IREX

From Learning to Earning:

A new guide to design employment solutions that respond to youth needs

Acknowledgments

About IREX: IREX is a global development and education organization. We work with partners in more than 100 countries in four areas essential to progress: cultivating leaders, empowering youth, strengthening institutions, and increasing access to quality education and information. Read more: www.irex.org

About IREX's Center for Applied Learning and Impact: IREX's Center for Applied Learning and Impact is a dedicated space for learning and innovation that collaborates across IREX and with external partners to carry out research, evaluation and learning and develop cutting-edge new approaches.

1. Balazs, Carolina L., and Rachel Morello-Frosch. "The Three Rs: How Community-Based Participatory Research Strengthens the Rigor, Relevance, and Reach of Science." Environmental Justice, vol. 6, no. 1, 2013, pp. 9–16., https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2012.0017.

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Introduction

Why we created this guide:

This guide is a resource to design youth employment programs that are responsive to young people's needs, struggles, and lived experiences while transitioning from post-secondary education into work. We undertook this project so that program designers and donor agency representatives can use this guide to design youth employment solutions that are relevant, impactful, and based on up-to-date data and evidence about the day-to-day realities of young people.

Globally, many young people are facing an employment crisis. **Studies show that 4 in 10 young people never transition into stable employment even once they are older.**[2] This youth unemployment crisis is worsened by other changes that put pressure on young people to quickly adapt — among them ongoing digital transformations and the COVID-19 pandemic, migration, climate change, food insecurity, and social movements like #MeToo. For youth, the struggle to transition into work is an urgent personal crisis that shapes their lifelong wellbeing, economic security, and social contributions.[3] For their communities, youth unemployment has serious implications on economic growth and productivity, worsening social instability, division, crime, inequality, and migration. Donors, program designers, and educators need up-to-date data and evidence to design responsive and relevant support models that have a positive impact on young people's employment outcomes.

To bridge the gap between youth employment donors, program designers, educators, and youth through data and evidence, IREX sought to explore a slice of the youth employment challenge: how youth with post-secondary credentials experienced their transition into work. We conducted a desk review[4] that helped us recognize that more focus is needed to center youth lived experiences and youth leadership in research to supplement the many macroeconomic studies that explore youth unemployment. Therefore, we partnered with youth researchers to study young people's lived experiences after they complete their education and search for work. We asked young people about their experiences and what would help them. We share our findings in this guide to equip program designers and donors with data-informed stories that center young people's voices about their experiences, struggles, and needs.

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2. Alam, Andaleeb and Maria Eugenia de Diego. "Unpacking School-to-Work Transition: Data and Synthesis Analysis." UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy, Scoping Paper No. 2, August 2019.

3. Chacaltana, Juan, Sara Elder, and Miso Lee. "Youth Transitions and Lifetime Trajectory." International Labor Organization Employment Policy Department, Working Paper No. 253, 2019.

4. Belachew, Tsega and Matthew Vanderwerff. "Understanding Youth Learning to Earning Journeys: The Case for a Learning Agenda." IREX, 2022.

You can dive into our key research takeaways in three sections of this guide:

01

This guide provides three sections to access the key research takeaways:

We provide an at-a-glance overview of the takeaways in this introduction,

02

"Meet the personas" is the main body of this document where we use personas, which are data-informed stories of diverse youth, to share the research takeaways through young people's voices and stories. These personas include recommendations for career support to youth along with guided reflection questions to help designers develop context-responsive and customized youth employment solutions on their own.

03

Under Appendix 1, we share the narrative which further elaborates on the data behind the key research takeaways.

For young people, work is a means to...

Kenyan
youth said:

41% lead a meaningful life by impacting others

39% learn and grow

27% gain financial compensation

Guatemalan
youth said:

54% learn and grow

37% get financial compensation

25% share who I am and my talents

Iraqi
youth said:

39% learn and grow

28% gain respect, social status, and belonging

25% get financial compensation
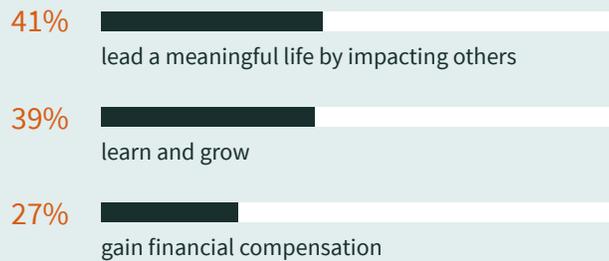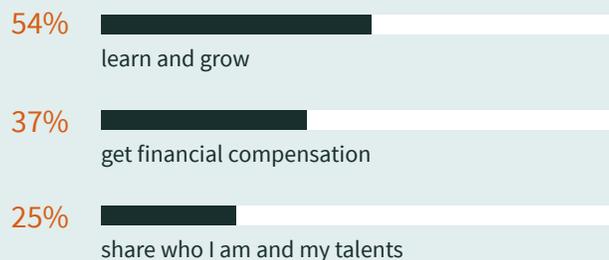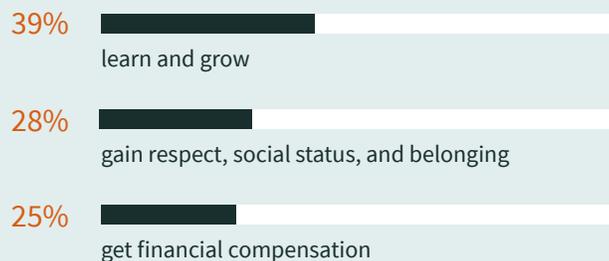
Summary of key research takeaways

For a more detailed analysis of the research takeaways, please read Appendix 1.

The myth of a seamless, singular path into work can create unrealistic expectations.

Career support: Dispel the myth of a seamless, singular path into work. Celebrate and support diverse and winding pathways while preparing youth for paths from learning into earning[5] that are often long,[6] uncertain and challenging. Prepare youth to build a portfolio of experiences and transferrable soft skills[7] (what IREX calls "Youth Essential Skills") to be self-reliant learners who carve their own unique and evolving path to earning during which they might explore multiple career opportunities, fields, and work types.

Youth emotional wellbeing is directly linked to the outcomes of a young person's transition into work.

Career support: Strengthen youth emotional wellbeing[8] through mental health and psychosocial support, socio-emotional[9] skills development, and community-based holistic support.

Work is not just a full-time formal job. Many youth engage in non-traditional work, informal work, self-employment, and entrepreneurship, based on exposure or necessity when their first plan, to do full-time formal work, does not yield results. Youth are interested in and would like more support to succeed in non-traditional work.

Career support: Equip youth to succeed in self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal work. Mainstream support for non-formal work within education institutions, youth-serving programs, and donor funding agendas. Study and highlight stories of informal work, self-employment, and entrepreneurship.

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5. Definition under Appendix 3.
6. Belachew, Tsega and Matthew Vanderwerff. "Understanding Youth Learning to Earning Journeys: The Case for a Learning Agenda." IREX, 2022.
7. Definition under Appendix 3.
8. Definition under Appendix 3.
9. Definition under Appendix 3.

Informal family and friend networks, the internet, and social media facilitate youth transitions into work. Access to actionable, relevant, and timely information facilitates transitions into work.

Career support: Strengthen informal and digital networks which youth rely on for career success. Recognize and leverage informal networks and support within program models. Improve access to actionable, relevant, and timely information which facilitates transitions into work.

Practical work experience can make the difference between employment and unemployment.

Career support: Ensure every young person gets and can market their existing practical work skills and experience.

Youth experience unique socio-cultural barriers based on their intersectional[10] identities, with some identity groups facing more barriers, and would benefit from customized support.

Career support: Prioritize context-responsive, customized solutions for youth with diverse intersectional identities.

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10. **Intersectionality:** The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalize people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc.

How to use this guide:

Purpose of the guide

This guide is meant to help program designers and donor agency representatives understand and consider the stories and voices of youth (individuals aged 18-35) within program design and decision-making conversations. Results and recommendations contained within this document are based on a sequential, mixed methods study of young people's lived experiences seeking work after completing education. (For more about research methods, see Appendix 2).

Who is this for?

We created this guide to be used alongside other sources of data and evidence to design youth employment programs and donor funding agendas that are responsive to young people's needs, priorities, and lived realities. (Please refer to additional resources from the World Bank,[11] ILO,[12] and UNICEF[13] for systematic reviews of the evidence related to youth employment programming.) We envision that program designers (including those at youth-led, youth-serving groups and education institutions) and donor agency representatives can bring this guide into the room with them during design meetings. We highly encourage that diverse young people also be invited to shape decisions at these decision-making tables.

11. Datta, Namita, Angela Elzir Assy, Johanne Buba, Sara Johansson de Silva, Samantha Watson, et al. "Integrated Youth Employment Programs: A Stocktake of Evidence on What Works in Youth Employment Programs." The World Bank Group, Jobs Working Paper Issue No. 24, 2018.
12. "World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2021." International Labour Organization, 2021. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_795453.pdf
13. Alam, Andaleeb and Maria Eugenia de Diego. "Unpacking School-to-Work Transition: Data and Synthesis Analysis." UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy, Scoping Paper No. 2, August 2019.

If you are a program designer, you can use this resource to...

Prioritize the voices and stories of diverse youth in your work that impacts youth.

Develop impactful and relevant program design utilizing learnings from data-based stories and personas about youth experiences transitioning from learning to earning.

If you are a donor agency representative, you can use this resource to...

