



Wilton Park



Image: DFID

Report

## Boosting youth employment in Sub-Saharan Africa: creating opportunities and building skills

Wednesday 11 – Saturday 14 July 2018 | WP1609

Held in South Africa

In partnership with:



Department  
for International  
Development



In association with:



The Commonwealth



Institute of  
Development Studies



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### Introduction

“Youth have a higher unemployment rate than adults. There are increasing numbers of NEET youth (not in employment, education or training). Whatever we are doing now, it is not good enough!”

The Wilton Park ‘Youth Dialogues: powering the future’ is a series of events being held from 2017-2019 with a specific focus on Africa, the Middle East and Europe. The dialogues aim to bring together young people, government and non-governmental organisations, civil society, academics, experts and educationalists, for honest, inclusive conversations about young people and their role in addressing local, regional and global challenges. They set out to provide a forum to discuss the effectiveness of existing policy approaches and promote exploration of what new approaches are needed.

Wilton Park’s mission is to promote peace and address the **challenging issues of our time**, one of which is the challenge of **youth unemployment**. Statistics highlight the urgency. The African Development Bank estimates that, without concerted action, nearly 50% of youth will be unemployed or economically inactive by 2025. An estimated 18 million new jobs will be needed each year until 2035 to absorb the growing labour force in the region. However, the problem is not only unemployment, but underemployment and a lack of secure and decent work. The informal economy, where many young people find a livelihood, may not absorb all jobless youth and offers largely insecure work. This is particularly challenging in agriculture, where work is highly unstable and low paid.

“This is not intended to be a talkshop. This meeting is a grand coalition, and what we decide in this room could have a dramatic impact. Youth unemployment is one of the greatest challenges of our time.”

The conference ‘**Boosting youth employment in Sub-Saharan Africa: creating opportunities and building skills**’ took place in South Africa from 11 to 13 July and was convened to debate responses to the youth employment challenge and explore how global action and international cooperation can address the issue. An expert group of 55 participants from 17 different countries with representation from government, donor agencies, NGO’s, the Commonwealth Secretariat, international civil society organisations, academia, the private sector and young entrepreneurs met to discuss the youth employment challenge and potential solutions in Africa. The Dialogue was the third main event in The Wilton Park ‘Youth Dialogues’ series. Delegates met to discuss in particular:

- The perspectives of young entrepreneurs on decent work and barriers to entrepreneurship.
- The evidence of impact of youth-centred skill building interventions, and the macro-economic forces that can drive job creation.

- The ecosystem for youth employment and what is needed for youth employment.
- The kind of partnerships needed to tackle youth un- and underemployment.
- The potential advantages and disadvantages of launching a new, concerted global campaign to tackle the challenges.

A small workshop for select policymakers preceded the main conference. On Wednesday 11 July, as the capstone event of a **learning journey** on youth employment and citizenship organised for DFID and other donor bodies by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), participants came together to identify and tackle key pathways and crucial blockages in the theories of change underlying youth employment policies. This provided a foundation for these participants' contributions to the main meeting. The workshop drew on three background papers<sup>1</sup> prepared by IDS, which discussed in depth the role of structural barriers and strategies versus youth-specific barriers and strategies for employment, and the differences between the type of action needed in stable contexts and conflict-affected scenarios.

This report summarises the debates at the conference and elaborates the key take-away points, which are:

- There is a widespread questioning and rethinking of the previous wholesale focus on youth-centred entrepreneurship and skill building programmes, because such interventions only change the supply of work-seeking young people into labour markets without addressing the demand for their skills in the marketplace.
- There is great optimism about digital futures. However, it is not (yet) matched by evidence, and it is recognised that solutions will also need to be found for the large youth populations living in rural areas, where digital technology has not penetrated to the same extent as in cities.
- A challenge identified by taking an ecosystem approach is that silos exist within governments and donor agencies. Youth ministries and youth divisions usually take on skills programmes, while economic development departments focus on macro-economic growth and private sector policies, but not necessarily (and usually) not on youth. Both need to work together.
- Debates on youth employment have focused on urban youth and are still far too separate from debates on the role of the informal sector and the role of agriculture and other rural livelihoods strategies. These sectors require specific policy approaches.
- There is widespread agreement on the need for better data to know 'what works' as well as what does not work in addressing the youth employment challenge, and to enable more context-adapted action that responds to the political-economic realities of different countries, and especially low-income or fragile and conflict-affected settings. Different

