is fulfilling but is not dignified as “indecent work”. Although this type of work allows young people to use their skills and talent and provides some financial re-

wards, it has inherent abuse and intolerable employer behaviour with a high turnover propensity. This type of work does not provide hope for growth and purpose. Work is dignified and fulfilling, where it is the dream work and perfectly aligns with the aspirations of young people—for example, working as an entrepreneur and making a decent income. African youth seek the dream work, the work that is both dignified and fulfilling. Although these labels are descriptive, they present an opportunity for testing the different types of work young people undertake through quantitative measures in a future study.

Dignified and fulfilling work as a marker of success

Youth perspective of success is almost entirely synonymous with dignified and fulfilling work, although to a greater extent, they used dignified and fulfilling work as a means to success. For example, a participant indicated:

“I would say I am successful when I achieve my goals and make my mother proud by getting a job and living while taking care of my mother.” (Female, Ethiopia).

“There are a lot of successful people in this current society, unlike before when there were a few of successful people in the society but

now they are abundant, in this current society a person who has money; that is “physical cash” is considered a successful person but unlike before when a successful person was measured by the number of children or animals they have and other properties now it is about money, “cash” (PWD Participants, Ghana).

The emerging perspectives of success include financial stability, having a good business, good job, owning property, good education and starting a family. Others include having peace of mind and being independent from parents. The explanation of a successful life varies by age, gender, and location. Success as used by young people also strongly aligns with their aspirations explained elsewhere in this report under perspectives of youth aspiration. While dignified and fulfilling work was described as a means to success, majority of youth from qualitative data indicated they are were very far behind in achieving success in life.

Towards dignified and fulfilling work: An emerging theory.

Figure 8 presents an emerging theory of how African youth work towards dignified and fulfilling work. The pathway towards dignified and fulfilling work is non-linear and complex, the figure captures the essential issues. Study participants primarily engage in four activities: formal education, apprenticeship, “hustling”, and migration. Some have migrated or intend to migrate. As they undertake these activities independently or in different combinations, they develop critical knowledge, build skills, and gain experience, gaining resilience, which enable them to either seek employment that fits their aspirations or create and manage their work through entrepreneurship. Obtaining or creating their dream work ultimately takes them into dignified and fulfilling work or what they conceive of as success in life. However, the qualitative data shows that gaining knowledge, skill, and experience does not necessarily translate into employment and entrepreneurship due to contextual barriers such as the lack of finance, unfavourable youth policy and employment environment and the general lack of opportunities for young people, mainly due to limitations placed by unfavourable socio-cultural practices that disadvantage women.

Figure 8. An emerging pathway towards Dream/dignified and fulfilling work or success



In most cultures, getting the right education and training is critical to successfully transferring to desirable employment. Young people claim that knowledge and skills acquired through education help youths identify their talents and areas of jobs and business. Most youth believe that education equips them with skills that help them achieve their job aspirations. For example, a participant in Ethiopia noted:

“I now believe that taking some 5 days training in construction can equip youth with important construction skills than spending 5 years in engineering studies. Just completing primary and secondary education can be sufficient to equip one with general knowledge including literacy and numeracy” (Male FGD, Ethiopia).

However, as indicated earlier, this notion is changing among young people, with a growing threat of graduate unemployment across all the study countries. The lack of employment opportunities for young graduates causes some young men and women to doubt the value of higher education for running a successful business or obtaining desired occupations. Participants in a focus group discussion reported that:

“Educated youths widely remain unemployed and become a burden for families. The increasing number of ‘educated unemployment’ has reduced the interests of youths towards education and training for successful business or to find a desired job”.
(FGD, male, Ethiopia).

In navigating the challenges of educated youth, the evidence shows that some communities, especially in Ethiopia, are developing businesses as alternatives to education for livelihoods due to growing urbanization and human necessities. For example, families are buying motors and ‘Bajaj’ (tricycles) for their children as a better alternative to enrolling them in school. Thus, the pathway to dignified and fulfilling work involves transitioning from primary or secondary education to employment and various other circumstances, such as self-employment, cooperatives, and informal and formal economic sectors. This is because of higher education is not equipping students with labour market regarding skills and competencies (Guardia, Mancini, Jacobetty, & Maina, 2021; Pitan & Muller, 2020). Most graduates need employabil-

ity skills like communication, entrepreneurship, computer, and leadership skills. Thus, education and skill development are required to assist young people to secure dignified and fulfilling work. However, skill development initiatives should be informed by young people’s aspirations.

