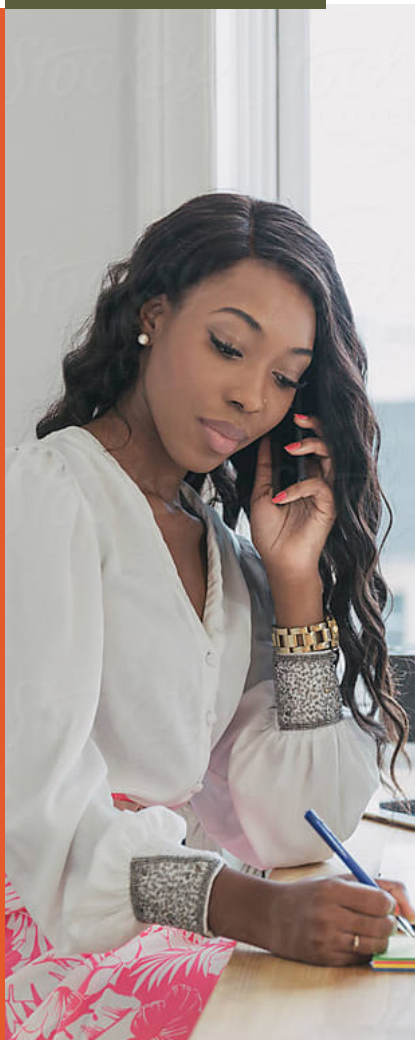


'It is not what you think': Signposting Three Disconnects in the Youth Employment Space

POLICY BRIEF



Executive Summary

Several stakeholders are involved in providing employment opportunities for youth: the government, private sector actors, donor and development agencies, and the youth themselves. However, opportunities for these stakeholders to meet and connect are few. As a result, there are disconnections in definitions, expectations and roles. In a study of youth aspirations, resilience and perspectives about dignified and fulfilling work in Nigeria, we identified three such disconnects:

- Youth want financial and other independence whereas other stakeholders think they want just jobs;
- Youth think of informality as a safety net and nest while other stakeholders think of it as a sector;
- Youth think of the digital as the job, while other stakeholders think of it as an enabler of youth employment

Given the growing disconnect, regular dialogues among stakeholders in the youth employment space will remedy the situation and make employment policies and interventions more relevant to youth aspirations for dignified and fulfilling work.

Introduction

With a population of 206 million with 70% youth, Nigeria faces both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge of employing youth in a nation with a 64% national unemployment rate is daunting (Mboho, 2021; O’Neill, 2021). However, the youth population is creative and hardworking, and the private sector is growing gradually. The support of donor and development agencies presents a significant opportunity.

The problem, however, is that conversations and dialogues around youth employment among these stakeholders – the government, the private sector, development agencies and the youth – are rare. As a result, each stakeholder is working hard but not in vital connection with the other.

The starting place for such conversations is to ask questions about youth aspirations – what they hope to be and achieve in future and their perspectives about dignified and fulfilling work. This should then determine policy and other forms of intervention.

Our nationwide study of these themes: youth aspirations, youth perspectives of dignified and fulfilling work and youth resilience combined quantitative and qualitative strategies. We had 18 Focus Group Discussions with youths; 16 Youth Panel Discussions; 15 in-depth interviews and nine key-informant interviews. We also surveyed 1,660 youth from across the six geo-political zones.

We took care to ensure diversity and inclusion. For the interviews, we had more females (14) than males (10) while for the questionnaire, we had an equal number. The FGDs and YPDs were mixed. We took care to include in our respondents Persons with disabilities (PWD) and LGBTQ. We also selected respondents across diverse sectors.

We identified a gaping disconnection between youth aspirations and perspectives on one hand and youth employment interventions and policies on the other. In this brief, we present three of these instances of disconnections.

Findings: Three Disconnections:

Our research identifies, among others, a gaping disconnection between youth aspirations and perspectives on one hand and youth employment interventions and policies on the other. In this brief, we present three of these instances of disconnections.

i. Young people want independence not just jobs.

