

# In the Throes of Limited Opportunities: How African Youth Navigate their Aspirations for Dignified and Fulfilling Work

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## Executive Summary

The rising unemployment and informality among African youth constitute an impending crisis. While 13.3 per cent of youth aged between 15-24 remain unemployed, about 95 per cent of those employed work in informal settings<sup>1</sup>. The recent Covid-19 pandemic further worsened prospects of employment, dimming opportunities for dignified and fulfilling work for Africa's young women and men. This policy brief presents findings from PASGR's ongoing Africa Youth Aspirations and Resilience (AYAR) research project that explores the aspirations and resilience capacities of Africa's young women and men, and their perspectives of dignified and fulfilling work against the backdrop of competing challenges. The findings revealed that existing youth employment creation strategies and interventions could do better to meet aspirations. This calls for the revisiting of existing intervention programmes informed by what youth aspire for and addressing the policy misalignment between youth aspirations and current economic opportunities.

1 ILO 2018. Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical picture, 3rd edition (Geneva).

## POLICY BRIEF



## Key Messages

- i. Africa's young women and men exhibit diverse aspirations that depict futures marked by stable jobs, riches, business ownership and ability to provide family support.
- ii. Public sector jobs are considered as dignified and fulfilling because of their perceived job security and public reputation.
- iii. 'Hustling' is recognized by most of the youth as a means of survival and active pursuit of desired futures.
- iv. Africa's young women and men are dynamic and innovative.
- v. Among other resilience strategies, youth in Africa are maximizing savings, pursuing higher education and training, and seeking support from family and friends.

## Background and Purpose

Today, more than half of the sub-Saharan African population is made up of young people aged 15 to 35 years.<sup>1</sup> This youthful demographic faces numerous challenges and precarity, such as underemployment, unemployment, and social exclusion. **The precarity facing young people in the continent is compounded by the rapidly changing work environment and social, economic and environmental shocks.** The continent is still grappling with limited economic opportunities.

**Although, most young women and men aspire for skill-centered occupations, skill mismatch remain the biggest hurdle for youth in their quest for dignified and fulfilling work.** There are concerns that young people are underemployed in jobs that do not match their qualifications. For example, 40 per cent and 25 percent of employed youth in Ghana and Kenya respectively, reported that their education exceeded required qualifications for their current employment.

1 ILO (2020). "Global Employment Trends for Youth: Africa.

Despite a steady increase in the level of education attainment across the continent, the net effect in yielding employment for young people is yet to be realized. **A considerable proportion of youth, especially young women in countries like Uganda still rely on low-productivity agriculture.** At the same time, informality among young and men appears common in all countries of focus, as young people have no choice but remain in insecure and low productivity jobs as a way of survival. **The rising informality has brought about the concept of "hustling" – doing anything or everything possible to achieve their aspirations.**

Without improving the conditions of the labour market and creating economic opportunities, more skilled young African women and men will not be able to find a job. Importantly, their voices and ideas should drive policy and regulatory changes meant to fuel their aspirations.

## Key Insights

### 1. Diverse aspirations, successful futures

From having a good job to being rich, attaining good education, owning businesses, supporting their societies and having successful families, Africa's young women and men portray diverse aspirations that characterize their definitions of success. (See figure 1).

Comparatively, more young women aspire to good education and starting families, while more young men dream of being rich and financially stable. These aspirations align with underpinning social norms across most African societies that tend to influence imagined futures and pathways of success. Despite the differences, both women and men aspire to good jobs, that offer good salaries and job security. Instructively, **a considerable proportion of youth across Africa, prefer entrepreneurship – owning their own ventures – where they have full control and flexibility of work.**