The emerging theory suggests that developing critical skills, knowledge, and experience is important for youth to move towards dignified and fulfilling work. However, personal initiative, personal savings, self-help groups, hard work, access to finance, active participation in social institutions, skill training, and provision of working space are prerequisites to achieve success.

YOUTH RESILIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY

We examined the aspect of youth resilience that portray by young women and men to offset the challenges that they confront. Besides the widespread unemployment and other barriers to achieving dignified and fulfilling work, the youth face a disruptive environment occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the condition, African youth have demonstrated resilience as indicated by a high degree of perseverance, optimism, discipline, and faith. As presented in Table 7, young people have scored highly on the standard resilience scale across all countries, with the highest being spirituality and faith, followed by Perseverance/Commitment, Relationship/regulation/Social Support and Positive self-image/optimism dimensions. There are no significant country variations. Young women and men demonstrated high levels of resilience, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, young men significantly differed from young women in resilience across the seven countries. For instance, Nigerian young men demonstrated stronger resilience than young women. Young men showed stronger desires to take risks and try new things than young women. The following discussions provide a qualitative thematic analysis of the emerging findings from interviews and focus group discussions on youth resilience.

Table 7: Resilience among Young women and men

	AVERAGE RATING BY COUNTRY						
	Ethiopia	Nigeria	Kenya	Ghana	Uganda	Rwanda	Senegal
Perseverance/Commitment	3.94	4.35	4.15	4.06	4.00	3.75	4.04
Positive self-image/optimism	3.83	3.22	3.62	3.83	3.80	3.78	4.00
Relationship/regulation/Social Support	4.05	4.25	4.05	3.90	4.17	3.76	4.11
Spirituality/Faith	4.29	4.40	4.31	4.21	4.28	4.12	3.53

Perseverance/Commitment

The findings reveal that resilience is portrayed in the spirit of hard work with a strong hope that the situation can improve. Young women and men have persevered through hardship and the intense pressures. Data from Nigeria, for instance, indicate that young people are highly resilient and perseverant in the face of economic and other challenges.

“Perseverance is what has been keeping us going still... Like, there’s this trait of being a youth, they call it resilience, now being resilient means, you go for it, do or die, you work for it, anyhow it comes, you must still take it that way and keep moving. During the pandemic, I think I tried my best to improve on my craft as a youth, though I had to go on a lot of hunger strikes but still, I kept going” (Male, FGD, Kaduna, Nigeria).

In Kenya, young people exhibit strong will to survive and persevere in the face of adversity. Participants note that they encouraged each other to be self-reliant and not depend on others to survive. They believed that despite life’s hardships, they could always make it by learning from experience and self-management. During the period of economic turmoil, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, they worked harder and pursued their goals with determination. Those who were laid off from formal employment, became more innovative and creative as they cope with survival demands. One participant noted:

“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 it can put food on the table and pay the bills” (Female, FGD, Homabay, Kenya)

The data show that Nigerian young men showed a high perseverance level in the pursuit of their aspirations despite uncertainties on their way as opposed to young women. Similarly, young people from the urban setup were slightly more resilient than their counterparts from the rural areas. In Uganda young women were slightly more resilient than young men.

In Ethiopia, Ghana and Senegal young women and men consider themselves to be highly resilient, persevering and committed to achieving their desired goals.

“In my opinion, we are resilient, we do not ignore or avoid the problems we face, rather we are able to face them with the courage and confidence we need to overcome the problems” (FGD Male, Bonga, Ethiopia).

“One important lesson that readily jumps at you, is the fact that the beginning is not as important as the end. You may experience challenges in the beginning of something, but if you are able to persist, the end would be ok. I may be suffering today, but I may not in my 40s.” (IDI, male respondent, Western region, Ghana).

Thus, young women and men were very philosophical and determined in the face of challenges to overcome obstacles which they defined temporary setbacks and sometimes as stepping stones to achieving their aspirations. They overcame setbacks and adapted to new circumstances with determination and a positive attitude.