<sup>1</sup> (1) Irwin, S., Mader, P. and Flynn, J. (2018). How Youth-Specific is Africa's Youth Employment Challenge? K4D Emerging Issues Report. Brighton, UK: IDS. (2) Oosterom, M.A. (2018). Youth employment & citizenship: Problematizing theories of change. K4D Emerging Issues Report, Brighton, UK: IDS. (3) Mader, P. (2018). Better jobs and livelihoods for young people in Africa – a spotlight on demand. K4D Emerging Issues Report. Brighton, UK: IDS.

contexts require very different approaches.

- At the same time, there is a need to overcome the fragmentation of interventions and to ensure greater collaboration and coordination within and across donors and governments, for instance through pooling of funds. This links to the question of whether a new, global campaign is the best way forward.

## The challenge

Among the challenges facing Africa today, youth employment stands out. However, it is unclear what approaches actually work in tackling it, and which parts of the job market to focus on: formal jobs, the informal sector, or self-employment and entrepreneurship. It is clear that, while partnerships and learning across borders and contexts are necessary, national governments have a responsibility to take action.

1. Youth unemployment, underemployment and insecure employment together constitute **a major challenge of our time**. The youth employment challenge is seen as leading to problems of insecurity and violence.
2. One fifth of the world's young people are counted as not in employment, education, or training (**NEET**). Three out of four young men and women are working in informal employment, compared to only three out of five adults, and in some developing countries the ratio is as high as 19 out of 20 young people.
3. Most of the world's projected **youth population growth** will take place in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), and this trend could have important implications for growth and socio-political stability. SSA is the only region where the youth population has yet to peak. Approximately 70% of the population here is under 30, and this suggests that special policies need to be developed.
4. In a world of ageing populations, youth can be an asset. Finance and investment, facilitated through international cooperation, could create **formal** jobs for young people, which would drive growth and enhance tax income. Donor countries are revisiting their economic development strategies to consider more investment for structural change towards manufacturing and high value-added services.
5. This should not mean ignoring the **informal** sector and the important role that it often plays, the continued predominance of agriculture in providing livelihoods in SSA, or the fact that formalisation is a challenge and there are sometimes strong incentives against it. Rather, it means shifting the narrative towards recognising how productive investments in the formal sector are the main drivers of structural transformation and creation of decent jobs.
6. In this context, youth **entrepreneurship and innovation** are seen as crucial drivers of progress. There is a hunger for technology and growth among young women and men in SSA. If young people leverage digital innovations for enterprise, this can have positive multipliers, bringing benefits for their families, for instance for as their children go to better schools and their communities as they offer new services and jobs. At the same time, the advance of digital technologies bears the risk that some are left behind by the digital divide, and technology should not be seen as a 'miracle cure'.
7. However, young people must have access to **education** so that they can shape and grow their economies. Full and productive and decent work for youth falls under Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With the mission to 'leave no one behind' enshrined in the SDGs, this applies to girls in particular. Countries investing heavily in human capital were responsible for much of the growth in recent years.
8. No single actor can solve the youth unemployment crisis, so **partnerships** are crucial. A grand coalition could have dramatic impact, if it focused on putting in place systems approaches for education and entrepreneurship. The focus should be on opening pathways toward decent jobs for youth and youth development, not least through

sharing knowledge about successes and failures at the policy level, and between businesses at the micro level.

9. However, as much as partnerships can help, **governments** need to take ownership of the problem. National and local solutions are key. SSA is made up of at least 46 different countries, which require solutions tailored to different circumstances. In part, this will require policy environments that enable rather than constrain innovation and job-creation and provide the infrastructure that grants access to transformative technologies.
10. Recognising **context and diverse needs** in different circumstances is crucial for successful initiatives. It is necessary to gain a clear understanding of what macro issues affect the whole economy versus those that affect young people directly. 'Youth' is an extremely heterogeneous group. Common definitions of 'youth' in SSA, as ranging from 15 to 35 years, can obscure their very different needs. Not all young people have the capacity or desire to become (successful) **entrepreneurs**.