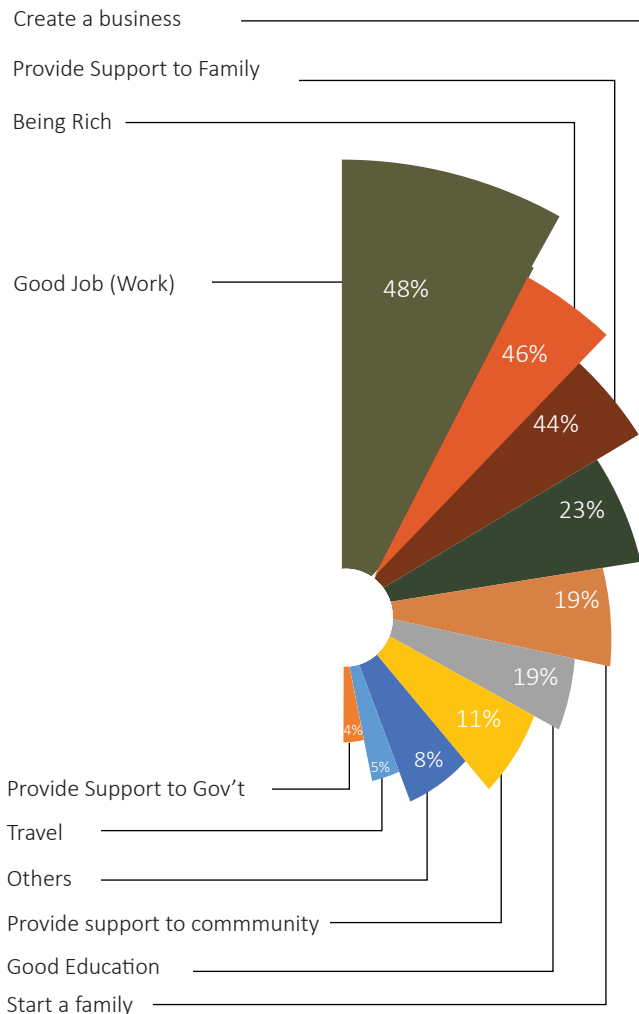


Figure 1: PASGR (2022) Youth Aspirations Synthesis Report

## 2. Youth perspectives on dignified and fulfilling work

Young women and men define dignified and fulfilling employment as one that is reputable, has a sense of purpose or accomplishment and has fair compensation. Although not a single definition can be generalized owing to the diversity of perspectives, based on our findings a job is dignified and fulfilling when it: (i) has good pay; (ii) is meaningful and offers a sense of purpose; (iii) is honest and reputable in nature (iv) offers one respect.

These perspectives offer insights into the kind of work that young women and men are interested in and tie to findings that point to having a good job as the greatest aspiration of youth in Africa. Imperatively, these findings point to highly transformational sectors such as manufacturing and industry, real estate and construction, ICT and the emerging gig economy, transport, tourism, and agro-processing as well as development and service sectors in both public and private sectors. Notably, however, the growing unemployment, informality, and precarious work conditions that most youth, especially women are confronted with, undermines their prospects for desired work. Necessary action, including expanding employment opportunities in diverse fields, should be adopted by governments and development partners to ensure that youth in Africa can access dignified and fulfilling work. In the same breath, support for entrepreneurship through establishing hubs for business incubation, mentorship, provision of seed grants, and creating an enabling policy environment bear potential in addressing unemployment.

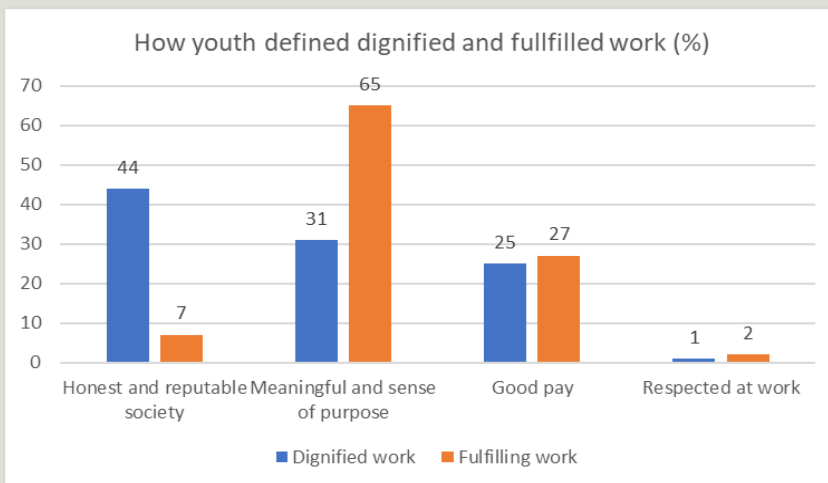


Figure 2: Source: PASGR (2022) Youth Aspirations Synthesis Report

## 3. Challenges faced by Africa’s youth in fulfilling their aspirations

Many young people across Africa face several challenges in the pursuit of their aspirations. Besides dire financial challenges that stem largely from a general lack of employment and poverty, other challenges such as a mismatch of skills to available opportunities and social ills such as corruption undermine youth’s capacities to fulfill their aspirations. As many pointed out, career progression in the public sector is often based on personal relationships and/or tokenism. Across the four countries, young African women demonstrate less enthusiasm for political leadership and public life thus creating gaps for their representation and voices in policy spaces.