Positive self-image/optimism

The youth believe that having a positive self-image, a positive and realistic attitude, and mental picture about oneself, constitute an important component of resilience in the face of adversity. Positive self-image and optimism can boost the physical, mental, social, emotional the ability to withstand, adapt and recover from adversities. Young women and men across the seven countries remained optimistic about their future. They believe they would recover quickly from any major socio-economic setbacks. While majority of the participants portrayed the sense of positive self-image and optimism, few participants expressed hopelessness. Fewer claim to have resorted to unaccepted behaviours to survive. Some desire to migrate to out of their countries.

In Nigeria, young people from the urban areas express more optimism about their future and the future of their country than those from the rural areas. In Ethiopia, young people from the urban areas show more optimism, self-acceptance, feeling of pride than young people from the rural areas. In Senegal majority of the young people (both women and men) are optimistic about their future. Few of them, however, are not satisfied with their self-image. They lack self-confidence and admit not being adequately prepared to handle life's challenges especially during the socio-economic setbacks.

In Ghana majority of young people, portrayed the sense of positive self-image and were optimistic about the future. They are proud of their accomplishments in life regardless of gender. However, there is variation in self-perception between those in urban and rural areas like the case of Ethiopia, with the urban youth exhibiting more positive image/optimism than the rural youth. Young people derive strength from self-encouragement and positive mindset of not giving up, while pressing on with the goals they have set for their lives.

A says:

“I had to encouraged and strengthen myself to be able to adapt to certain changes, that I least expected” (FGD, male, Ashanti region, Ghana).

Relationship/regulation/Social Support and spirituality/faith

Social relationships are an important source of resilience among young people across the 7 countries. Majority of them admitted that family, relatives and friends played a very significant role in their lives during the period of hardships. They sought refuge and got financial assistance from close relatives and friends. In Uganda, young people sought refuge in families, relatives and friends. Many young people in the urban centres who could no longer afford basic need had to move to their ancestral homes where they could get free food, housing and comfort from their relatives. In extreme cases, some married male youths sent their wives and children back to their parents' homes since they could not take care of them. One participant narrates;

“As an individual I reached at a level when I could not handle it anymore and I sent my wife back to her parent’s home because even at that time we were renting two different places and yet we were both not working. So, we decided to sell off some of the things we were using at the time to send her back to her parents where she remained until the lockdown was partially lifted and she came back but after we had nearly sold everything we had before the end of COVID-19 lockdown” (Male FGD Isingiro district, Uganda)

In Nigeria, majority of young people had at least one close person who could be of help to them during the hard times. Thus, circles of friends and families are vital to cushioning hard times and give young people emotional strength to soldier on, and not relent in realizing their goals.

“I think the COVID-19 period connected many people. It has made you think of others. It has brought people very close to each other like contributing, assisting, helping, reaching out to others that need you” (Female FGD, Northern Nigeria).

Young people in Kenya just as their counterparts in Uganda also perceived family and friends as great source of support for them. They also indicate receiving emotional support, mentorship and positive advice from family members and relatives who helped them overcome challenges and achieve their goals.

“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 really received support from my friends, relatives, and family. That’s what has kept me going”. (Male and Female FGD, Nairobi, Kenya).

In Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal and Rwanda, the domains of social relationships, and spirituality/faith have been central to resilience. In Ghana, females tended to hold more spiritual beliefs than the males. In Senegal majority of the young people strongly agreed that believing in the supernatural being and a belief that things will be better tomorrow kept their hopes alive during the period of adversity.

In general, positive self-image, emotional regulation, positive thinking, spirituality, and self-confidence were important coping variables that ensured survival against all the odds. It is therefore safe to argue that these characteristics enabled the young people to overcome numerous emotional, behavioural, and psychological imbalances during uncertainty or difficult situations.

ADAPTABILITY STRATEGIES

Adaptability strategies that were embraced by young women and men during the economic setbacks thinking through possible options, adjusting expectations, seeking new information, develop new ways of going about things, reducing negative emotions and minimising frustrations as shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Cross country young people's voices on adaptability domain

