



A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO MAXIMIZE THE IMPACT OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN AFRICA

The opportunity of a large youth demographic is a unique moment for Africa — but are we doing everything we can to prepare young people for the future of work?



Secondary Education in Africa:

PREPARING YOUTH FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

Norbert Agola teaches an entrepreneurship class in Uganda. The class was part of a partnership between the Mastercard Foundation and STIR education to develop classroom innovations to ensuring quality education.

Ensuring that Africa's youth secure employment or can create their own livelihoods is arguably the single most significant task facing African policymakers today. Africa's working age population is projected to grow by 70 percent, or by 450 million people between 2015 and 2035 (World Bank, 2017). Between 10 and 12 million youth across Africa enter the workforce each year, but only 3.1 million jobs are created, leaving the majority of youth unemployed or underemployed (African Development Bank 2016). Digitization, automation, and technological advances such as artificial intelligence are changing the nature of work globally, including in Africa. These trends will increase uncertainty and the pace of change, raising the premium on skills that help young people be adaptable, resilient and creative problem solvers.

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The urgency to do more to realize the potential of Africa's growing youth population is also driven by another factor. Africa is currently the youngest continent in the world and will continue to be for the next several decades. It is estimated that by 2050, one quarter of the world's labour force will be in Africa (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2013). Investing in preparing youth for the future of work is not only good for the continent, it is an investment in the global workforce of the future.

Secondary education in Africa has been viewed primarily as a stepping-stone to tertiary education. However, with rising primary enrolment and completion rates, and low tertiary enrolment on the continent, the role of secondary education is expanding. Secondary education is becoming a significant platform from which young people in Africa will transition to work.

Reimagining secondary education as a springboard for work is a paradigm shift. Alongside shifts in curricula, investments that widen access to secondary education will allow this generation of youth to play a pivotal role in realizing Africa's vision of economic transformation, laid out by today's leaders in the African Union's Agenda 2063.

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At Mastercard Foundation, a core element of our Young Africa Works strategy, is the commitment to quality, relevant secondary education as key to securing dignified and fulfilling work for youth, especially young women. It is at this formative level that there is great potential to build the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for an effective and adaptable workforce. This belief is informed by lessons from our work with stakeholders across the region and from the findings in our upcoming report, *Secondary Education in Africa: Preparing Youth for the Future of Work*.

The *Secondary Education in Africa* report is a collaborative effort with many African and global partners. The report seeks to elevate our understanding of the types of skills and competencies that will be needed and how secondary education can transform to better prepare youth to succeed. Key skills identified include foundational skills, digital literacy, and 21st century skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and communication. Projections to 2030 suggest that formal employment will not grow fast enough to absorb a growing population and the majority of young people will remain in the informal sector for the duration of their working lives. In this context entrepreneurship skills, including how to set up and build a business, will also be critical.

But to get there, greater effort and resources will be needed. Today, only about one third of Sub-Saharan African youth complete

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secondary education. Young women are often particularly at risk of not completing school. They are also less likely to make the transition between school and work because of early marriage or early motherhood, which place additional barriers to their entry to work. In some countries, social norms sometimes enforce job segregation by gender, which limits the alternatives that women have for dignified and fulfilling work.

For instance, young women in the household enterprise sector work mostly in narrowly defined fields such as dressmaking or hairdressing, even though a range of other occupations could provide a higher income.

First-generation school leavers aspiring to be wage workers lack a family history in formal employment. This results in limited networks or social capital to help them find jobs. If these gaps are addressed, Africa's youth will come a step closer to building bright futures, while also making a sustainable contribution to economic growth.

Reforming secondary systems to provide young people with the skills they need to succeed in the labour force and as entrepreneurs is a socio-economic imperative that can lead to an increase in productivity and drive economic growth. There is also evidence that increasing levels of academic education may be associated with declining levels of informal employment (African Center for Economic Transformation, 2018).

Accessible, quality, and relevant secondary education also contributes to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. The benefits of education have been linked to poverty reduction, improved health, lower fertility rates, sustainable farming practices, better energy conservation, and greater participation in political and civic life, particularly for women (UNESCO, 2016).

As African governments continue to invest in and reform their secondary education systems, we should not lose sight of the scale of the challenge. While governments around the world work to better align their education systems with market demand, the complexity, magnitude and urgency of the challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa are unique. With several countries in the region moving towards a massive expansion of their secondary systems, Sub-Saharan Africa has a unique opportunity to rethink what skills young people need to learn and how to best deliver those skills. The time to act is now.

The SEA report aims to provide policymakers and education professionals with practical options and examples of promising practices as they engage in the complex task of finding solutions that are relevant and implementable in their contexts. It is not intended to be a blueprint. Rather, the objective is to highlight the urgency of the challenge; and to contribute to the dialogue on how to prepare Africa's youth to succeed in an ever-changing work environment and ensure that Africa benefits from the potential of its growing youth demographic.

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