### The youth perspective on promoting decent work and living

A number of young entrepreneurs attended the conference and made a significant impression on the participants, given their perseverance and creativity. All of them are now employing others. In the discussion, it was highlighted that one has to be mindful that the pathways of these entrepreneurs may not be relevant to the situation of other young people, particularly rural youth. Youth, as a demographic group, are highly diverse, and the entrepreneurs on the panel represented urban youth with a command of the English language. Each of them runs a very different business, which they had started and developed in different countries. Whereas discussions did not extend to how differences in terms of economic and policy environment had influenced the process of starting up a business, the young entrepreneurs all contributed valuable lessons from their own experience.

11. **Mobility** was important for several entrepreneurs: to learn from different places, and to try to expand into new markets. However, the quality of infrastructure (both roads and airways) on the African continent were seen as hampering connectivity and mobility.
12. Entrepreneurs emphasised the importance of **mentoring** young entrepreneurs. Some found this even more important than start-up capital. To have someone with expertise in the right sector to discuss plans with; someone to get familiar with one's business ideas and able to give tailored advice; these were seen as crucial for new entrepreneurs to get on the right track.
13. **Technology** has made certain procedures in businesses more efficient, including for going to scale. One example was the administrative software that all branches of one company could use across different countries.
14. **Policies and procedures** in certain countries can be a real barrier to starting a new business. Some entrepreneurs talked of months, even years, of waiting before their license came through. Others underscored the huge operating costs when policies changed overnight, and businesses needed to change their ways of working.
15. In some countries, **procedures are politicised** and licenses can only be obtained through paying bribes, or demonstrating support for the ruling party. Some governments do not respect property rights. They also lack the will to let all people benefit from free trade arrangements.
16. Young delegates agreed there are few opportunities for young people to be part of **policy formulation** processes, both with regard to youth-centred interventions specifically but also concerning economic and private sector development more broadly. National Youth Councils can be politicised and captured by elite youth, and usually they do not engage on macro-economic policies.

"It can be easier to travel to Europe than to some places in Africa."

"Instead of saying 'the grass is greener on the other side' I say 'the grass is greener where you water it'. The little we have can go a long way. We need to improve our own countries."



“It is not fair to push young people into entrepreneurship, because you push them into a life of difficult living. Millions are struggling for a decent living but won't have it. There are no safety nets.”

“Given the scale of the youth challenge, we need to go beyond digital, urban solutions and go into the rural areas. We need a more comprehensive offer of solutions.”

17. One delegate commented that there is a **democratic deficit** across the board, which is not youth-specific. Nevertheless, if one holds that anyone has the right to participate in policy and decision-making, especially when affected by those very policies, then more efforts would be needed to bring youth into policy spaces.
18. The panel highlighted how difficult it is for youth to access loans and recommended revisiting loan schemes. Often banks will ask for security, which is not feasible for many young people. They suggested **new ways of financing** young entrepreneurs, such as creating incentives to private firms to donate a percentage to start-up funds; governments daring to take some risk, with a part of the pension fund; or through taxation.
19. There are many **low-wage jobs** that youth do not find attractive, like plumbing or waste collection. It was said that it might require a change of mindset in individuals to see these as business opportunities. However, there are reasons why these kinds of jobs are not considered great opportunities. It will require society at large to accord greater respect to people who do these kinds of work, and also it takes government effort and commitment to ensure that low-wage jobs are done in a safe, non-hazardous manner.
20. One delegate offered a realistic and sobering perspective on being a young entrepreneur. While being a successful entrepreneur himself, he emphasised that many young entrepreneurs are **living on the edge**, facing challenging living conditions and family pressures.
21. This contribution led the discussion to the issue of **safety nets** for young entrepreneurs. No policy framework or infrastructure is in place, such that entrepreneurs need to fall back on family networks in case of illness or failure of the business.

### Looking at the effectiveness of youth employment interventions

The youth employment space is replete with evidence of interventions, failures, and questions about what works in what context and not in others. Discussions highlighted particular evidence gaps regarding the effectiveness of different types of interventions, particularly entrepreneurship and skills training. Recognising Africa's youth employment challenge as a 'missing jobs' crisis, many questions turned towards how, where, and how quickly adequate numbers of jobs could be created. Above all, it was agreed, there is a need to avoid expensive but ineffective programmes.