Prioritize the voices and stories of diverse youth in your work that impacts youth.

Create relevant and impactful policies and donor funding agendas that are responsive to the actual lived experiences of youth during their transitions from learning to earning. Supplement macroeconomic research on labor market intelligence and growth sectors with stories of youth in their own voices to design richer and targeted youth employment donor agendas and policies.

Identify emerging innovations and ideas for funding agendas, programs, and research to support youth transitions into work.

Using this guide outside of Guatemala, Kenya, and Iraq:

Even though the personas in this guide are created with unique contexts in mind, they capture what we learned about youth with similar archetypes in multiple geographies. For instance, the persona focused on self-employment captures insights from our qualitative and quantitative study about self-employed youth in Guatemala, Kenya, and Iraq. Therefore, we believe that this guide can be a helpful starting point and framework for youth employment solution designers outside of the three countries of our study to use the reflection questions we provided to reflect about the needs of youth in their own contexts to utilize this guide for their own design needs. We recommend that designers supplement this guide with targeted needs assessments and gender equity and social inclusion analyses to further contextualize youth employment solutions.

Background:

This guide is focused on this research question:

What kind of support is needed to help today's youth succeed in their learning to earning journeys?

Youth data stories through personas

This guide shares what we learned about young people's lived experiences transitioning from learning to earning in Guatemala, Kenya, and Iraq.

In addition to doing that through the summary of key takeaways outlined above and in more detail under Appendix 1, we share the research takeaways through "personas" in this section of the guide. These personas were developed through the synthesis of learnings from our qualitative and quantitative research. Illustrative quotes from youth interviews have been anonymized and adjusted for personas. These quotes are shared alongside quantitative results from our survey to highlight young people's stories in their own voices.

What is a persona?[16]

A persona is a composite based on our research that represents the needs, thoughts, struggles, goals, and lived experiences of potential youth employment program participants. The personas in this guide are not meant to be an exhaustive representation of young people's work statuses or intersectional identities. Personas are created to help designers **empathize with people** to deeply understand their realities, passions, motivations, desires, barriers, and challenges to design solutions that can effectively meet their needs. As a tool, a persona helps designers see and experience the world from the perspective of young people and prevents them from generalizing all youth into one bucket.[17]

Career Journey Graphic:

For each persona we created career journeys that depict the winding career path that the persona experiences in line with our first research takeaway (#1. dispel myths about a seamless, singular path to work). The career journey for each persona is based on our qualitative data. That is to say, these are real examples of young people's career journeys that youth interviewees shared with us. Below we outline the guidelines we used to create the journeys:

✓ **Milestones:** Milestones are pivotal moments that are depicted as points along a young person's journey. How the young person feels during that milestone is shown through an emoji which shares human emotions[18] according to emoji definitions set by the Unicode Consortium.

✓ **Time trajectory:** Career journeys are depicted as lines, with movement forward in time being represented as horizontal movement.

✓ **Up vs. down:** Movement on the vertical plane shows more income or access to earnings.

✓ **Spirals depict staying in one place,** trying different things, but having difficulty moving forward and/or feeling stuck.

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16. Doorley, Scott, Sarah Holcomb, Perry Klebahn, Kathryn Segovia, and Jeremy Utley. Stanford Design School Bootcamp Toolkit, Stanford University, 2018. https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/the-bootcamp-bootleg Open Design Kit, Becoup, 2017. http://opendesignkit.org/methods/personas/

17. Doorley, Scott, Sarah Holcomb, Perry Klebahn, Kathryn Segovia, and Jeremy Utley. Stanford Design School Bootcamp Toolkit, Stanford University, 2018. https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/the-bootcamp-bootleg Open Design Kit, Becoup, 2017. http://opendesignkit.org/methods/personas/

18. We strived to use emoji definitions according to The Unicode Consortium, a non-profit organization that develops, maintains, and promotes software internationalization standards.

Meet the personas:

Youth data-informed stories highlighting research takeaways

Long-term unemployed, Fatema is Iraqi (she/her).
When an expected career plan doesn't work out, frustration and hopelessness can follow.

Short-term unemployed, Armando is Guatemalan (he/him).
Practical work experience and funds to cover the cost of career-enabling opportunities facilitate the transition to work.

Self-employed, Mercy is Kenyan (she/her).
This persona, like other youth, fell into self-employment out of necessity or through exposure, now embraces it, and would like more technical support.

Entrepreneur, Alex is Guatemalan (they/them).
Informal family and digital networks are key for facilitating successful transitions to work.

Formal worker, Ali is Iraqi (he/him).
Formal work in one's field of study is rare and thus youth must be equipped to navigate other diverse pathways to earning as well.

Formal worker who does side gigs, Amina is Kenyan (she/her).
Actionable, relevant information facilitates a successful transition into work. Youth need prior awareness to anticipate and navigate socio-cultural barriers outside of their control, e.g., corruption and nepotism.

Informal worker, Solomon is Kenyan (he/him).
Youth need better support to be financially resilient and develop a self-employment career trajectory based on informal work that they might fall into doing.

Long-term unemployed, Fatema

Age:
26

Gender Identity:
Woman (She/her)

Education:
University - Engineering

Location:
Basara, Iraq

Current work status:
Unemployed

Time till earning: Unemployed for 2.5 years

Starts job search
(Hopeful, confused)

Job searching
(Confused, frustrated)

Degree in Engineeering
(Hopeful, confused, courageous)

Education paused
due to war
(Sad, helpless)

Stops job search, has a baby

Starts job search
(Frustrated, inadequate)

Gives up hope on job search
(Hopeless, despair)
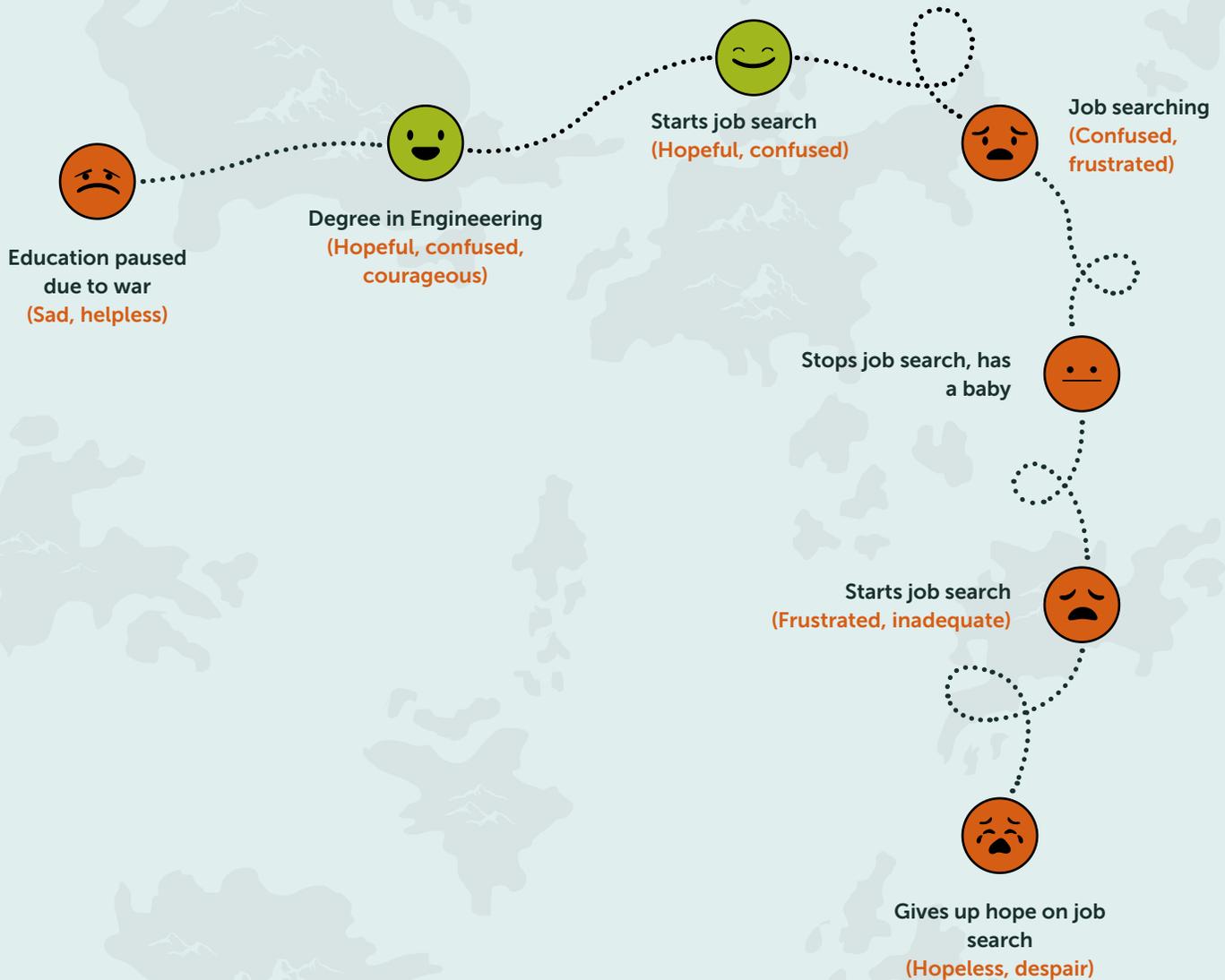
Research Insights from Fatema Persona:

Insight: Fatema wants to be an engineer. She is motivated by learning and growing as an engineer and by earning a living to support her family.