	AVERAGE RATING BY COUNTRY						
	Ethiopia	Nigeria	Kenya	Ghana	Uganda	Rwanda	Senegal
I am able to think through a number of options to assist in a new situation.	4.08	4.42	4.28	4.1	4.22	3.99	4.28
I am able to devise a new way of getting out of challenges	4.09	4.34	4.2	4.06	4.17	3.97	4.30
I am able to adjust my thinking or expectations to assist me in a new situation.	4.1	4.34	4.24	4.1	4.19	3.95	4.26
I am able to seek new information/people/resources to deal with new situations.	4.1	4.32	4.22	4.1	4.22	4.00	4.20
I am able to develop new ways of going about things to help me	4.09	4.31	4.2	4.11	4.11	4.05	4.21
I am able to change the way I do things.	4.1	4.3	4.21	4.11	4.20	4.06	4.21
I am able to reduce negative emotions.	4.1	4.26	4.12	4.06	4.11	4.05	4.20
I am able to minimize frustration or irritation so I can deal with it best.	4.01	4.22	4.1	4.07	4.00	4.06	4.19

African youth devised various adaptability strategies that show flexibility, creativity and innovativeness in navigating uncertain times as such, hardship situations like that created by COVID-19 has brought about positive changes to young people's lives contrary to popular beliefs. A discussant during a focus group discussion in Nigeria states as follows;

“COVID-19 changed me, and I am bold to stand anywhere to face whatever thing ... let me just say that COVID-19 has made me stand out. For me, the pandemic changed my mentality, it taught me how to adapt” (Male and Female FGD, Southeast region, Nigeria).

While hustling as an adaptability strategy has been loosely interpreted to mean any activity being pursued especially by young people to survive,

specifically by establishing small business ventures to survive, in Kenya, the term is now being used even by those who are in formal employment with insufficient income. Young people in Kenya reported that during the socio-economic setbacks they could hustle a lot including selling anything to make ends meet. In Nigeria, the young people also indicated that they had no choice but to hustle in order to survive. Interestingly this was brought forward by females who admitted that their male counterparts had to hustle more in order to survive.

“In our society, there is a certain age, and some families consider that males are supposed to be independent at that age... they should hustle for their lives but in the aspect of ladies, unless you're married or you're in school, you

cannot be that far from your family". (Female FGD, Northern Nigeria)

The study confirms the assertion from the OECD (2021), that the societal expectations were restrictive to masculinities, and advance the norms that a "real" man should be the breadwinner and financially viable than women. While young women are expected to take care of the children including providing unpaid care work (cooking for the family, taking care of the children and doing laundry) and ensuring that the home is habitable, young men bore the heavy burden since a great measure of financial responsibility was conferred on them by society as the main provider for their homes. This meant that the greater adaptability potentials of young men could not be delinked from the expectations of men based on sociocultural norms.

"To me, let me not be biased, the men were more affected than the women the reason is in my community, in the North specifically, most of the ladies don't go out to work and look for what to eat, it's the men that go out and look for what they will eat and bring it home for them to feed themselves(families)" (Female FGD, Northern Nigeria)

Entrepreneurship

In all the 7 countries, the majority of the young women and men ventured in small businesses as a survival strategy. Being severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic they embrace business opportunities, including selling the facemasks, hawk-ing food items, delivery business etc

"When COVID-19 came, I was doing security work, but the job ended. I started cooking chapati and mandazi by the roadside road 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" (Male, Kiambu County, Kenya).

"Applying little tricks on entrepreneurship, I re-strategized my transport business to a delivery business since there were restrictions on people's movement. I was so committed to my business" (Male, Northern Nigeria).

In Ethiopia, the young women and men connected to create businesses with friends or like-minded people. They ventured into homemade products like fashionable face masks, perfumed sanitizers, soap, food, clothes, jewellery, and use online platforms to market and promote the products.

"Some have also made a lot of profits by selling face masks, alcohol and soaps. Planning in accordance with the resources ...working in team and associations; sharing experiences among each other; motivation and encouragement are all important". (FGD mixed, Adama, Ethiopia)

In Ghana, Uganda, and Senegal many young people reported engaging in small businesses to survive; entrepreneurs being embraced by majority of the young people during the setbacks. However, in Rwanda and Ethiopia, young women and men indicated that lack of essential business and life skills required to become entrepreneurs or start their own businesses. From that experience, participants agree that quality education that provides youth not only with technical and vocational but also core employability skills and entrepreneurship skills is the most critical element in the quest to meeting their life goals.

"Despite the fact that majority of us have degrees from different colleges, most of us lack entrepreneurial skills, awareness of what it takes to start a business, and access to available business development service" (Female FGD, Bonga, Ethiopia). "As young generation we are facing the barrier of Lack of capital to start a business" (FGD, Rwamagana, Rwanda).

