



POLICY BRIEF

# The school to work transition in sub-Saharan Africa

Towards both formal and informal work

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out of employment  
and the education  
system.**



## The context

Secondary education is often framed as a pathway to tertiary education, but this is the case for only a small minority of youth in sub-Saharan Africa. For most young people, the transition from school to work happens during or before secondary education.

Despite increased enrollment in secondary education, tertiary opportunities remain small. And there is a mismatch between aspirations for salaried, formal sector jobs and the reality of the job market. The majority of young people will continue to transition into the informal sector, including agriculture and household enterprises.

Transitions to work, particularly into the informal sector, are often complex and non-linear as youth move in and out of employment and the education system.

**There is a mismatch between aspirations for salaried, formal sector jobs and the reality of the job market.**

## The study

Laterite conducted a situational analysis with the aim of better understanding how secondary education systems in sub-Saharan Africa are preparing youth for the transition to work.

The study summarizes information on how best to equip young people in secondary school with the skills needed to find jobs in a challenging and informal job market. Using this information, Laterite prepared a framework for understanding the school-to-work transition in sub-Saharan Africa, drawing from studies of four different labor market, educational and country contexts: Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Senegal.

The study also reviews existing programs supporting youth in the transition to work and highlights best practices.

# KEY FINDINGS



**School-to-work transitions in sub-Saharan Africa are complex and non-linear.** Youth may pursue many (overlapping) activities and work multiple jobs while also going back and forth between periods of education and employment.



**Most young people transition from primary or secondary school into informal sector or agriculture work.** This has implications for the targeting and content of programs supporting school-to-work transitions, many of which are aimed at the tertiary level.



**While many existing school-to-work initiatives focus on the formal sector, job opportunities here are limited.** At present, the formal sector can at best absorb only a third of the youth transitioning to work in sub-Saharan Africa.



**Youth are often lacking soft skills to find formal and informal sector jobs.** Skills such as networking, self-confidence/self-esteem and entrepreneurship were identified as key markers of success in multiple phases of the transition.



**Secondary schools are well positioned to prepare youth for the transition to work,** particularly as secondary enrollment continues to rise but tertiary opportunities remain limited.



**There are several promising programs that prepare youth for the transition to work that could be scaled nationally.** These include programs focusing on transitions into the informal and agricultural sectors; as well as programs that partner with governments to deliver training in secondary schools that could be scaled nationally.

# Defining the school to work transition

We consider a school-to-work transition successful when youth have the skills to make decisions in their job search that maximize their options and put them on an employment trajectory that improves their livelihood. A successful school-to-work transition is an important factor in achieving the broader development objective of improving livelihoods. We recognize that improvements in livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa may be constrained by external factors, such as skill constraints and lack of economic opportunities. Therefore, we have proposed on an employment trajectory towards an improved livelihood, as opposed to the improved livelihood itself, as the successful endpoint.

**Transitions to work are complex and non-linear.** A young person may leave school to start his/her first job with the

**School-to-work transition: the process that links the demand for work to the supply for work, within the context of a regulatory, social, cultural and economic framework.**

aim of returning to school after enough money has been saved. Alternatively, a young person may be forced to drop out of school when he/she is too young to join the workforce, remaining in a “holding pattern” instead. The exact process of the transition can therefore be difficult to identify. Despite this ambiguity, defining success is necessary to guide policy and program decisions.

**Figure 1.**

Laterite's school-to-work transition framework to help program and policy leaders structure the concept





## What do transitions to work look like for youth in sub-Saharan Africa?

**Most transitions to work happen during or after primary or secondary school.**

The majority of youth of post-secondary school age (ages 20-24) make the transition to work without ever having attended secondary school, except in the case of Kenya. In Kenya an estimated 77% of out-of-school youth aged 20-24 had ever attended secondary school, compared to 46% in Ethiopia, 18% in Senegal and 17% in Rwanda.

**Many sub-Saharan African youth aspire to a salaried and formal sector job and view secondary education as**

**a path to this goal, but only a minority achieve this.** Secondary school enrollment has increased rapidly across sub-Saharan Africa: the net rate of enrollment in secondary school increased from 19% in 1998 to around 33% in 2016.<sup>1</sup> This trend is projected to continue given that universal secondary education has been prioritized as one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Yet the limited capacity for all to continue to tertiary education and onward to a formal sector job means that more youth will be transitioning from secondary school directly into the labor market.