Insight: Some youth, like Fatema, acknowledge that socio-cultural factors outside of their control can affect their ability to find a job. Barriers focused on identity categories such as gender biases or harassment hinder youth. Fatema faces pressure from her family to stay home and raise her children along with negative biases from employers about her competence as a female engineer.

Insight: Fatema's transition was disrupted by war which caused university closures and extended the time until her graduation.

"As a woman, you are also aware that many times it is necessary to consider safe places of harassment when considering whether to accept a job, so it becomes another barrier. Feeling stuck at certain points in life, not moving forward for so long…but it's part of life because if we use [being a woman] to our advantage we can use it in a positive way."

Insight: Like many young people, she expected a seamless transition into stable formal work. Contrary to her expectations, the transition has been more challenging. Like many youth, this mismatch between her reality and her expectations caused Fatema to experience difficult negative emotions.

"When you're in school, you hope for the best. You expect a steady transition while in school and once you are done in school, you notice the difference on the ground." "My views were that after school, I would get the job immediately."

Insight: Feelings of frustration from this journey appear frequently for youth. Some, like Fatema, experience a downward spiral of emotions and start to question their life choices and even give up hope, not realizing that their struggle is very common and normal. Some youth feel unsupported or discouraged after getting no response or rejections from employers, and a lack of support from family when they pursue paths that are not aligned with their family's expectations.

Insight: Many youth interviewees felt relieved when youth researchers from this research project listened to their struggles and journey searching for work. The experience helped some of them feel affirmed that they are, in fact, not alone in their struggles with their search for work. Interviewers aimed to create a safe and supportive environment for sharing struggles and successes through the "Empathy Interview" protocol (see Appendix 2 for more).

"You feel discouraged because you come to think that you are not capable of getting a job or being able to do anything without help."

"One of the main frustrations was when graduating and thinking that [I] would have access to opportunities, but it's not so easy to get them. There are external factors such as the fact that companies are only interested in hiring people with many years of experience, not people who have just graduated from university."

"When you have no job and have to be self-reliant you feel devastated and disillusioned with life, things go haywire."

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How this persona is based on our research:

In Iraq, 57% of our survey respondents cited having no employment over the prior two weeks. This number was slightly higher for women at 61%. This is important because according to our data across all three countries of the study, the unemployed persona that experiences socio-cultural barriers to finding work is in fact a very common one. Socio-cultural factors can be different and include those listed under our overview of Fatema, as well as other barriers based on a young person's identity, lack of available jobs within the labor market, corruption, **and** labor market mismatches between employer's needs and young people's experiences and skills. We also found that among respondents, women in Iraq rated finding formal employment as extremely important, with an average ranking of 8.2 out of 10. This means, like this persona, youth were focused on waiting for that kind of opportunity.

Trends Related to this Persona: Emotional Wellbeing

Fatema's experience of unemployment—and the mental health challenges it creates for her — are important dynamics for program designers to understand. In our survey, we found more than half of Iraqi youth told us their job search had affected their mental health.

51%

of Iraqi youth reported that their job search affected their emotional wellbeing

16%

23%

28%

22%

11%

● A great deal ● Quite a bit ● Somewhat ● Very little ○ Not at all
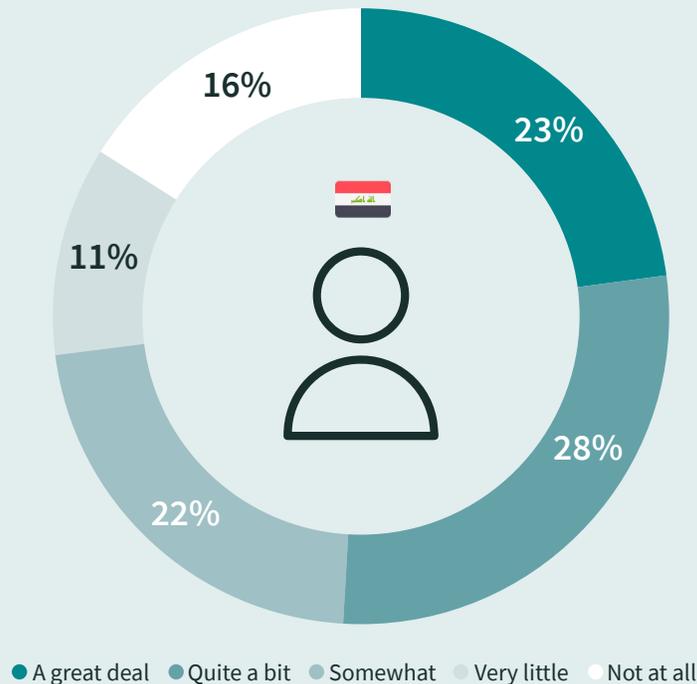
Trends Related to this Persona: Emotional Wellbeing

A majority of youth respondents in Iraq also told us that they want mental health support to help them during their search for work. In the chart below, we describe the type of mental health support youth in Iraq told us would help.

81%

would like support for their emotional wellbeing. They prefer:

29%
Equipping my family with resources to support me

27%
Support to improve my confidence and response to difficulties

16%
Mentor to guide and encourage me

15%
Moral support from peers who are also searching for work

12%
Support from a counselor

Design Career Support for Long-Term Unemployed Youth in Your Community:

Step 1: INTERRUPT BIASES:

Consider young people in your community who have a similar profile as this persona, i.e., long-term unemployed. **What biases (positive or negative) do you have about youth in your community who are like this persona?** *Stating biases can help you set them aside so that you can see the world from the persona's perspective. Deep empathy is key to designing impactful solutions to address young people's needs.*

Step 2: GENERATE IDEAS:

See examples *(in italics)* to spark your creativity, then consider the persona and recommended support to brainstorm solutions relevant for youth in your community.

Dispel the myth of a seamless, singular path into work. Celebrate and support more common winding career paths:	What can you do to introduce youth in your community to different pathways to work?

- *For those outside of school, provide career coaching that highlights the more common winding career paths. Enable storytelling from professionals who struggled to find work. Highlight how challenges are common and how the professionals overcame these struggles during their winding career journey. Support youth to develop multiple career plans and to pivot plans OR develop multiple career plans and "pivot plans" and non-traditional work so that they can implement these plans if their first plan does not bear fruit. This helps them diversify their career prospects and navigate career uncertainties/risks, e.g., they struggle to get a formal job in their field.*

- *Support youth to develop soft skills or what IREX calls Youth Essential Skills and other transferable vocational, digital, or data skills: how can they use diverse abilities and skills to explore different career opportunities?*

Strengthen youth emotional wellbeing:	What type of mental health resources are available in your community that you can connect youth to?

- *Provide emotional wellness support, for instance connecting (e.g., women or gender minorities within similar fields) within facilitated group support and inspiration sessions.*

- *Increase storytelling about winding career journeys to help youth see their experience is very common. This can provide encouragement by helping youth understand that they are not alone in their struggles and that they can continue with resilience to secure decent work through paths they did not expect.*

Prioritize context-responsive, customized solutions for youth with diverse intersectional identities: • *Conduct a gender equity and social inclusion analysis to design solutions that specifically address intersectional bottlenecks and barriers for youth across intersectional identities within that context.*	What are gender biases or barriers young women and gender minorities might face in your community and how might you prepare them to navigate these challenges?

Short-term unemployed, Armando

Age:
20

Gender Identity:
Man (he/him)

Education:
Some college, dropped out to earn an income

Studied:
Psychology

Location:
Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala

Ethnicity:
Indigenous / Mayan

Time till earning: Unemployed for 6 months

Studying psychology
(Optimistic)

Leaves school due to financial need
(Disappointed)

Rejected by employers due to lack of practical experience
(Frustrated)

Looks for internships, but can't pay for daily trasnport costs
(Frustrated, stuck)

Research Insights from Armando's Persona:

Insight: He is motivated by learning and growing while sharing his talents and who he is through his work.

Insight: Armando expresses a mix of positive and difficult emotions like so many young people (out of survey respondents in Guatemala, 40% who are still searching for work feel satisfied and 67% feel frustrated). He feels stuck after having to drop out of school for financial reasons and still not being able to find work.

"Honestly, when I was in school, I never visualized myself being jobless even for a month...I had never foreseen what I am going through right now."

Insight: Armando needs financial support to make progress and pay for career-enabling opportunities, e.g., paying for formal paperwork required to be hired, daily travel, volunteering, participating in a training, having coffee with new professional contacts, using funds to start a new project, etc.

Insight: A limitation that marked his life was that teachers and peers joked about his rural upbringing. This has negatively affected his self-esteem and further motivated him to drop out of school.

"I did not think of participating in the training workshops because my financial ability did not help me to do so."

"In the calls for applications from public institutions they only ask for graduates, so even if you have completed your university studies you need to graduate, and that represents a lot of expenses. They ask for 3 years of experience as a requirement. Both the expenses and required years of experience make me question if it is even worth it to go back to school to pursue my dream of being a psychologist."

Insight: Armando lacks practical experience but can't seem to get it.

"I have had moments of desperation because I do not meet the requirements and because sometimes there are no places that will accept me to practice the profession without previous experience."

How this persona is based on our research:

In each country surveyed, a large percentage of youth respondents described earning no income in the previous two weeks (43% in Kenya, 47% in Iraq, 53% in Guatemala). Our qualitative study showed that financial resources were critical for youth to have the financial flexibility to pursue career opportunities, but socio-economic barriers hindered them from pursuing crucial career-enabling opportunities. This appears to create a "risk differential" where youth who cannot afford to pay for costs are limited from participating in activities that are career-enabling but do not guarantee career outcomes.