22. There is a **sense of crisis** among policymakers because of the combination of a vast youth demographic and a very limited, patchy and contested evidence base for effective interventions. Governments, politicians and development partners recognise a need to do something urgently.
23. The picture is complex with regards to **growth and investment**. The recent economic history of Africa of the last 20 years is not one story, but multiple stories. Since 2000, a substantial number of countries (at least half) have introduced good policies and improved per capita growth. There have been transformative results, while others have fallen behind.
24. In some countries the majority of formal wage jobs is now in the private sector; a sign of progress compared to several decades ago. But the problem remains that most countries **have started from a very weak place**, so that even double-digit growth rates often do not feel transformative. A key problem, particularly compared to countries outside of Africa, is population growth, which diminishes the effects of economic growth and translates into high labour force growth rates.
25. In the last few years, a number of impact studies have come out showing that youth employment interventions that focus solely on **skill building** have hardly any impact. First and foremost, they do not create new jobs. They have no sustained impact, with any programme effect disappearing after 2 to 3 years, and the best results being only in middle-income countries. Such programmes are highly expensive and not cost-

“We should remind ourselves that much entrepreneurial activity is undertaken for survival, not out of choice. We often fail to ask young people what they want, but when we do, we find formal employment is at the core.”

“Platform businesses indirectly enable new jobs. Youth can often get jobs that fix dysfunctions or address efficiencies. Last-mile distribution is the perfect youth job.”

effective. Some delegates argued that donors and governments should stop funding skill-building interventions altogether. At the very least, new programmes should demonstrate how their design is different, how they incorporate lessons from past evaluations, and how they expect to create jobs.

26. Because the **nature of the challenge** is insufficiently understood and the evidence for specific interventions remains weak, action is often driven by simple yet compelling narratives, built on essentialist thinking, common knowledge and political expediency. One-size-fits-all or single-shot ‘solutions’ are the result.
27. Constructive policy dialogue is not helped by simplistic **positive narratives** that focus on a great opportunity presented by Africa’s ‘demographic dividend’ and the suggestion that African youth are particularly innovative and creative and will use entrepreneurship to turn themselves from job-seekers into job-creators.
28. These are mirrored by equally simplistic and unhelpful **negative narratives**, for instance of a threat to food security as young people abandon farming, while they ‘should’ be using their talents and new technologies to transform agriculture. Another such narrative without evidence holds that conflict, upheaval and domestic and international migration are driven by the lack of youth employment opportunities.
29. Unfounded claims about supposedly **essential characteristics of African youth** (such as their inherent creativity or entrepreneurship), which channel interventions into potentially unproductive and wasteful directions, need to be abandoned. Moreover, the lack of credible evidence to suggest a simple, linear relationship between employment status and violence needs to be taken seriously; the vast majority of young people, also young men, do not get involved in violence or conflict.
30. Escaping such simplistic narratives entails **re-thinking** ‘Africa’s youth employment challenge’ as, rather, ‘Africa’s missing jobs challenge’, and replacing a youth-centric problem analysis with one that puts the economy and economic policy centre-stage. This entails recognising that most barriers to youth employment are systemic in nature and not youth-specific.
31. The importance of complexity and context entails focusing more on identifying **particular skills mismatches** and delivering the right skills. This can lead to greater success at placing young people in real jobs and fulfilling labour market demands. But for this to work a skills anticipation strategy is essential, which requires far better data and more labour market data collection.
32. **Vocational education and training** often fall under Ministries of Education in Africa, and connections to Ministries of Labour and Agriculture needs to be strengthened. The private sector could be allowed to play a greater role in curriculum development. Training needs to be offered where it is needed, for example with agricultural colleges in rural areas, introducing teaching on modern technologies. More funding needs to go toward vocational rather than academic education.
33. **Compulsory entrepreneurship training** is not a good thing and distracts from the technical skills that are needed in the labour market. Many youth-focused credit schemes are collapsing. Successful entrepreneurship is an ecosystem issue and its wider success, particularly in creating jobs in agriculture, depends on integration with value chains.
34. **Expensive programmes** for youth employment or entrepreneurship that do not actually create jobs need to be avoided. Simpler cash transfer schemes might be more cost-effective. A focus on entrepreneurship may help in some areas, for instance in agriculture, but will need to be focused on a smaller number of growth-oriented enterprises.
35. There are encouraging signs that the spotlight is shifting away from education, skills, training and employability toward addressing the **demand side of labour markets**, with a focus on job creation, decent work and structural transformation. But realism is