Top on the list of young people’s aspirations is to be financially stable. Financial stability is seen as a pathway to independence and becoming “a person in the society”. Finding a job, in the views of the youth, does not provide you with that independence. A large majority desire to be businesswomen and men not just to have jobs. For them, to be successful means that one is financially independent of an employer. A youth discussant said:

“Nobody wants to be in the office and wait for one boss to come and boss you around when you know you can work from home and you get that same amount the employers are paying you, you can as well pay that” (FGD, Mixed gender)

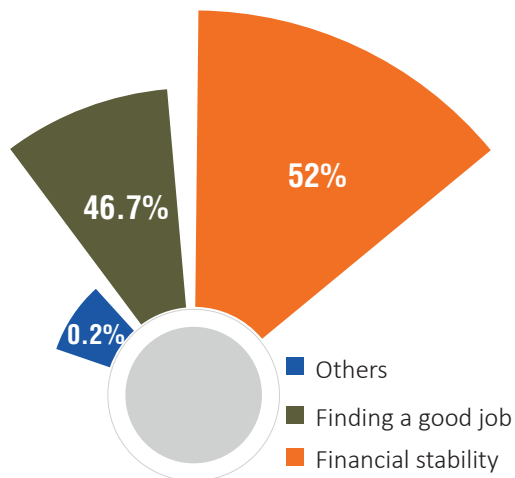


Fig 1: Top success marker for Nigerian youth

A good-paying job is very important to the youth but a job that allows personal independence and financial stability is their dream aspirational job. This is contrary to conversations in most youth employment debates and interventions which simply aim at creating jobs for youth to “find and fit in”. Our analysis shows that only 9.3% of the youth want that kind of employment opportunity.

This does not suggest that young people are unwilling to be mentored or guided. Many of them actively seek out mentors. One said:



“Right now, I’m undertaking a mentorship course... I think it goes a long way in helping, having someone more experienced than you, having someone that you can relate with, someone that can help you share your problem or advise you” (Female, IDI)

However, they draw a line between mentorship or advice, business development support ideas on one hand and being an employee with little or no independence on the other.

ii. Youth think of informality as a safety net and nest, not just a sector.

Informality is often viewed as the opposite of the formal sector, and efforts are made to move people from this sector to the formal one, for many reasons. The wrong assumption is often that if sufficient effort and incentives are provided, people will move to the formal sector. Youth, however, think of the informal sector as a haven, a safety net and a comfort nest.

Therefore, they somewhat resist migration to the formal sector. This is where the idea of side hustles becomes important. About 40% of our male respondents and 30.2% of female respondents would most certainly combine “informal side hustle” with any regular job they might have. This is because:



...multiple streams of income in the sense that you have to try and expand and broaden so that whenever one gets closed the other will still be open. So, multiple streams of income are one of the strategies that I think we can use (Male, FGD).

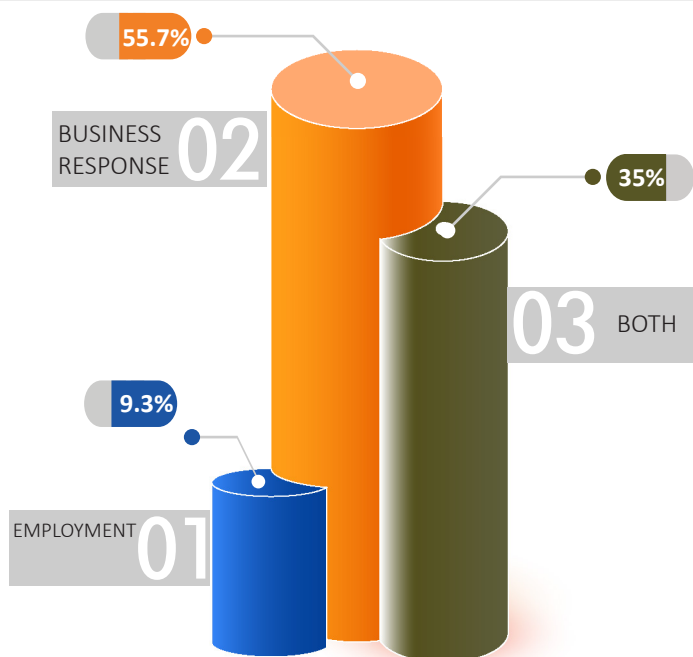


Fig 1: Young Peoples Work Preference

This position is reflected in young people’s response to the type of employment they look forward to. Most (55.7%) want their own private businesses but 35.0% want to combine being an employee with having their own business