Trends Related to this Persona: Practical Work Experience and Funds for Opportunities

We found that youth often report that a lack of practical work experience is a major barrier to obtaining work and youth feel stuck not knowing where to find that practical experience. According to our survey in Guatemala, the most frequently cited difficulty that youth face in finding work is a lack of practical skills or work experience. This is consistent with what we heard in our youth interviews, where youth respondents also cited that a lack of financial resources to pay for transport to get to internships or pay for the formal paperwork to start working after being offered a job.

80%

faced at least one dificulty during their search for work:

31%	Lack of practical skills or work experience
30%	COVID-19 pandemic-related business closures
30%	Corruption (preference for candidates with connections)
18%	Lack of emotional and moral support
15%	Bias against my identity (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity)
14%	Accessing relevant information or contacts
9%	Accessing digital tools and internet
6%	War or conflicts
5%	Other

Design Career Support for Short-Term Unemployed Youth in Your Community:

Step 1: INTERRUPT BIASES:

Consider young people in your community who have a similar profile as this persona, i.e., short-term unemployed. **What biases (positive or negative) do you have about youth in your community who are like this persona?** *Stating biases can help you set them aside so that you can see the world from the persona's perspective. Deep empathy is key to designing impactful solutions that are responsive to young people's needs.*

Step 2: GENERATE IDEAS:

See examples *(in italics)* **to spark your creativity, then consider the persona and recommended support to brainstorm solutions relevant for youth in your community.**

Ensure every young person gets and can market their existing practical work skills and experience:

- *Connect young people with employers for internships, volunteering, short-term work, work shadowing, and virtual or in-person micro (mini) internships on a project, daily, or weekly basis.*

- *Practical work experience accelerator program where youth do micro-tasks (completed in a few hours) with support from on-the-job mentors.*

- *Develop policies that reform educational curricula to embed practical work experiences.*

What can you do to help youth in your community access a safe space to try out work experiences through micro-tasks for employers?

• *Provide career counseling that helps youth identify and market skills and experiences they already have from informal settings. For instance, if someone was selling goods on the street, they likely gained interpersonal, financial management, and communication skills and can market them to employers and clients. Armando, who has an interest in psychology, could share how he managed stress or addressed conflicts with his family. Such informal experiences are invaluable and can be transferable if youth effectively market them.*	
Prioritize context-responsive, customized solutions for youth with diverse intersectional identities: • *Funds for youth with limited finances to participate in unpaid work to gain experience;* *can be presented as a food and transport stipend*. *Youth can use these funds to pay for their day-to-day expenses while searching for work.*	What are creative funding streams or partnerships, e.g., with local banks or mobile money vendors, that can provide "career funds" for youth?

Self-employed freelancer, Mercy

Age:
27

Gender Identity:
Woman (She/her)

Education:
4-year university

Studied:
Architecture

Location:
Nakuru, Kenya

Time till earning: 6 months

Incorporated small graphic
design business
(Proud)

Degree in architecture.
Learned graphic design
as a hobby
(Hopeful, excited)

Established freelancer
(Hopeful, stressed)

Infrequent gigs in
graphic design
(Frustrated)

Unemployed
**(Confused, discouraged,
frustrated)**

Research Insights from Mercy's Persona:

Insight: She gained a flexible mindset after being forced to look for alternatives.

Insight: She is motivated to earn an income and build workforce skills. After exposure, she now loves setting her own working hours as a freelancer. Several youth in Kenya, like Mercy, expressed the need for a flexible mindset to try different paths beyond one's field of study due to limited opportunities.

"Real life is very different from what you idealize." "As youths, we live in a bubble that once you are out of school, things will fall in place. However, things don't happen like that."

Insight: Self-employment was an alternative path that she pursued because she had no other choice. To earn an income, she had to take action and this path presented itself. After exposure, she embraced it and considered it long-term. Mercy started doing graphic design as a hobby while in school and then started doing gigs to earn an income because her job search was not bearing fruit.

Insight: Her transition was more challenging than she expected.

"You know from a young age, time you are born, you know you are born and then you find people going to school, you join nursery school, from nursery school you know automatically you'll be going to class one all through to primary school, you complete primary school, you automatically go to secondary school, then campus." "After campus there is no plan, formula."

Insight: Small wins and steps towards larger wins. Mercy's first graphic design gig was creating posters for a friend's event. Informal friend and family networks were key to getting other small gigs from people in her close network. Then she connected with other freelancers in a WhatsApp group and joined an online freelance platform.

"I felt like I was heading somewhere when I got my first client. It was not easy getting clients both as a freelancer and as a self-employed person."

"All the women in my family and women who belong to the same feminist and activist groups as I do serve as motivation and support."

"Social media and a few friends have helped me find work. WhatsApp groups, online platforms have also helped."

How this persona is based on our research:

We selected this persona because in Kenya among those who have earned an income in the past two weeks, 38% were self-employed, the largest category among the employed. Among women in Kenya, the top motivations reported by respondents for doing informal work were to gain practical work experience and skills (36%), to become self-employed (consulting or start your own business/non-profit) (36%), and to gain more professional contacts (27%).

Trends Related to this Persona: Self-Employment

Mercy's story illustrates that youth may benefit from diverse kinds of employment support, including mainstreaming support and storytelling about self-employment. We asked youth in Kenya to prioritize the kinds of support that would help them succeed in self-employment or entrepreneurship. The most common responses included "Help me develop entrepreneurship, business or financial skills" (28%), "Help me understand if self-employment is right for me" (26%), and "Help me connect with self-employed/entrepreneur professionals" (23%).

What

support do you prefer to help consider & succeed in self-employment or entrepreneurship?

26% Help me understand if self-employment is right for me

22% Help me understand if entrepreneurship is right for me

14% Help me use digital tools and networks for self-employment or entrepreneurship

28% Help me develop entrepreneurship, business or financial skills

23% Help me connect with self-employed/entrepreneur professionals

9% Other

14% I am not interested in self-employment or entrepreneurship

Trends Related to this Persona: Self-Employment

More

than a third of young Kenyans reported to us that the main reason to pursue informal work is to gain practical work experience and skills

35%
To gain practical work experience and skills

26%
To become self-employed (consulting or start your own business/non-profit)

24%
To gain more professional contacts

23%
To advance my career goals

20%
To get additional income

8%
Did not find formal work

5%
Other

3%
Did not find work related to my field of study

Design Career Support for Self-Employed Youth in Your Community:

Step 1: INTERRUPT BIASES:

Consider young people in your community who have a similar profile as this persona, i.e., self-employed. **What biases (positive or negative) do you have about youth in your community who are like this persona?** *Stating biases can help you set them aside so that you can see the world from the persona's perspective. Deep empathy is key to designing impactful solutions that are responsive to young people's needs.*

Step 2: GENERATE IDEAS:

See examples *(in italics)* **to spark your creativity, then consider the persona and recommended support to brainstorm solutions relevant for youth in your community.**

Dispel the myth of a seamless, singular path into work. Celebrate and support more common winding career paths: • *For young people in schools, storytelling through videos or workshops that highlight people who took non-conventional paths to work. This can include people who pivoted from their field of study, entrepreneurs, self-employed individuals, or informal workers. Such exposure might have helped Mercy try a new path earlier.* • *Increase storytelling, preparation, and training related to self-employment, including infusing technical self-employment, business, and financial skills into the education system to mainstream support for youth.*	What can you do to help youth in your community get exposed to stories about self-employment before their search for work?

Equip youth to succeed in self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal work, and mainstream non-formal work:

- *Provide technical training and operational support to help the self-employed to professionalize services: business planning, marketing, financial planning, online professional presence, incorporating a small business, etc.*

What skills, knowledge, practical experience related to self-employment (freelance, gig work) do youth in your community need that you might provide?

Strengthen informal and digital networks for career success:

- *Intentionally leverage internet and social media as part of career support programs. Identify existing networks on WhatsApp, social media platforms, and other forums for professionals to connect young people to. Create activities and linkages that enable youth to organically engage in these networks.*

- *Strengthen networks of the self-employed to support each other, including peers, mentors, or role models.*

How might you help youth gain access to relevant, actionable, and timely information about finding clients and freelancing?

Entrepreneur, Alex

Age:
32

Gender Identity:
Non-binary (they/them)

Studied:
Law

Location:
Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

Time till earning: less than 6 months (started earning while in school)

Questions if they should go back to law
(Confused, overwhelmed)

Ups and downs of income
(Confused, frustrated)

Business thriving
(Satisfied, excited)

Degree in law
(Hopeful, excited, bold)

Research Insights from Alex's Persona:

Insight: They are motivated to work to learn and grow and gain financial compensation from work.

Insight: He feels hopeful, but like many youth, Alex sees work in an informal business as less respected. They are running a successful informal business but continue to question whether they should go back into law, which is more respected in their community.

"Even though our informal business is very successful, nowadays I still feel uneasy knowing that the business has nothing to do with what I decided to study."

Insight: Some youth like Alex consider self-employment or entrepreneurship (often after exposure) as an alternative path outside of their first plan. Others may be curious but do not have enough information and are unsure how they could even start a business or social venture on their own.

