Policy Brief



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Executive Summary

Artificial intelligence, automation, digital technology, remote employment, and the platform economy are making the labour market evolve quickly, changing how young people learn, earn, and compete. While these shifts have created new opportunities, they have also widened existing inequalities: young people with access to digital infrastructure, quality education, and practical skills are better positioned to benefit from the global economy, while those without such access risk being left further behind.

Education systems across much of Africa still prioritise theoretical knowledge over practical, technical, entrepreneurial, and digital skills. Employers consistently report difficulty finding graduates with the skills required in today's labour market, even as young people struggle to secure meaningful employment despite holding formal qualifications.

Addressing youth employability calls for substantial investment in education reform, digital inclusion, labour market policy, and stronger academia–industry partnerships. This is no longer simply an educational priority; it is an economic imperative that will determine Africa's ability to compete in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

Why This Matters

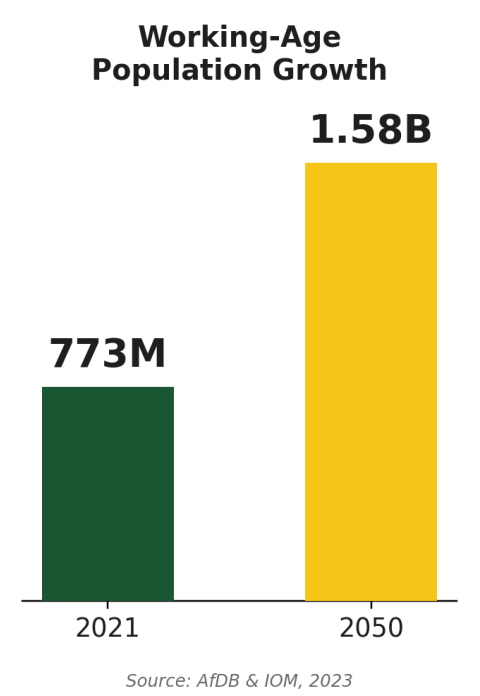
Youth employability goes beyond the question of whether young people can find jobs in their communities. It is fundamentally about how Africa can harness its demographic advantage to drive inclusive growth, strengthen social cohesion, and remain globally competitive.

Without conscious investment in skills development and decent employment opportunities, rising youth unemployment may contribute to increased poverty, inequality, social exclusion, irregular migration, and insecurity. Conversely, when youth are equipped with relevant skills and supported through enabling policies, they become innovators, entrepreneurs, taxpayers, and leaders who contribute directly to national development.

The transition toward digital economies, green industries, and knowledge-based employment presents Africa with an opportunity to leapfrog traditional development pathways — if governments, educational institutions, employers, development partners, and civil society work collaboratively to prepare young people for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

1. Introduction

Africa's working-age population (15–64 years) is projected to double from approximately 773 million in 2021 to about 1.58 billion by 2050 (AfDB/IOM). This rapid growth presents a significant opportunity to accelerate economic growth when young people are equipped with relevant skills and productive employment opportunities.



Source: AfDB & IOM, 2023

This demographic advantage is accompanied by a significant employment challenge: 10–12 million young Africans enter the labour market each year, while only about 3 million formal jobs are created, leaving millions unemployed or engaged in vulnerable, informal employment.

A major driver is the growing disconnect between education systems and labour market demands: curricula often remain heavily theoretical, and digital literacy, problem-solving, entrepreneurship, and technical expertise are not consistently integrated into national education systems. Rural communities also experience lower connectivity, unreliable electricity, and higher internet costs than urban centres.

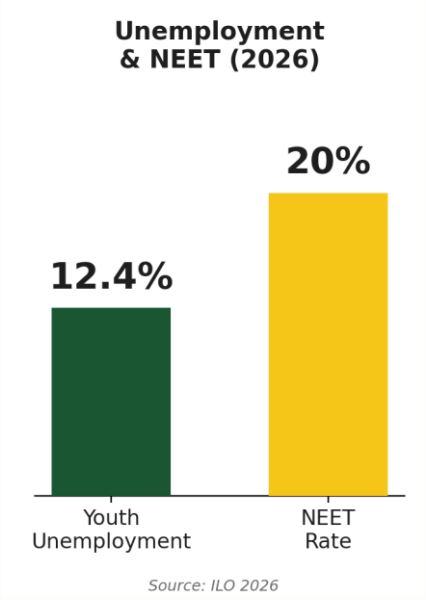
2. Key Findings

12.4% global youth unemployment

20% youth NEET rate

10–12M vs 3M youth entering labour market vs. formal jobs created annually

1. **Persistent Youth Unemployment:** The ILO's Employment and Social Trends 2026 report shows global youth unemployment at 12.4%, with 20% of youth worldwide not in employment, education, or training (NEET).