needed here, too. Change will not be as fast as expectations, and we have to stop blaming youth for their job prospects and have to understand that future youth that are coming in to the labour market will face the same problems.

36. Part of a more realistic approach would be to **focus on agriculture**, where the majority of Africans work, but only a smaller share of GDP is earned. The issue is to increase productivity, especially of smallholder and family farms, and support agricultural transformation. That would be a driving force of job creation for everyone, with youth being positively affected because of country demographics.

### What ecosystem for youth employment?

The importance of thinking in terms of an 'ecosystem' conducive to youth employment has emerged in all the Wilton Park Youth Dialogues. This approach recognises that the responsibility to resolve issues youth face does not rest on the shoulders of young people alone, because their difficulties result from broader systems, structures and processes in society, including forms of exclusion, which require concerted efforts from a range of actors. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) in London in April 2018, leaders stressed the importance of creating meaningful employment opportunities for the Commonwealth's growing youth populations. They agreed on the need to invest in systems to support young people, which include skills building, entrepreneurship, apprenticeships and better data to target interventions more effectively, but also job-creation. The debate has however been rather one-sided, with youth often being made responsible for creating their own jobs, with varying levels of support. Instead, it is now increasingly recognised that economic development policies can be improved in order to maximise job creation for young people. The conference touched on different aspects of this debate.

37. Youth employment needs to be recognised as more than just an investment opportunity or a threat, but rather **a holistic issue** with social, demographic, skills-related, governance-related and planning-related factors all at play.
38. It is felt that the elements of the youth employment space are currently **disconnected**, and therefore fail to form an effective ecosystem. For instance, the role of the informal sector and the large numbers of youth that work in farming and other rural livelihoods are usually considered separately from skill-building and education initiatives.
39. **Youth-led development initiatives** are desirable and an essential part of a more successful approach. On the one hand, there is a recognition of the need to make decisions more informed by evidence. On the other hand, there is also a desire to be more disruptive and to make sure that all voices, including those of young people, can count.
40. **Effective entrepreneurship** means growth-oriented, risk-taking ventures that are likely to be willing and able to employ others, not microenterprise. In supporting entrepreneurship, only about 10% of what matters is business development services, while 90% is the enabling environment, including infrastructure such as roads, ports, finance, the political context, and wider drivers, such as social norms that engender a sense of personal agency.
41. It may be possible to deliver **entrepreneurship-related education** in three ways: 1. wider awareness-creation of entrepreneurship, perhaps starting in primary education; 2. underlying education in qualities that could be useful for entrepreneurship, but also beyond; 3. training in business and management skills and in specialist knowledge such as how to handle particular regulations or compliance issues, for the people who might actually become entrepreneurs. However, potential successful entrepreneurs are only a small percentage of the population.
42. **Financing** for youth enterprise remains a major challenge, because of the risk of failure, which is inherent in entrepreneurship. However, in addition to financing for early-stage companies run by young people, which is riskier and may require more innovative solutions, working to improve financing for more established companies that

"While skills and education are important, less is known about the environment needed to cultivate these. Let's look at the ecosystems approach."

"Two perspectives are possible. One, let's make decisions informed by evidence. Two, perhaps that's not what we need, and we need to be more disruptive and make sure that every voice can count."



create jobs for young people must also be considered.