Insight: For Alex, like many other youth, the internet and social media appear to be enablers and informal family networks are key for them to gain encouragement, startup capital, and ideas for starting a business.

Insight: Alex was particularly grateful because they, unlike many young people in Guatemala, had financial support from family to pay for their law degree, something that is rare. This makes them feel more pressure to find work in the more respected legal field even if their parents do not put this pressure on them.

"I had difficulty in the beginning to build my own project due to lack of income, so I took simple steps, used funds from selling the minimal merchandise my mother gave me, and built my project from scratch."

"My business partner studied marketing, so we use digital marketing. We have a social media page where they have been selling products and since the pandemic they feel the business has grown thanks to increased use of platforms. It even helped us connect to new suppliers that provide items at low cost."

Insight: Entrepreneurship has ups and downs. Alex was not aware of these and would have liked more awareness earlier and more technical and business know-how to navigate the natural uncertainties of being an entrepreneur.

"Throughout my education I received no lectures or preparation on how to use money. So many times, my expenses exceeded earnings and it was difficult to make ends meet. I wish I knew these ups and downs were normal when I started my business."

How this persona is based on our research:

Among youth survey respondents in Guatemala, the most reported (31%) form of earning an income was self-employment (consulting, gig work, or running a business/non-profit). Ninety-two percent of survey respondents in Guatemala shared that they are interested in entrepreneurship. Our qualitative data showed us that many youth are curious about entrepreneurship but most only try it after exposure through family, friends, or trainings.

Trends Related to this Persona: Support for Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship

From Alex's story, we see that youth are sometimes interested in entrepreneurship or self-employment, but don't know how to start and sometimes "fall into" this pathway either through exposure or out of necessity. In our survey, 92% of youth in Guatemala expressed an interest in entrepreneurship, and importantly identified several areas where support would help most: "Help developing entrepreneurship, business, or financial skills" (41%) and "Help connect with self-employed/entrepreneur professionals" (31%). Entrepreneurship and self-employment may not be the right path for everyone, but we see that many youth are interested and would benefit from support models that mainstream this career path.

92%

of youth surveyed told us they are interested in entrepreneurship and to succeed, they need:

41% Help me develop entrepreneurship, business, or financial skills

31% Help me connect with self-employed/entrepreneur professionals

27% Help me use digital tools and networks for self-employment or entrepreneurship

25% Help me understand if self-employment is right for me

21% Help me understand if entrepreneurship is right for me

8% I am not interested in self-employment or entrepreneurship

6% Other

Design Career Support for Youth Entrepreneurs in Your Community:

Step 1: INTERRUPT BIASES:

Consider young people in your community who have a similar profile as this persona, i.e., entrepreneur. **What biases (positive or negative) do you have about youth in your community who are like this persona?** *Stating biases can help you set them aside so that you can see the world from the persona's perspective. Deep empathy is key to designing impactful solutions that are responsive to young people's needs.*

Step 2: GENERATE IDEAS:

See examples *(in italics)* **to spark your creativity, then consider the persona and recommended support to brainstorm solutions relevant for youth in your community.**

Equip youth to succeed in self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal work, and mainstream non-formal work:

- *Highlight stories of entrepreneurs within education curricula. Invite local entrepreneurs to your classroom as a guest speaker to share their story. Such exposure might help youth like Alex who question whether non-traditional work is acceptable.*

- *Increase storytelling, preparation, and training related to entrepreneurship including infusing technical entrepreneurship, business, and financial skills into the education system to mainstream support for youth to pursue entrepreneurship.*

- *Provide an accurate portrayal of the upsides and the downsides of entrepreneurship for youth to make an informed choice about pursuing this path.*

How can you help youth in your community who are curious about entrepreneurship increase their exposure to the realities of entrepreneurship?

What skills would you highlight in "skills exchange" workshops led by entrepreneurs in your community?

Strengthen informal and digital networks for career success:

- *Provide digital marketing and operations trainings to help entrepreneurs digitize their operations and access vendors/ suppliers.*

- *Strengthen informal networks and safe spaces for young people to network with other entrepreneurs, and give and get support to navigate the ups and downs of running a business. Prioritize linking underserved entrepreneurs.*

How might you strengthen "weak ties" and informal networks to support youth career journeys?

Formal worker, Ali

Age:
24

Gender Identity:
Man (he/him)

Studied:
Computer Engineering

Location:
Kirkuk, Iraq

Ethnicity:
Kurdish

Time till earning: 3 months

Formal contractor job at private company
(Confused)

Lower pay, discrimination at work during COVID-19
(disappointed, frustrated)

Formal contractor job at private company
(Grateful)

Unpaid work: internship and volunteering
(Grateful)

Degree in computer science
(Hopeful)

Research Insights from Ali's Persona:

Insight: He is motivated to work to gain respect, social status, and belonging, and to get financial compensation by working with technology in a company that offers employment and benefits.

Insight: He is grateful but also a bit disappointed that he only partially achieved the transition he dreamed of: a seamless and immediate transition into a long-term contract with a private company when he was dreaming of a stable public sector job with better benefits. He sees work in the public sector as very desirable.

"I thought that I would get a job opportunity in the government after completing my studies in 2019, this was my ultimate dream, but that did not happen, which made me feel empty and dissatisfied with my condition as I searched for a job. I am now happy and satisfied that I was able to get a job in a private institution even if my dream was to work in the public sector."

"The most respected professions are the jobs that exist in places with public services and that have stable jobs and legal benefits, while the least respected job opportunities are informal and low-paying jobs."

Insight: He recognizes the practical experience he gained from his unpaid internship and the volunteering he did for a non-profit gave him the required work experience that many of his peers lack. This facilitated his transition. He is grateful that his parents were financially able to cover his educational costs and to enable him to take unpaid internships and opportunities with their support.

"I got the job through being part of the company as an intern." "It was easier for me to get the job because I was trained as an intern before."

Insight: During Covid-19, his company assigned him additional work and cut his pay significantly because he was the most junior employee. Colleagues sometimes look at him differently because he is an ethnic minority as a Kurd, which is frustrating for him.

How this persona is based on our research:

We selected this persona because 13% of men surveyed in Iraq (15% of respondents overall) described earning an income from formal work in their field of study. This is an uncommon path, but it is a very **expected path** by an overwhelmingly large majority of youth. On a scale of 1-10, on average those surveyed ranked the importance of doing formal work in their field of study as 8.2/10.

Trends Related to this Persona: Formal Employment in One's Field of Study is Rare

Ali's story of a smooth transition from full-time school to full-time, formal employment in his field of study is unusual despite how many youth expect this type of career transition. According to our survey in Iraq, only 15% of youth surveyed had formal employment in their field of study (13% of men and 18% of women). This pathway was similarly rare in Kenya, where 11% of survey respondents reported working in a formal job in their field of study (15% of men and 7% of women), and in Guatemala (14% overall, 18% men, 12% women). This gap between career path expectations and reality suggests that career support to consider and pursue multiple possible career paths and non-traditional work needs to be prioritized.

Have

you earned an income in the past two weeks?

46% No, I'm still searching for work

11% No and I'm not searching for work

11% Yes, self-employed (consulting, gig work, or running a business/non-profit)

15% Yes, formal work in my field of study (with a formal contract at a registered enterprise)

6% Yes, formal work not in my field of study (with a formal contract at a registered enterprise)

4% Yes, informal work (with no formal contract, at a non-registered enterprise, e.g., shop, gig work, internet cafe, family business, etc.)

7% Yes, both formal and informal work

Design Career Support For Youth Seeking Formal Work in Your Community:

Step 1: INTERRUPT BIASES:

Consider young people in your community who have a similar profile as this persona, i.e., seeking formal work. **What biases (positive or negative) do you have about youth in your community who are like this persona?** *Stating biases can help you set them aside so that you can see the world from the persona's perspective. Deep empathy is key to designing impactful solutions that are responsive to young people's needs.*

Step 2: GENERATE IDEAS:

See examples *(in italics)* **to spark your creativity, then consider the persona and recommended support to brainstorm solutions relevant for youth in your community.**

Ensure every young person gets and can market their existing practical work skills and experience:

- *Expose youth through 2-day to 1-week shadowing programs.*

- *Provide career path planning workshops focused on exploring 2-3 career options. Encourage youth to embrace the "winding career journey" and test out multiple career options to gain skills, experience, and networks for their long-term career.*

- *Equip youth to leverage extracurricular activities and project-based and experiential learning in the classroom to strengthen practical work experience and professional skills.*

- *Train youth to develop "practical work experience portfolios" from informal and formal practical experiences, equipping them to pursue experiences outside of their field of study.*

- *Encourage volunteering, short-term, temporary, or freelance work, projects at school, helping family, friends, and educators on their projects, starting a micro business (however small!), etc.*

What can you do to help youth in your community strengthen or market their practical work experiences?

How might you help youth identify and connect to diverse opportunities in your community to strengthen and market practical skills, knowledge, experience, and networks?