Notably, many young people reported lack of crucial information about existing opportunities or programs that seek to empower them. Rural and poor youth blame bureaucratic hurdles as the main reason why they could not access these opportunities. This highlights a crucial information gap, that would need

to be filled if youth development programs are to achieve their intended impact. Further, despite the growth of technology and the internet as an enabler for access to opportunities and conducting business, **only about 25 per cent of youth admitted to having daily internet access, with high cost of internet bundles, intermittent power supply and sometimes low connectivity.**

## 4. From desperation to dignity: resilience strategies among African youth

Despite these challenges, Africa’s young women and men have devised ways of coping as they navigate the difficult pathways toward fulfilling their aspirations. Through maximizing savings, acquiring specialized skills by getting advanced training and education, networking and seeking mentorship, Africa’s youth have adopted several resilience strategies.

A common aspect of their survival has been through ‘hustling’ – a term used to refer to doing anything and everything possible within their immediate environments to achieve their goals. **Youth engage in hustles such as small scale online and offline businesses, gig work and other labor-intensive jobs available within the informal economy.** Hustling denotes a sense of practice and identity that is not just about surviving the hardships of a thin, exclusionary economy, but instead being active and investing considerable efforts and skills in cracking new opportunities, often capitalizing on the very scarcity and neglect that prevails in their neighborhoods. Although hustling is common among urban young men, young women as well as youth in rural areas are increasingly embracing the concept, ‘contributing to building their own futures’.

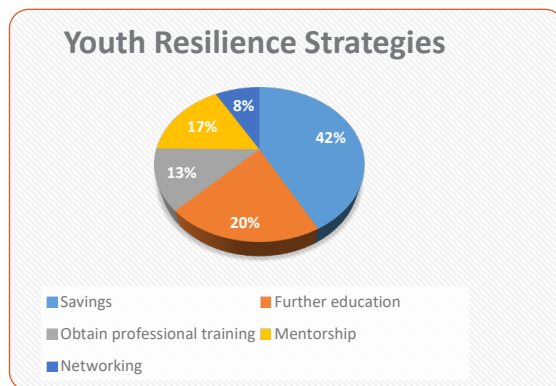


Figure 3: Source: PASGR (2022) Africa’s youth resilience strategies

## Policy Recommendations

To empower young women and men in Africa to achieve their aspirations and quest for dignified and fulfilling employment.

There are a few options available to African governments and development partners:

- Increase opportunities for training on key workforce skills that align with the aspirations and desired futures such as ICT and digital skills, entrepreneurship, commercial agriculture, and commercialization of social media, among others.** This is important in closing the gaps created by the mismatch in opportunities and key skills. Investing in education and career mentorships, informed by desired pathways of success is likely to lead to increased employment of young people.
- Orient Africa’s youth development policies to center on youth aspirations, attitudes and identity,** and foster youth inclusion, especially young women, in critical spaces of leadership where youth action is needed.
- Create conducive environments to facilitate growth of youth-owned small businesses** through funding grants and access to financial services. This includes recognition and support of various ‘hustle’ streams that young are engaged and supporting their growth.
- Harness technology to work for the youth, by reducing digital services taxation, utilize ICT in basic education, and supporting incubation labs for skilling and re-skilling of African youth** on innovative and creative strategies of utilizing technology as a medium for dignified and fulfilling work.
- Address corruption and other social ills that hinder youth capacities for development and create inequalities in accessing work opportunities.** Channel resources recovered from corruption to supporting youth-specific programmes.
- Adopt a proactive approach to policy communication** to enable governments to address the information constraints facing young people. Policies should reflect youth voices - involve the youths at every stage of policy framing and development and let their voices be captured in all the processes of policy framing.

## Further Reading

- Otieno, J., Makokha, R., & Atela, M., (2022). *From ‘Waithood to Hustling’: Africa’s youth Quest for dignified and fulfilling work*: Technical Briefing: PASGR.
- Doh D., Atela M., Thamari M., Makokha R., Otieno J., and Kaketch J. (2022). *From ‘Waithood to Hustling’: Africa’s youth quest for dignified and fulfilling work*. A synthesis report. Partnership for Africa Social and Governance Research (PASGR) – forthcoming

The policy brief was written by **Rachael Makokha** and **Joel Otieno**, Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) and edited by **Daniel Doh** It was produced in the context of the Africa Youth Aspirations and Resilience (AYAR) research partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. AYAR is a three years’ initiative that is running between 2021 and 2024 to understand youth aspirations in their own words. Project covers Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Foundation, its staff, or its Board of Directors.

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