43. Current ecosystems are missing appropriate **channels for youth to influence** policies and programmes. Making sure that young people are equipped with the political skills to act as engaged citizens can help solve the problem. This requires addressing the broader democratic deficit in many African countries, and looking beyond the usual suspects; for instance, involving more people from agrarian backgrounds and those who have less access to economic opportunities. They need capacity building in order to help them participate in policy spaces effectively.
44. The **informal sector** is another missing dimension in debates on the youth employment challenge, as large numbers of youth find work here in practice: in some countries this is as high as 95 %. If its productivity is enhanced, it can contribute to GDP growth. Currently, many donors lack a clear policy regarding the informal sector, which includes finding ways for governments to tax informal enterprise.
45. The informal sector also offers **apprenticeships** and an informal route for learning professional skills, which can enable a better transition into the labour market.
46. **Gender obstacles and social barriers**, including for people with disabilities and vulnerable or minority groups, lead to major differences and particular challenges in quality of education and access to work and education. Cultural norms make it difficult for women to get their own incomes and make their own choices, and women often face sexual corruption and extortion in accessing work opportunities. Championing girls' agency and women's leadership may lead to improvements in the longer run, but in the meantime law enforcement and the use of media to penalise harassment is needed.

### African partnerships for decent work

The discussions on the youth employment ecosystem informed subsequent discussions on practical ways forward and the partnerships that would be needed. Among actors working in government institutions and international institutions like the African Union (AU) and the African Development Bank, there was a strong sense that more and better coordination, with African institutions in the driving seat, would be key. They emphasised that new ideas need to be aligned with the policy direction the continent wants to take, enshrined in the [Agenda 2063](#). At the same time, participants emphasised the importance of involving youth better in policy-making in ways that reflect their diversity. The AU has a youth charter, but out of 54 nations that ratified it, only 5 have domesticated the charter.

47. **Breaking down silos** between and within both African governments and donors emerged as a major issue to be addressed, to move towards an effective ecosystem. This would involve improved dialogue between the different ministries and divisions of governments that are responsible for youth employment, rural livelihoods and agricultural transformation, labour, and trade.
48. The example of the **Youth Employment Service (YES) in South Africa** was discussed as an example of an intervention that seeks to create jobs for youth by intervening on the links in the ecosystem, especially between firms and youth, and by taking private sector actors into areas where large numbers of youth live. YES aims to provide 1 million work opportunities and uses a scorecard system for companies: if they invest in youth, they go up one level on the score card. YES identifies potential value chains and market access opportunities in different parts of the country, and then analyses how to leverage this, with a 'design thinking' mind-set.
49. An example of improving links at the international level mentioned was the **African Development Bank** prioritising human capital development, in which youth employment is an important aspect. It aims to create 25 million jobs over the next ten years<sup>2</sup> through a dedicated job market strategy. Priority areas are energy, agriculture,

"We need to be inclusive with our efforts, so young people can drive their own agenda. Youth are not the future – they are the present."

"Change begins at home with our governments. A government can be cheering for entrepreneurs, but in my country, I have struggled for years to get a license for my business. In many governments, institutions are not separated from parties. You get to benefit when your party is in power, otherwise not."

<sup>2</sup> AfDB (2016) [Strategy for Jobs for Youth in Africa, 2016-2025](#).

“Youth taking part in my business support activities are very business-like. There is no contradiction between wanting to get going and being willing to learn, and systematically testing and reflecting on what works through research.”

regional integration of markets, industrial zones and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and Fragility Assessments will inform how the AfDB will give tailored support to youth and governments in fragile states.

50. Through **improved ‘integration’**, the AfDB aims to incorporate a youth employment component into its projects and systems and advise its member countries on how to improve their approaches. The AfDB plans to work with partners to incubate, implement, assess, and scale promising solutions and invest to catalyse private sector investments that fuel job creation and employment for youth.
51. Again, participants recognised that there is a need to **better involve young people** in policy discussions and in the design of programmes and schemes. Not only do institutional channels need to be improved, but there needs to be capacity-building to enable young people to use their voice when they actually get ‘a seat at the table’.
52. Youth representatives expressed that, while many policy initiatives and processes appear to exist, many youth do not know about them, let alone use them to initiate **dialogue with their governments**. Governments would have to put much more effort into taking policies to the local level.
53. Moreover, it was argued that policymaking needs to better reflect the diversity of youth. Many African countries define youth as between the ages of 15-35, leading to a real risk that **younger youth** will be drowned out of dialogues by older youth. Moreover, entrepreneurship interventions are not appropriate for the youngest cohorts.
54. Likewise, on the diversity issue, it was noted that a single young person can have **multiple identities**. Policies would need to deal with the fact that youth often have livelihood portfolios: they are the ‘Slash Generation’, doing many activities at once, e.g. farming/vending/sewing/etc.
55. Furthermore, **curricula** are usually developed at a national level, which not only means they are imposed on different local contexts, but also that it takes years from beginning to end of the development process, and often they are out of date by the time of implementation. There may be scope for decentralisation, in partnership with the private sector, for ensuring that vocational education and training is better matched to emerging skills demands.
56. The dilemma remains between **local knowledge** and approaches, and the vast scale of the youth employment problem. Participants wondered: Are there any general principles that work, and if so, how can they be ‘franchised’ to work in different contexts? A practical suggestion for more effective collaboration that was made was to build a widely-supported ‘clearinghouse’ of knowledge about interventions in different countries.