Formal worker with side gigs not in field of study, Amina

Age:
29

Gender Identity:
Woman (she/her)

Studied:
Political Science

Location:
Nairobi, Kenya

Time till earning: 1.5 years

Political Science Degree
(Hopeful)

Applying for jobs, rejected
(Frustrated)

Applying for jobs, lower expectations
(Inadequate, frustrated)

Call center agent
(Acceptance, grateful)

Applying for graduate school to improve job prospects
(Frustrated)

Side gigs in informal sector
(Acceptance, confusion)
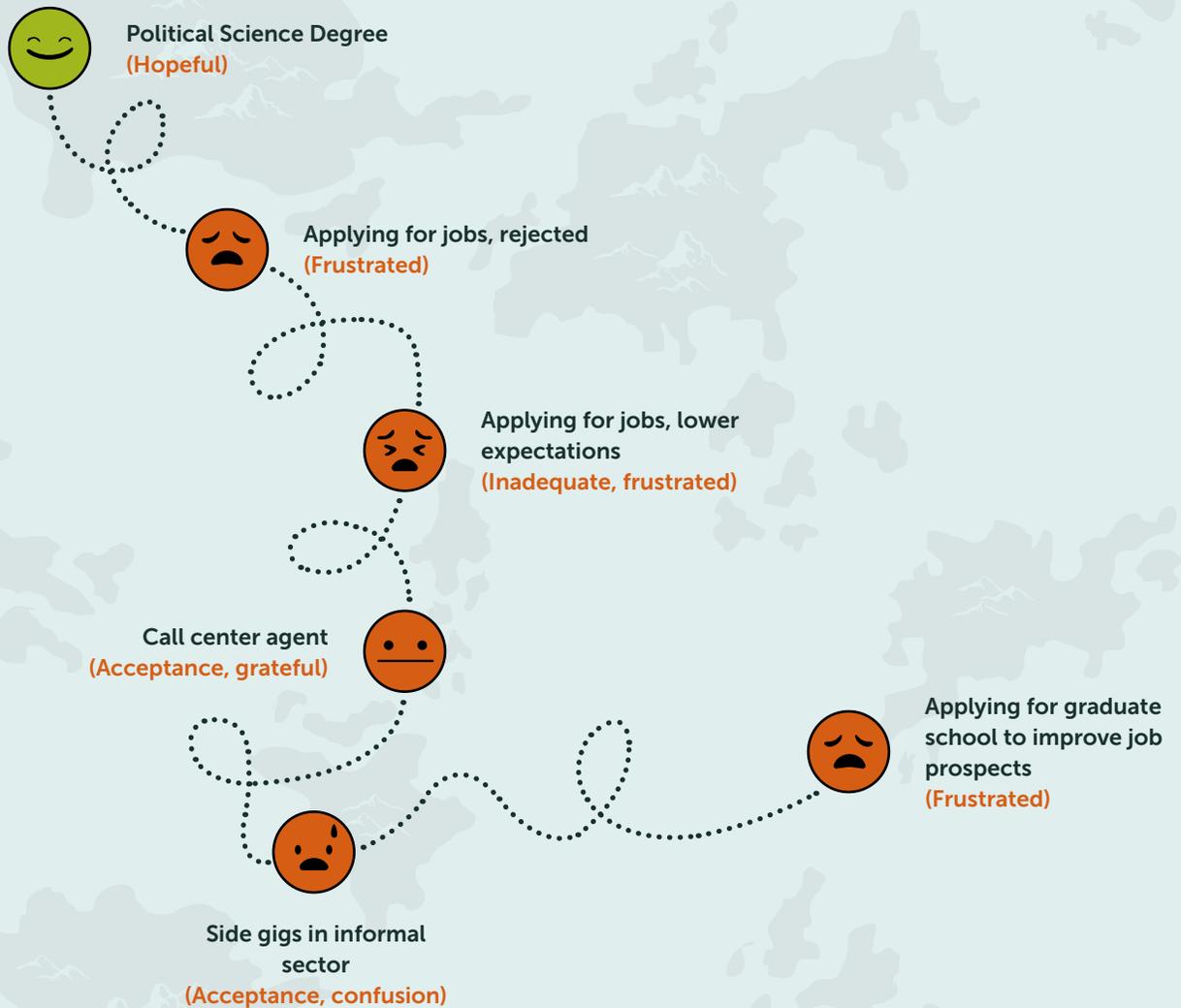
Research Insights from Amina's Persona:

Insight: Motivated to work to lead a meaningful life that impacts others, Amina applied aggressively for jobs for which she is qualified to later find out that many of these jobs had been given to someone else due to corruption/nepotism.

"After school, you expect to have more money, but that is not the situation, you have to fight through this job market." "We are constantly trying to stand out from our colleagues, so that your unique experiences are identified." "It is not as easy as you think, while in school. After school, things shock you."

"In this country there is no meritocracy as people got jobs because of tribalism and nepotism. Less qualified people get jobs because they knew someone. People asked me for bribes to help me secure a job."

Insight: She has now lowered her expectations by taking a low-paying call center job that did not match the ambitions she had for her career. In addition, she started taking side gigs such as assisting at events and selling clothes, jewelry, and women's shoes through WhatsApp and Facebook to supplement her income in order to sustain herself and her family. She sees her path as less respected and feels disappointed.

Insight: Amina is actively applying for graduate school to improve her job prospects because she feels she has not gotten anywhere with her bachelor's degree. Despite these efforts, she does not believe she will achieve much in life after going through the challenging transition. She just wants a stable income.

"I had this notion that my career is well paying, and set some standards … Reality set in … You get confused once you get to the job market. At the end of the day, you just settle for any job."

"I was shocked by the reality and faced many difficulties in searching for my first paid gig. I felt frustrated and questioned the reason for studying. I believe that education does not respond to what is needed, it does not provide adequate opportunities or education so that a young person can prepare for life, a job or even enthusiasm to be able to undertake an entrepreneurial venture."

Insight: Access to information shapes what youth expect and how they navigate the transition. In Amina's case she had limited relevant, actionable information to help her understand the winding nature of careers and the prevalence of corruption, and about how to manage her limited finances once she starts earning.

Insight: Many youth, like Amina, are grateful for the family support that helped them through difficult times.

"My parents understood what I was going through and encouraged me throughout this time."

How this persona is based on our research:

Many youth end up doing work outside of formal employment in their field of study. In Kenya, only 11% of youth respondents (15% of men, 7% of women) reported having formal jobs in their field of study. In Kenya, the most common barrier to getting a job cited by 44% of survey respondents (41% of men, 48% of women) was corruption (candidates with connections getting jobs). Frustration was the second most cited emotion among youth survey respondents in Kenya and the most common negative emotion.

Trends Related to this Persona : Corruption and A Lack of Information Are Barriers

We learned that one of the most common barriers cited by youth in trying to find work was encountering corruption or nepotism. In Kenya, 44% of youth surveyed cited corruption as a barrier to finding work. In our interviews with youth, we heard that corruption could lead youth to feel like application processes are rigged against them—they do not know if a job is available and if they have a fair shot at being selected.

94%

faced at least one dificulty during their job search:

44% Corruption (preference for candidates with connections)

33% COVID-19 pandemic-related business closures

26% Lack of practical skills or work experience

24% Lack of emotional and moral support

22% Accessing relevant information or contacts

18% Bias against my identity (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity)

10% Accessing digital tools and internet

7% War or conflicts

3% Other
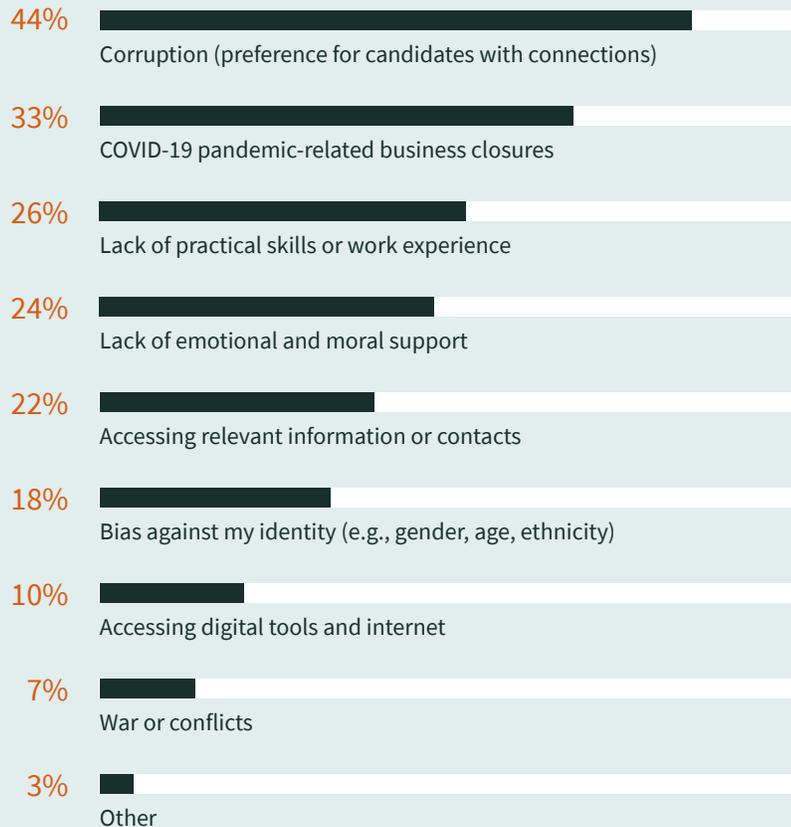
Design Career Support For Youth Doing Work Outside Their Field Of Study in Your Community:

Step 1: INTERRUPT BIASES:

Consider young people in your community who have a similar profile as this persona, i.e., youth doing work outside their field of study. **What biases (positive or negative) do you have about youth in your community who are like this persona?** *Stating biases can help you set them aside so that you can see the world from the persona's perspective. Deep empathy is key to designing impactful solutions that are responsive to young people's needs.*

Step 2: GENERATE IDEAS:

See examples *(in italics)* **to spark your creativity, then consider the persona and recommended support to brainstorm solutions relevant for youth in your community.**

Dispel the myth of a seamless, singular path into work. Celebrate and support more common winding career paths: • *Prepare youth to build a portfolio of experiences and skills instead of focusing solely on one career path, one kind of work type, or skillset. Guide youth to explore different fields and career opportunities (through volunteering, side gigs, a hobby/ passion) to pave an evolving and dynamic career path.* • *Expose youth to relevant, actionable information, e.g., financial literacy skills to navigate financial ups and downs.*	How might you support youth doing multiple gigs/ jobs at the same time to strengthen their long-term marketability from each gig?