## Example of a transition into the informal sector

**Joseph\*, Airtime Agent and Cleaner, Rwanda**

Joseph's experience highlights the complex and non-linear manner of transitioning from school to work.

Joseph dropped out of school after Secondary 5, and in preparation for his job search, he saved money to move to Kigali with a friend. He first worked as a manual worker at a construction site, a security guard, and a restaurant cleaner, while searching for other opportunities

through networking and listening to success stories on the radio.

Once he was convinced of the viability of selling airtime as a business, he approached someone he knew from his work as a cleaner and persuaded him to lend him capital to purchase airtime and cards. This enabled him to start his new job as an airtime agent, although he continued to work as a cleaner on the side. Two years later, Joseph had earned enough money to pay back his loan.

Source: Laterite key informant interviews. \*Name changed to protect anonymity

## Gap between the size of the formal sector job market and the cohort entering the work force

	Total jobs in the formal sector	Young people turning 18 every year
<b>Rwanda</b>	500,000	250,000
<b>Kenya</b>	2.8 million	1 million
<b>Nigeria</b>	1.6 million jobs created over 3 years	3 million

Sources: Rwanda – National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2017; Kenya – Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Nigeria – Nigeria Bureau of Statistics Data Portal

Most youth transition to the informal sector as a result of the lack of formal sector jobs. A 2014 survey of several countries showed that an estimated 80% of youth that had completed secondary education were employed in the informal sector.<sup>2</sup> This trend is likely to continue due to the significant gap between the number of jobs available in the formal sector and the number of youth entering the job market each year in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

This means that informal sector and agricultural jobs will continue to be the main careers for the foreseeable future. About half of the labor force in sub-Saharan Africa currently works in agriculture.<sup>3</sup> In addition, estimates from the International Labor Organization (ILO) show that about two-thirds of non-agricultural employment in sub-Saharan Africa is in the informal economy.<sup>4</sup> Looking forward, it is likely that 80% of youth in sub-Saharan Africa will work in either agriculture or household enterprises for at least the next decade.<sup>5</sup>

# How can schools help prepare youth to find work?

**Given the increased access to secondary education, secondary schools are well positioned to prepare youth for work.** Some countries have therefore started working to make secondary education more relevant to employment. Senegal, Rwanda and Kenya are moving to a competency-based curriculum featuring learner-centred methods that make education more practical and less theoretical. Some countries have also integrated training in entrepreneurship and school-to-work transition skills into secondary school curricula.

**Much of the existing training focuses on successful school-to-work transitions, but takes place outside the general**

**secondary school system.** In most countries, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions or technical vocational secondary schools are the bridge between education and employment. However, across sub-Saharan Africa only 6% of students enrolled in secondary education take part in TVET programs<sup>5</sup>, and these programs tend to lack resources. Further, many existing programs that do work within the general secondary school system tend to focus on the formal sector. For example, the International Youth Foundation's Passport to Success program partners with finance, hospitality and retail companies to seek trainees for their companies.

## Case study

The International Youth Foundation's two initiatives, **VIA: Pathways to Work** and **YouthMap**, recognize that youth often have to work multiple jobs both in the formal and informal sectors, often in agriculture. Training includes:

- Developing life skills that are applicable to any form of livelihood, such as teamwork, reliability, and making priorities.
- Improving access to finance to help facilitate the transformation of small-

scale household enterprises to income-generating businesses. In Mozambique, a VIA initiative partner provides saving and credit groups that teach young people how to save money. This then prepares them for micro-loans.

- Providing financial literacy and business development skills training to counteract the lack of predictability that comes with mixed livelihoods, such as through the YouthMap initiative in Senegal.