The evidence is that young people are taking charge of their destiny and have become job creators, and their own bosses through entrepreneurship. This is contrary to the previous studies in Nigeria that suggested that young people largely desired white-collar government jobs (Agbontale et al., 2019; Efido & Ogbu, 2020).

Saving groups, agriculture and other informal jobs

Young women and men in all the seven countries cultivated the spirit of working together in a team and formed groups to enable them access loans to start up small businesses and small farming. These groups came together to fulfil the requirement set by the government for prospective beneficiaries of the loan being awarded in Uganda. In areas where government money could not be accessed, youths accumulated capital from their small savings and supported each other in starting small businesses such as brick laying, weaving of mats and baskets, selling liquid soaps, masks etc.

“These days we work as a group and there are different groups in the community for both the males and females. We have a savings group here. We have been able to save some money however little it may be. With these groups, we have been able to accumulate capital and do some farming” (Male FGD Kiboga, Uganda).

Agriculture (farming) and other informal jobs became a big opportunity during the COVID-19 for many young women and men across the seven countries. Majority of them resorted to informal job and farming, irrespective of their field or interests to survive many young people were laid off from formal employment. A young female in Kenya;

“I was a teaching assistant, so when my job ended during COVID-19, I went back to the farm and started farming so that I could get help there or gain income that could help me and my family”. (Female, Kisumu, Kenya)

This reflected the flexibility and resourcefulness of young people who are willing to embrace new opportunities especially in agriculture and step outside their comfort zones. While concerted efforts have been realized from the policymakers in the seven countries supplemented by donor initiatives geared towards changing the attitude and shifting the mind-set of the young people into agriculture (all value chains), challenges have persisted that requires collaborative efforts among the key stakeholders in the sector. These include skills mismatch that hinders the exploitation of the various value chains, limited funding that is not inclusive and sustainable, lack of market opportunities, and inadequate research and extension services.

It is evident that the perception of the young people is now changing from the formal employment to the informal employment with digital space and agriculture becoming the preference of many young people. This is due to the realization that agricultural sector when fully harnessed can provide viable business opportunities, respectable incomes and fulfilling employment. Thus, any investments in agriculture and more so in agro-processing and agri-business ought to be directed towards transformative work opportunities that not only offer dignified and fulfilling work, but also transforms and enhances economic growth as well as societal growth.

In Kenya, for instance, we have seen deliberate efforts from the government to attract the young people to agriculture. These efforts are starting to pay off as young people now venturing in various value chains with mango and potato value chains are gaining a lot of traction. Other value chains such as horticulture, dairy and poultry farming perceived to be profitable are now becoming easy targets for the young people. The greatest effort from the policymakers as well as the non-state actors should be how to endear the young people to the so-called unattractive value chains including the traditional agriculture that entails the farming on both domestic and commercial purposes while also ensuring all value chains are inclusive of different kinds of young people. It is imperative to ensure young people invest in all the value chains as a way of income generation and creating employment and diverse business opportunities to ensure the resilience of the young people are harnessed.

Footprints in the digital platforms

Digital platforms were a key resilience and adaptability mechanism for both young men and women across seven countries. Due to the lockdowns many young people used online infrastructure including social media to sell their products, for entertainment and learning purposes. This was consistent with previous studies by Workneh (2020) and Bosch (2016), Dzisah (2018) and Oyedemi & Choung (2020) that for young people in Ethiopia, South Africa and Ghana, digital platforms especially social media were major resilient tools for the young people in times of crisis. Other studies, however, suggested that young people deploy the digital platform more for entertainment and “catching cruise” than for serious business (Omotsho, 2020).

The digital platforms offered the young people opportunities to earn a living during the economic setbacks.

“The digital platforms gave us the ability to conduct online meetings, engage in online learning, establish online businesses, and leverage online marketing strategies” (Mixed FGD, Nairobi, Kenya).

“I noticed that during COVID-19 the lockdown made youth in my environment go more digital. So, mostly now they are into mostly into internet businesses. I have seen them around. You have to be inspired to do something. When you want to do something, you have to determine these are your goals and surely, they’ll come” (Male IDI, Northern Nigeria).

For many young women and men, engaging in the digital platforms creatively and innovatively was the only way to keep their businesses and dreams afloat. Even artists started uploading their contents, including skits to generate some money through viewership.