2. **Digital Divide:** Internet usage in urban areas (85%) far exceeds rural areas (58%); Africa continues to have the lowest regional internet penetration globally, at 35.7% (ITU, 2025).

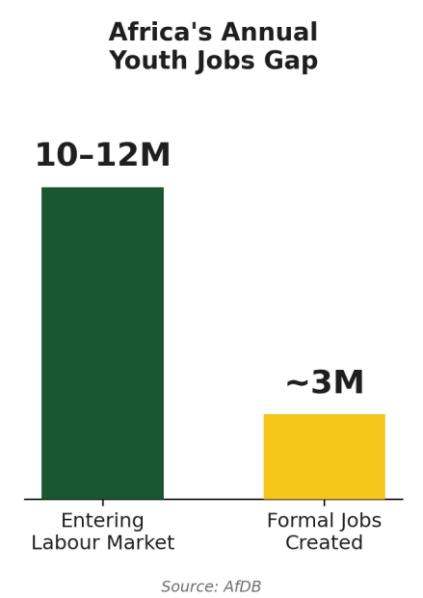
3. **Weak School-to-Work Transitions:** Many African youths experience extended periods before securing stable employment, often beginning in informal or temporary jobs.

4. **Precarious Digital and Gig Work:** Digital platforms are booming, but regulations are lagging; most gig workers operate without contracts, social protections, or a minimum wage.

3. Systemic Barriers and Policy Gaps

5. **Outdated Education and Training Systems:** Curricula remain largely theoretical, with limited integration of digital skills, entrepreneurship, and work-based learning; TVET systems remain underfunded and socially stigmatised.

6. **Limited Investment in Job Readiness:** Public and private investment in career guidance, employability boot camps, certification schemes, and incubation hubs remains insufficient.



7. **Weak Industry-Academia Linkages:** Few formal mechanisms exist for co-designing curricula, exchanging expertise, or aligning training outcomes with labour market demands.

8. **Inadequate Labour Market Regulations:** Labour laws in many African countries do not adequately recognise or protect gig workers, freelancers, and digital workers.

9. **Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Strong societal and parental emphasis on university degrees discourages youth from pursuing vocational training and entrepreneurship, even where labour market demand is high.

4.1 To Governments

- **Reform** education policies to prioritise skills-based, demand-driven, and digitally relevant learning across all levels.
- **Expand** investment in TVET, digital skills training, and lifelong learning programmes.
- **Strengthen** labour market policies to formally recognise and protect gig and digital workers.
- **Incentivise** private-sector youth employment through tax reliefs, wage subsidies, and public-private partnerships.
- **Expand** affordable digital infrastructure to underserved and rural communities.

4.2 To Donors and Development Partners

- **Invest** in scalable youth skills development and job-readiness programmes, including digital literacy and certification initiatives.
- **Support** innovation hubs, mentorship schemes, and youth entrepreneurship ecosystems.
- **Fund** pilot programmes that link education, industry, and employment outcomes.
- **Support** policy reform and data systems that track youth employment and skills demand.

4.3 To Civil Society Organisations

- **Advocate** for inclusive education and labour policies that reflect the realities of young people.
- **Implement** community-based skills training, mentorship, and career guidance programmes.
- **Support** youth engagement in policy dialogue and labour market governance.
- **Promote** mindset shifts toward skills-based learning, entrepreneurship, and non-traditional career pathways.



This brief, drawn from the AYNUA's activity webinar on Youth Employability in a Globalised World, examines the structural obstacles preventing young people from finding employment, identifies new prospects in the digital economy, and offers recommendations for governments, development partners, and civil society

AYNUA (the African Youth Network of UCDW Advocates) is coordinated by the Africa Leadership Foundation (ALF), in partnership with Oxfam in Africa.

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