### Going forward: toward a global coalition?

A major topic of debate was the idea of a new initiative of a Global Coalition for youth employment. The Parliamentary Network on the World Bank and IMF is promoting this to pioneer a ‘Systems Approach’ to youth job creation in individual National Action Plans created by individual governments with the support of key stake-holders: the private sector; academics, NGO practitioners and other job creation specialists; donors and investors; youth leaders and unemployed youth themselves. The ‘Systems Approach’ was mandated by Commonwealth Heads of State in Clause 19 of their final Communiqué from the London CHOGM in April. In the booklet, [‘The Case for Urgent Action on Youth Employment’](#), the UK Permanent Secretary of State for International Development acknowledges youth employment as one of the most pressing global challenges. The debate at the conference centred on the question of what kind of ‘urgent action’ exactly is required. Nobody expressed doubts about the importance and urgency of youth employment as a global issue, but rather the debate centred on what the best course of action will be.

57. **Key questions** around the new Coalition were: would it be the right answer to the problems in the ecosystem for youth employment? Would it be a funding entity? Is a

“It is important to recognise that no single actor can address the Youth Employment Challenge. Only well-formed collaboration can address the challenge.”

“My experience from working with a youth-led organisation is that young people themselves focus on employment, because they say: what’s the point of investing in our health and education, if we just end up on the scrap heap?”

lack of funding a major issue at present? Some participants felt there is no shortage of existing actors and no lack of funding for youth employment initiatives, but how could their work be better coordinated? Would a new Coalition help with this urgent task or distract from it?

58. Participants welcomed the **systems approach** taken by the Coalition document. The learning from the conference and recent evaluations suggest a system approach would need to address the demand-side of labour, creating jobs through various measures including stimulating private sector growth and investment, and increasing the productivity of smallholder firms, as the route to job creation for everyone, including youth.
59. A **concern** expressed about this initiative was that such a Coalition might replicate existing programmatic approaches: mainly youth-centred programmes focused on skill building, mentoring and entrepreneurship training.
60. **Recent evidence** from robust meta-evaluations shows that these kinds of skill building programmes have very little effect in terms of increasing earnings, and hardly ever result in sustainable businesses. Therefore, discussants were invited to elaborate how the proposed Coalition might work to develop and test new, innovative approaches, rather than doing ‘more of the same’.
61. Some delegates further concerned that **‘urgent action’** suggests a new Coalition might rush into doing interventions without looking seriously at lessons learnt from previous interventions.
62. Endorsers and supporters of the new Coalition, however, argued that **action is needed** now, to assist the millions of African youth in need of meaningful work. Recognizing the need for better evidence, it was suggested that the Coalition would serve to trial and test new approaches and evaluate them properly.
63. The discussions made clear that **the role of evidence and learning** is still contested. Recognizing that many policy actors and practitioners have limited time to assess available evidence, delegates closer to research recommended to at least involve researchers in the discussion of ways forward. Others agreed that no resources should be spent on reinventing the wheel.
64. It was pointed out that a **global fund** helped effectively tackle malaria. The statistics for youth unemployment, it was said, are just as alarming; while it may seem an almost impossible task to create full employment for all young women and men, that is what all countries signed up to by 2030 with SDG number 8, Target 5. However, this places responsibility with the individual countries and with this the responsibility to allocate funding from existing country budgets.
65. In addition, the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London in 2018 committed to the delivery 12 years of basic education for each child, especially girls, which will represent a huge **fiscal burden** on governments. Adding on to this another commitment, namely to youth employment, while effective pathways to achieving this remained unclear, may have adverse implications for government budgets.
66. Representatives from donor agencies argued that campaigning and engaging politicians, such as MPs, would help to **keep up the positive energy** to tackle the issue of youth employment. However, there would be a need to focus and prioritise when making decisions about how to spend funds and which policy changes to support in order to drive job creation.