Mentorship and empowerment (Skills development and learning)

Skills development was an important variable that enhances the chances of survival for the young women and men during adversities. Young people across the seven countries scouted for opportunities for self-development to enhance their survival chances during the hardship period. Makhnach, (2014) and Dvorsky, Breaux, & Becker, (2020) who studied resilience among Russian youth, reported that youth resilience was built upon interaction with family members, friends and peers who imparted useful skills, provided emotional support and mentorship that was highly needed during such period of adversity. Continuous online courses enabled them to acquire new skills and technical training, which allowed them to acquire new capabilities and explore alternative career paths. Some participants narrate their experiences:

“Apart from it being just a pandemic, it was a good space for people to learn a new skill. I got a chance to start teaching kids at home because it’s in the middle of a pandemic, and you don’t have a job to do. Then you have to fend for yourself, you have to pay your bills.

So, I started teaching at home and I got paid something little” (FGD, Nairobi, Kenya).

“...we tried to search for an empowering scheme or all these organizations that empower people, even if it is not a big organization. The little families or compound where you see that this person has made it in life and doing very well, you can go there and say ‘Ma/Sir, I want to do this your stuff’ and you share your opinion or idea with the person” (Female and Male FGD, Southern Nigeria).

Resilience and adaptability strategies enhanced the survival and success of the young people during socio-economic setbacks. They demonstrated a high degree of perseverance, optimism, regulation, and faith against the odds of life. They were remarkably flexible in adapting to new situations and devising various strategies to earn a living. Many had to change careers, start side hustles, or even embrace informal job opportunities to survive. They were able to think creatively and innovatively as well as exploiting digital infrastructure to survive. Having supportive social relationships and networks helped. Majority of the young women and men relied on their families, friends, and community groups for support and survival. This highlights the importance of building and maintaining strong social ties, including collaboration and teamwork in navigating challenging situations.

CONCLUSION

African youths have a complex notion of youthhood with biological age specified by national policies the common denominator. They identified features of youthhood in terms of certain characteristics: physical strength and agility, state of mind, behaviour, freedom, independence, responsibility, exploration, social status, and productivity. Young women and women describe youthhood in relation to contrasting social expectations. For women being responsible at home, taking caregiving duties and dressing decently are indicators of a proper young woman, while for the men being productive, entrepreneurial and a hard worker are the indicators. Thus, the notion of youth, youthhood and the transition to adulthood is often shaped by perceptions of both youth themselves and the norms and cultures of the community in which they live.

Young women and men's aspiration could be categorized into economic, education and training, social, migration, personal independence, civic aspiration. Civic aspirations are of the least interest among the youth, as less than 4% of the youth in the six countries showed interest in their country's politics. But in the few cases where they have engaged, young people have created new identities in politics despite their limited financial resources. Economic aspiration is the highest followed by social aspirations.

Accordingly, young people have a complex perspective of dignified and fulfilling work. Good income is the most significant attribute of dignified and fulfilling work. For them, work should provide adequate financial remuneration that reflects the skills, efforts, and contributions put into it. It should preclude a situation of "working but poor". They identify several elements that make work to be both dignified and fulfilling. Dignified and fulfilling work pays well, is secure and stable, is socially respectable/reputable in society and non-discriminatory (regardless of who is doing the job young or older), safe work (riskless), flexible work (provides room for life responsibilities or non-paid domestic work), and creates a sense of direction, satisfaction and opportunity for growth.

This perception of dignified and fulfilling work is made clearer when young people make a distinction between dignified and fulfilling aspects of work. Fulfilling work makes sense only when the job is dignified. The idea of dignified work has strong

economic and social dimensions. The economic dimension has to do with the economic condition of the worker that flows from the level of financial independence that comes from work (individual) and the capacity to intervene in material terms in family and community (social) made possible by a strong financial muscle. This means that, ultimately, dignified work ensures the independence of the individual to make choices in an effective manner and ultimately endows the capacity to be an agent of positive improvement in community life in material terms. Thus, work can become meaningfully fulfilling when it incorporates the two dimensions of dignified work. Fulfilling becomes a job that is enjoyed, done with passion and satisfaction. Thus, within the context of aspiration, dignified and fulfilling work is dream work.