Source: Kristina Gaddy, "Using Mixed Livelihood Lessons for Better Programming," International Youth Foundation: Employment Education, 2017



Given the size of the informal sector, there are significant opportunities to shift the focus of programs to finding informal sector jobs. There are a growing number of innovative programs focused on the informal sector that can be used as models. The International Youth Foundation's VIA: Pathways to Work initiative in Tanzania & Mozambique and YouthMap in Senegal recognize the diversity in livelihoods, ensuring that skills taught are transferable.<sup>6</sup> The U-LEARN 2 project in Uganda run by Swisscontact focuses on agribusiness, and removing barriers to accessing relevant market information and linkages. Lastly, Technoserve's STRYDE program in Rwanda provides training for youth to identify and capitalize on local opportunities in agriculture and agri-related businesses.<sup>7</sup>

## Which practices improve the transition?

**Skills were identified as critical to success in the school-to-work transition.** These skills for finding a job are often different from the set of skills required to succeed at the job.

Some initiatives show how programs can prepare youth for informal sector work. Huguka Dukore is an Education Development Center (EDC) program in Rwanda that emphasizes the importance of market-driven training. The organization developed a tool to ensure that training caters to the local

## Skills required at different phases of the school-to-work transition

### 1 Preparation

- Networking
- Work experience (e.g. internships)
- Self-awareness & self-confidence
- Entrepreneurship - developing ideas

### 2 Search

- Networking
- Information seeking
- Fluency in a business language
- Entrepreneurship - resource mapping

### 3 Persuade, Evaluate, Negotiate

- Networking
- Understanding employment
- Self-esteem, motivation, aspiration
- Entrepreneurship - marketing & soft skills

### 4 Start

- Understanding employment and employers
- Soft skills
- Entrepreneurship - financial literacy, business skills

needs, and trained all implementing partners on its use. Informal apprenticeships are often better tailored to the realities and needs of the job market and can work as pathways for youth into self-employment or informal sector employment.<sup>8</sup> In Ghana, informal apprenticeships increased the earnings of youth with low-level education by ~50%.<sup>9</sup>

# Policy take-aways



## **Target school-to-work training to secondary schools**

Secondary schools have a strategic position in the school-to-work transition process, and governments could consider incorporating training and programs to support youth at the lower secondary level. This approach would target a greater proportion of youth at a time when they are likely to be making the transition to work. Governments could consider scaling promising initiatives in secondary schools that have successfully worked alongside Ministries of Education and government partners, such as Educate!’s Skills Labs and Student Business Clubs, International Youth Foundation’s Passport to Success, and EDC’s Work Ready Now!

## **Focus on sustainable livelihoods, not just formal sector jobs**

Policymakers and implementing partners could equip and encourage youth to

pursue sustainable livelihoods in the formal and informal sectors. Doing so will capitalize on the strides sub-Saharan Africa has made in improving access to education and growing its economies. Programs that leverage the secondary education system, equip youth with skills to find a job, and link training to the realities of the local market are most likely to have the widest reach and greatest effect.

## **Equip youth with job-seeking skills**

Programs supporting transitions into the informal sector and agriculture could be improved by supporting youth to develop soft skills such as networking, information-seeking, and entrepreneurship skills. Programs could also help youth by focusing on the realities of the job market. Capitalizing on existing informal sector apprenticeships can help match young people with the jobs available while meeting the needs of the local community.

# REFERENCES & NOTES

## REFERENCES

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## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Research for this project drew from a variety of sources, including a review of academic and grey literature on school-to-work transitions; a review and analysis of the policies, national data, and programs related to education and youth employment in the countries of focus; case studies on best practices related to preparing youth for work; and key informant interviews on education and employment in the countries of focus.

The literature review examined existing literature on school-to-work transitions in sub-Saharan Africa and compiled a list of ongoing major initiatives in this space. Information was collected by searching in relevant databases using different combinations of relevant keywords.

Case studies were selected using the following criteria: adaptability, innovation, stakeholder

engagement, program impact, and the availability of information about the program. Preference was given to programs that scaled nationally.

68 key informant interviews were used to supplement the existing literature. Interviewees included educators, policy makers, employers and workers in the formal and informal sector from the four focus countries. The interviews were semi-structured and covered themes including transitions from secondary school to work; skills required for the transition; public-private partnerships; entrepreneurship; networks; and programs and policy.

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The full report is [available for download](#).

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