This second stream of income is called ‘side hustle’ and is in most cases, informal. It is the nest to seek additional succour or the safety net to fall back on when salaries come late (which is usual in Nigeria) or even fail to come. Employees of the government are banned by law from having other businesses except farms. Therefore, even if government employees want to have a formally registered ‘side hustle’, it would be illegal for them to do so.

In any case, young people do not desire that ‘side hustles’ be migrated to the formal sector.

iii. The digital is more than an enabler

Governments, donor and development organizations and private sector actors think of digital platforms as enablers of youth employment. In this case, they think of the business as one thing, and its enabler as another. A farmer advertising her products on Twitter, for instance, has agriculture as the business and Twitter as the enabler. For some youth, this is the case. They use social media and digital platforms massively to promote their business, to mentor others, and to render business support to others. A female vegetable farmer from Jos said:

The strategies I used is to use social media means and introduce it to people so that they can grow it on their own farms and have their own kitchen garden in their own homes, it actually worked and it is a business opportunity that am still exploring and am actually proud of it (Female, IDI)

However, many young people think looking at the digital as just an enabler is not accurate. To them, the digital is both the business and the enabler of the business. If anything goes wrong with digital access, the entire business crumbles at that moment. Examples of these include internet-based work such as banking apps, coding, but also skit making, online skills acquisition and educational classes, drop-shipping businesses, and online fitness classes among others. This must have been why Nigerian youth's response to the 2021 Twitter ban in Nigeria was a loud cry-out followed by a bypass.

Recommendations

- The youth employment space is more complicated than it appears on the surface. The aspirations and preferences of the youth are more nuanced. Government, donors and private sector actors, and young people need regular constant dialogues and conversations.
- Formalizing the informal sector will put businesses and work under government oversight and control. It will bring in more taxes and might even help the government track illegal fund flows. However, it will also be injurious to the wellbeing of many young people.
- Since the internet is more than an enabler to the youth, the now frequent internet shutdowns by African governments should be discontinued. The losses that these shutdowns produce in one day cannot be remedied in months.
- Instead of creating jobs for young people and then expecting them to pick these jobs and fit in, efforts should rather be directed towards creating an environment that allows them to create their own businesses. Government and donors in this space should provide soft loans, business development services, and business skills for entrepreneurs to enable them to start their businesses – rather than creating jobs for them.

References and Further Reading

O'Neill, A. (2021). *Nigeria - youth unemployment rate 1999-2020* | Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812300/youth-unemployment-rate-in-nigeria/>

The policy brief was written by **Babatunde Ojebuyi**, PhD (University of Ibadan, Nigeria), **Oluwabusolami Oluwajulugbe** (University of Ibadan, Nigeria), **Oluwafunmilayo Aminu**, PhD (Olusegun Agagu University of Science and Technology, Akure, Nigeria), **Ridwan Kolawole** (Fountain University, Osogbo, Nigeria), and **Oluwaseun Ayomipo** (University of Ibadan, Nigeria) of the Nigeria Country Team, and edited by Daniel Doh and Remi Aiyede. It has been produced as part of the Africa Youth Aspirations and Resilience (AYAR) research in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. AYAR is a three-year research and uptake project that aims to understand youth aspirations, resilience and perspectives on dignified and fulfilling work. The project is implemented in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal.

Disclaimer

The views expressed do not necessarily represent the views or policies of PASGR and the Mastercard Foundation.