The idea that such dream work is expected to create a sense of purpose, satisfy and provide opportunities for growth suggests that dream work is dynamic and catalytic, challenging the individual to explore new frontiers and innovate, even as hardships challenge young people to rethink existing practices. Growth is never ending, and the social dimension of dignified and fulfilling work means work that look beyond the individual to the social, hence the linkage of aspiration to social agency and leadership.

While work cannot be meaningfully fulfilling if it is not dignified, dignified work has not only to meet individual survival needs and build reputation within society, but it also has to enable ability to improve society by contributing to the common good. "One feels like they are making a difference in the world or contributing to a greater good".

Dignified and fulfilling work is conceptualized as inherently personal, social and forward looking. Hence, the idea of resilience and adaptability, including the strategies adopted are not solely individualistic in terms of their nature and essence. They are social and futuristic. It is therefore not surprising that resort to illegal and socially harmful coping strategies in dealing with hardship situations is the exception rather than the rule. Hence, material hardships and health challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic must be overcome with a strong sense of the collective and mindfulness of the of its various dimensions, including spirituality, and the future. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant hardships was a major test of

the resilience and adaptability of young people as they seek to fulfil their aspirations by achieving dignified and fulfilling work. They adopted various strategies to cope and survive and entrepreneurship abilities came to the fore. Other strategies include changing careers, starting side hustles, or embracing informal job opportunities and exploiting digital infrastructure to survive. African youths are creative and use innovative approaches. Supportive social relationships and networks families, friends, and community groups provided the social environment to exercise these strategies and to innovate.

The pathway towards dignified and fulfilling work is non-linear and complex. Youth primarily engage in four activities as means towards dignified and fulfilling work: formal education, apprenticeship, “hustling”, and migration to develop knowledge and skills and build experiences. However, the pathway is often affected by barriers such as the lack of finance, unfavourable youth and employment policy environment and the general lack of opportunities for young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the key findings of the study and the conclusion arrived, the study recommends the following:

1. Youth-driven policies and programs

At the national level, it is essential for public institutions responsible for the development of young people, including ministries and departments, to establish youth policy platforms. These platforms will not only harness the voices of young people on policies and programs that affect them but also ensure that all voices are heard and respected. As a starting point, the relevant public institutions should **consider the voices of young people in the current research on dignified and fulfilling work and their aspirations for the future**. This consideration will guide the reform of ongoing programs or the development of new ones to reflect these aspirations. The reforms must also consider the diversity of young people with affirmative actions to meet the aspirations of diverse young people, including gender, rural-urban, and disabilities. This approach will require a deliberate and urgent effort by governments to seek stronger partnerships with non-state actors and the private sector organisations in developing youth-driven policies and programs. At the broader system level, the approach necessitates legislative reforms that align with some of the indices of dignified and fulfilling work - workplace safety, gender, and disability inclusiveness.

2. Funding for youth initiatives

The issue of funding and capital to support youth businesses and initiatives is a key focus of this research. A crucial recommendation is the establishment of public funding regimes, specifically tailored to national budget frameworks, to foster the development of business initiatives for young people. In cases where these funding regimes are already in place, it is essential to implement fair and transparent allocation mechanisms to ensure equity. Complementing public funding regimes, it is vital to enable the coordination and utilization of private sector funding and other development partnership fundings. This can be effectively achieved through a centralized location, overseen,

and managed by young people themselves, operating within a supportive institutional environment.

3. Supported peer-mentoring initiatives.

The proposed initiative of supported peer-mentoring offers young Africans an opportunity to support and mentor each other in developing critical skills for work readiness, business development, academic work, and digital technology. Such an initiative will augment ongoing programs of the Mastercard Foundation across the African continent. This initiative can be further bolstered by the support of development partners and the private sector through dedicated youth-oriented not-for-profit organisations with the backing of the Government, thereby strengthening progress towards dignified and fulfilling work.

4. Academia-industry collaboration to optimise work-readiness.

The research underscores the pressing issue of youth unemployment, mainly stemming from the lack of work readiness. A significant finding is that many young people were either in school or undergoing training as part of their transition to adulthood and the labour market. To address this, fostering collaboration between academia and industry is crucial. This collaboration can lead to the review of curricula and the promotion of on-the-job training programmes. For instance, young people have shown a keen interest in online activities and opportunities in the information and communication media, mainly social media. The digital skills sector could serve as a focal point for supporting youth in enhancing their skills for work in an increasingly digitalized economic system.

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