Equip youth to succeed in self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal work, and mainstream non-formal work:

- *Provide a safe space for young people to take on smaller or shorter opportunities to build a "freelance/gig work portfolio" with low stakes to attain small wins and build momentum for success.*

What can you do to help youth in your community strengthen their financial resiliency?

Strengthen youth emotional wellbeing:

- *Provide experience-based training for socio-emotional skills. For instance, youth work on a project and are trained to strengthen their positive self-concept to identify and market their unique gifts and talents to employers and clients.*

How might you help young people in your community whose self-esteem has been affected by their career journeys?

Informal Worker, Solomon

Age:
31

Gender Identity:
Man (he/him)

Studied:
Teaching

Location:
Mombasa, Kenya

Status:
Person with disabilities

Time till earning: 14 months

Teaching certificate
(Hopeful)

Applying to teaching jobs
(Frustrated)

Poor workplace conditions
lead to him quitting
(Distressed)

Gets sales clerk informal
job at an electronics shop
(Relieved)

Barely applying for work
(Demoralized)

Uses skills to
fix devices as
a side gig and
sales clerk at
friend's store
(Grateful)

Starts working at family
friend's shop
(Optimistic)

Research Insights from Solomon's Persona:

Insight: He is motivated to work to be self-sufficient and to lead a meaningful life by impacting others.

"More than anything in my personal life, mental health, and self-care, it helped me a lot to have that space to be alone and to know myself to recognize what my body and I needed, to think well about what I want for my life, to analyze all the links I have in life."

Insight: Informal work is an alternative path to earning an income, yet it is less respected than formal work in one's field of study. For some youth, like Solomon, it is unclear how to connect such work to long-term career goals. For instance, that career path might include gainful self-employment but the young person may not have the know-how to transition from informality into stabilized income streams and self-employment.

Insight: Solomon started helping his friend who had an electronics store then learned how to fix electronics himself and now gets paid for that on the side. He prefers earning money on his own because that gives him greater flexibility which is better with his disability.

"I engaged in a temporary job and was given Ksh 3000 daily. Just to get something to sustain me I continued engaging in side hustles such as fixing electronics. I am working at an electronics kiosk but still searching and I hope to get employment soon."

"I was hoping to learn more about the business and how it is managed, but it is not quite like that, because it is an informal job in which the salaries are quite low and the schedules are very long."

"I haven't achieved anything that I might at some point hope to achieve by going into that informal job."

"The most respected professions are the jobs that exist in places with public services and that have stable jobs and legal benefits, while the least respected job opportunities are informal and low-paying jobs."

Insight: He left a previous role citing unfavorable work environments. Solomon's previous manager verbally abused him and did not pay him consistently for his work. Solomon sometimes finds it difficult to navigate work environments with his disability.

"I resigned from that job because it was taking a toll on me and I was finding it hard to continue concentrating on my job."

Insight: Some youth acknowledge that socio-cultural factors outside of their control can affect their ability to find a job. In Kenya, youth recognize the lack of jobs as a predominant reality and try different paths and adapt to available opportunities to earn an income.

"You always think that you are going to work in what you studied, but it is not always like that, and along the way you need to look for income, so you have to look for any opportunity."

Insight: According to some youth, like Solomon, social media and family/friend networks can be valuable sources of actionable, relevant, and timely information of support during the process of finding work, e.g., family, peers, and social media.

"I thank YouTube for helping me with a lot of information in fixing electronics which is a service that I now get paid money for! " "Social media for me nowadays is everything."

How this persona is based on our research:

We selected this persona though only 8% of our survey respondents said they had done informal work in the past two weeks. But drawing on other reputable data sources, we know that 95% of young Africans and 70% of all workers do informal work at some point. Even among those who do informal work, this type of work is often viewed as less desirable.

For young people, work is a means to...

While many youth aspire to formal work in their field of study, this expectation is not always met in reality. Solomon's story illustrates how some youth see work outside of the formal sector in their field of study as less respected. In Kenya, our survey found that most youth ranked doing formal work as an important career goal—on average youth said doing work in their field of study was ranked as 7.9 on a 10-point scale *(where 0=unimportant and 10=extremely important)*. But we also know that many youth will do informal work and few find formal jobs in their field of study. This suggests that youth may benefit from having a more realistic picture of future work opportunities and support to maximize their success in those opportunities.

For young

Kenyans,

it is really important
to do a job in their field
of study:

7.9/10

7%	14%	79%

● 3 or less   ● 4 to 6/10   ● 7 to 10/10

And to do

formal

work

7.6/10

9%	20%	70%

● 3 or less   ● 4 to 6/10   ● 7 to 10/10

Design Career Support For Informal Workers in Your Community:

Step 1: INTERRUPT BIASES:

Consider young people in your community who have a similar profile as this persona, ie., informal worker. **What biases (positive or negative) do you have about youth in your community who are like this persona?** *Stating biases can help you set them aside so that you can see the world from the persona's perspective. Deep empathy is key to designing impactful solutions that are responsive to young people's needs.*

Step 2: GENERATE IDEAS:

See examples *(in italics)* **to spark your creativity, then consider the persona and recommended support to brainstorm solutions relevant for youth in your community.**

Dispel the myth of a seamless, singular path into work. Celebrate and support more common winding career paths:	Which informal gigs are available in your community that might lead to gainful self-employment?
• *Provide funding and policy support and highlight self-employment and informal work paths within curricula of educational institutions to mainstream support, showing that they are common and worthy.* • *Increase storytelling, preparation, and trainings for career pathing within informal work to help youth leverage informal work to grow their professional reputation and networks and stabilize their income towards self-employment and decent work.*	

• *Consider self-employment or informal worker accelerators to move informal workers along an entrepreneurial spectrum towards decent work.* • *Equip youth with financial literacy skills and small loans to help informal workers manage unstable incomes and plan for a future with income dips and spikes.*	How might you equip an informal worker to stabilize their income through self-marketing and building their networks?
Equip youth to succeed in self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal work, and mainstream non-formal work: • *Leverage platform-based work and gigs to help youth strengthen practical work experience.* • *Strengthen career pathways for informal workers, focusing on marketable services to build a client base and a reputation toward self-employment and entrepreneurship.* • *Equip youth with the self-marketing skills to identify skills gained from informal work and translate them into new work opportunities within formal employment, self-employment, or entrepreneurship for employers and clients.*	
Prioritize context-responsive, customized solutions for youth with diverse intersectional identities: • *Strengthen social protections and legal systems for informal workers to decrease exploitation and abuses for more pro-worker conditions.* • *Provide psycho-social support for those experiencing bias and harassment; in Solomon's case, he was the subject of verbal abuse due to his disability.*	

Call to Action

We encourage youth employment program designers and donors to:

1   **Use this guide to identify opportunities for innovation regarding youth employment.**

2   **Use the data and guided prompts in each persona to humanize the process of designing youth employment solutions,**
replacing faceless youth employment statistics to lead to broader youth employment programs with dignity for diverse identity-related experiences to shape tailored, responsive solutions.

- This tool walks designers through a process of checking their own assumptions and going through a consultative process that prioritizes the voices and stories of youth. The guided prompts help designers start a conversation in their design team, which would ideally include youth and youth leaders, to contextualize solutions for local communities based on this guide, needs assessments, and gender equality and social inclusion analyses that further surface salient and current local youth needs.

3   **Use this guide to interrupt youth-adult power**
disparities that impede youth employment program impact by using this resource to develop more responsive programs and donor funding agendas.

- Leverage youth data stories as an intergenerational language to give power to youth in program designs so that their lived experiences are the driving forces at the center of youth employment solutions.
- Use this guide to dispel inaccurate and harmful frameworks and definitions about work that are based on assumptions instead of young people's actual lived experiences. Instead, prioritize support for more common youth realities: winding career journeys, informal work, self-employment, and entrepreneurship. Please read the accompanying desk research paper which further examines assumptions embedded within existing frameworks.[19]

4   **Utilize this guide to ensure meaningful youth inclusion during design meetings and align youth employment program designs with Positive Youth Development frameworks:**

- Designers can use this guide to facilitate a conversation that meaningfully includes youth to shape program designs. In addition, we recommend intentional processes to meaningfully include youth in decision-making and design meetings. (Consider using this resource from UNOY) .
- This guide enables program designers to align their work with youth development best practices such as Positive Youth Development and the socioecological model. (Read more about that under Appendix 1)

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19. Belachew, Tsega and Matthew Vanderwerff. "Understanding Youth Learning to Earning Journeys: The Case for a Learning Agenda." IREX, 2022.

Appendix 1. Narrative about Key Research Takeaways

01

Career support:

Dispel the myth of a seamless, singular path into work which can be unhelpful and inaccurate, thus potentially causing harm.[20] Celebrate and support more common diverse pathways while preparing youth for winding paths from learning into earning.