## Commitments – improving the ecosystem

Rather than agreeing concrete commitments per actor, participants reflected on where the ecosystem around youth employment most urgently needs to be improved. Discussions sought to balance the need to invest directly in youth (who need help now) and securing economic growth which would help the population at large, including youth. It was argued that economic transformation and linking into global value chains is what will most likely create jobs, and it was suggested that private-sector actors can be encouraged to focus more on youth. Enabling all of this is the responsibility of African governments and inter-governmental institutions. At the same time, all agreed that youth need to be part of the discussions, which means they also need to be equipped with the capacity and the legitimacy to negotiate with both private and public sector actors.

67. There is a need to set realistic deadlines. CHOGM will be held in Rwanda in 2020, where commitments made at the London Commonwealth heads of Government meeting will come under scrutiny. The mandate of the 2018 London CHOGM requires the Commonwealth Secretariat to create results in two years.
68. The **African Development Bank** will organise roundtable discussions in a small number of countries on youth employment, which will involve youth as central actors at the table. Outcomes will be reported back to the AfDB annual meeting.
69. AU Youth Day will host the Africa Top Jobs Summit. Also, the AU will soon appoint a **Special Envoy for Youth**, who will encourage AU member states to define and implement youth youth-related policies. This Envoy shall also advocate for better youth mainstreaming in decision-making and promote 'African core values' across the continent and beyond. The AU Youth Envoy will also have the critical task of reconciling AU efforts on youth development with the aspirations of African youth themselves, help in enhancing the AU's response to youths' needs, and break down communication barriers between the African Union and African youth.
70. Young entrepreneurs, it was argued, need to come together in **networks and representative associations** in order to channel their collective voice to such roundtables, as the AfDB cannot reach out to every individual entrepreneur. Collective mobilisation is key, but this needs to acknowledge the diversity and different needs among e.g. male/female and urban/rural entrepreneurs, as well as people with disabilities.
71. Many donor and government representatives agreed that youth employment needs to be tackled with a **country-level focus**, and this has to start from country-level dialogue. Youth-centred interventions as well as support for policy change would need to be tailored to the economic and political context of each country.
72. Each donor agency in the global North needs to actively bring together different departments, **breaking down silos**, in order to address youth employment. Typically, this would entail the youth department (which is often preoccupied with skill building) working in closer liaison with private sector developments, macro-economic growth specialists, and agriculture-focused divisions.
73. In addition to internal coordination within donors, there was found to be a need for much-improved **coordination between agencies**, with intergovernmental institutions likely playing a major role.
74. **Dialogue with large firms and companies**, particularly addressing how and under which conditions they would be willing to employ more young people when they expand their business was seen as a promising avenue. This raises the question: Which incentives do businesses need to hire youth, and what might make youth attractive?
75. There is still a need to learn **lessons that apply at scale** regarding what is working and what not. It was recognised that the evidence base is fragmented and often built on learnings from small projects. Academics and policy makers need to work together to ensure that new approaches are designed and implemented in the light of existing

evidence of what works and what does not.

76. There is a need to identify jobs that are likely to grow and understand the labour force of each country better. This should help inform the skill-building efforts of the future. Curriculum reform is a slow and costly process, but a pragmatic approach would be to assist countries that are planning curriculum reform already, with an eye to the skills that real future jobs will require.
77. How to harness the undeniable current political energy and sense of urgency to take truly effective action on youth employment remains the key question. It is clear that young people cannot be asked to wait for better days.

The forthcoming Wilton Park Youth Dialogues conference, which will take place at Wiston House in January 2019 in collaboration with DFID and The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, will seek to explore the evidence of what works at scale to create jobs in Africa, and how this evidence and learning can reach the policy makers who need it.

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