Dispel the myth of the idealized singular and linear journey by mainstreaming support for more realistic diverse pathways into earning to equip young people with the information, knowledge, and skills to effectively navigate such pathways. Prioritize equipping youth with transferrable soft skills[21] (what IREX calls "Youth Essential Skills") that enable them to be self-reliant and adaptable learners who navigate uncertain paths to earning. Prepare youth to build a portfolio of experiences and skills instead of focusing solely on one career path, work type, or skillset. Guide youth to explore multiple fields and career opportunities through volunteering, side gigs, supporting friends/families, or working on a hobby/passion in an ongoing process that helps them pave their own unique, dynamic, and evolving career path.

The myth of a seamless, singular path into work can create unrealistic expectations.

Many young people are not prepared for diverse pathways into earning which can often be long, winding, uncertain, and challenging. Instead, many expect a seamless, singular, and idealized journey from formal education into stable full-time formal work in their field of study, which is often unrealistic.

Overwhelmingly, youth survey respondents asserted that it was extremely important to work in a formal job in their field of study. In Guatemala, on a scale of 0-10, youth ranked formal work 8.3/10 and work in their field of study 8.2/10 (0=unimportant, 10=extremely important). However, a minority of survey respondents are currently doing formal work in their field of study (26% in Kenya, 37% in Iraq, 26% in Guatemala). A large percentage of our survey respondents had not earned an income in the last two weeks, demonstrating just how challenging the transition can be (57% in Kenya, 53% in Iraq, 48% in Guatemala).

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20. Belachew, Tsega and Matthew Vanderwerff. "Understanding Youth Learning to Earning Journeys: The Case for a Learning Agenda." IREX, 2022.
21. Definition under Appendix 3.

Youth emotional wellbeing is directly linked to the outcomes of a young person's transition into work.

How young people feel and think shapes their experiences during their transition into work. Many express that they would like more support for their emotional wellbeing during this period.

During their search for work, youth described facing a mix of emotions that appear to take a toll. Youth shared that their job search affected their emotional wellbeing (64% in Kenya, 51% in Iraq, 42% in Guatemala). They also overwhelmingly told us they want support for their emotional wellbeing during their job search (91% in Kenya, 81% in Iraq, 87% in Guatemala). Some youth expressed that they felt unsure how to navigate big changes in their communities: violent conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic, or digital transformations that change work requirements. Others leveraged these big shifts to secure new opportunities. Mindsets that facilitated their transition to work include: flexibility to try different opportunities that deviate from their original plan, resilience and optimism to keep trying despite challenges, and self-motivation to build momentum from small steps and actions for bigger successes in earning an income.

Career support:

Strengthen youth emotional wellbeing:

Provide relevant mental health and psycho-social support to navigate challenges while strengthening socio-emotional skills and mindsets that facilitate success. For instance, creating peer-to-peer safe spaces for youth to provide and get support during their transition, equipping families with information to support youth on their transition, and involving families within intergenerational program activities. Increasing storytelling which dispels the narrative about a seamless transition, which puts pressure on youth and feeds negative mental health. Celebrating more common winding career journeys can help young people recognize an important reality that we uncovered through this research: their winding career paths are common, and they are not alone in their struggles. Sharing this reality can encourage youth and help them navigate their negative emotions. Knowing that others have struggled with similar challenges can help youth manage uncertainty with confidence to believe that they can transition into decent work through a challenging path they may not foresee.

Work is not just a full-time formal job anymore.

Many youth engage in non-traditional work, self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal work, after exposure or necessity when their first plan for full-time formal work does not yield results. Youth are interested in non-traditional forms of work, and many end up doing informal work at some point in their career. Therefore, youth need better exposure and support to succeed in these forms of work.

Youth are curious about non-traditional work that is not formal full-time employment. Between 85-95% of survey respondents in Guatemala, Iraq, and Kenya expressed interest in entrepreneurship and some expressed the need for more exposure or training to succeed in self-employment or entrepreneurship. Ninety-five percent of young Africans make their livelihoods in the informal sector. Among survey respondents in Kenya, the largest percentage (38%) of those who earned an income did so from self-employment. However, our research showed that both youth and adults that support them frequently deprioritize non-traditional work or see those who engage in those forms of work as less respected. As a result, the potential for youth to build skills, knowledge, and networks for lifelong employability within non-traditional work is overlooked.

Another youth-led study showed that youth chose to own a business simply out of necessity when they had no other options.[22] This emphasizes the value of more accurate storytelling that interrupts assumptions about non-traditional work and supports authentic youth career journeys which might include informal work, self-employment, and entrepreneurship. Practitioners have started to examine a spectrum or typology of entrepreneurship,[23] but informal work is frequently left out of such frameworks. It is important to show respect for informal work due to its importance in many young people's lives.[24] It is also crucial to examine its role within a broader typology of "entrepreneurial activities." Our research suggests that informal work might frequently overlap with self-employment and entrepreneurship.

Career support:

Prepare youth to navigate and succeed in self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal work by mainstreaming support for non-formal work within educational institutions, youth-serving programs, and donor funding agendas.

Mainstream support to youth to succeed in self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal work as part of their career journey and equip youth with diverse sets of transferable and technical knowledge, skills, and experiences to effectively navigate pivots and diverse pathways. For instance, IREX trains youth on "Youth Essential Skills," digital and data skills, financial management, business and marketing, sales, etc. Prepare youth to leverage informal work to enhance their long-term employability by building their reputation, skills, networks, and marketability as informal workers. Support informal workers to make career and financial plans to move them towards decent work (stable incomes), self-employment, or entrepreneurship. **Study and highlight stories of youth pursuing diverse forms of informal work, self-employment, and entrepreneurship.**

22. Godoy, K., Kough, E., Ma, M., & Ortbahn, C. (n.d.). (working paper). Economic Inclusion and Exclusion: Identities, Opportunities, and Barriers. USAID: Youth Excel Consortium. 2022.
23. Psilos, P., Galloway, T. (2018). What Works in Entrepreneurship Education and Training Programs for Youth? Washington, DC: USAID's YouthPower: Implementation, YouthPower Action.
24. Belachew, Tsega and Matthew Vanderwerff. "Understanding Youth Learning to Earning Journeys: The Case for a Learning Agenda." IREX, 2022.

04

Informal family and friend networks, the internet, and social media facilitate youth transitions into work.

Recognize and leverage informal networks and support within program models. Access to actionable, relevant, and timely information also facilitates successful transitions into work.

Youth found informal networks an important source of support and information. This includes family, friends, and internet and social media networks, which appear to facilitate young people's transition into work. Overwhelmingly, survey respondents indicated that family was a key source of support for them (62% in Iraq) compared to other sources like social media which was also a key source of support (50% in Guatemala). Many youth expressed how social media or internet sources were crucial sources of information and networks to help them to gain skills, knowledge, opportunities, and networks that facilitated their transition. This takeaway relates to studies which have highlighted the power of "weak ties" that have the potential to expand the flow of influence and information, mobility opportunity, and community organization.[25] Our qualitative study showed that strong ties and family and friend connections are often the gateways for youth to access information and economic opportunity and to develop more "weak ties" that facilitate even more opportunities.

Career support:

Strengthen informal and digital networks for career success:
Recognize that informal rather than formal networks, the internet, and social media are playing an important role in young people's journeys into work. Improve access to actionable, relevant, and timely information that facilitates successful transitions into work. Consider individualized career coaching supported by artificial intelligence to provide just-in-time information and resources exactly when young people need them.

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25. Granovetter, Mark S. "The Strength of Weak Ties." American Journal of Sociology, vol. 78, no. 6, 1973, pp. 1360–80, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776392. Accessed 6 May 2022.

05 Practical work experience can make the difference between employment and unemployment.

Practical work experience is often a prerequisite and barrier for youth to secure work. But many youth interviewees expressed that it is difficult to obtain work experience while employers look for extensive experience. This traps youth in a cycle which makes it difficult to obtain the qualifications required to work because their education is largely theoretical. In Guatemala, 31% of survey respondents indicated the most common difficulty they experienced was lacking practical experience.

Career support:

Ensure every young person gets and can market their existing practical work skills and experience:

Embed opportunities for youth to strengthen practical skills and experiences through project-based and experience-based learning in the classroom and in the real world. Help youth gain work experiences with employers and prepare youth to effectively market their informal experiences to employers and clients.

06

Youth experience unique socio-cultural barriers based on their intersectional[26] identities, with some identity groups facing more barriers, and would benefit from tailored support.

During interviews, youth often acknowledged that they face socio-cultural and structural barriers such as limited job opportunities for the number of unemployed youth (Kenya) or the prevalence of nepotism and corruption which privileges youth with connections and disadvantages others (Iraq, Kenya, Guatemala). Broader societal inequities and power dynamics also impose overwhelming barriers on youth. For example, gender biases and harassment or poor working conditions, which recently motivated Kenyan youth to start a social media movement to voice workplace abuses they have endured.

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26. Definition under Appendix 3.

Many young people across geographies expressed that their limited access to funds was a barrier to them trying different career-enabling opportunities that could support their long-term career growth, including **paying for required formal paperwork, networking activities, transportation costs, registration fees, and unpaid work (internships, volunteering).**

This suggests a "risk differential" where youth with limited funds are not able to engage in career-enabling activities that do not guarantee career outcomes. Youth articulate disappointment in not being able to participate in such activities which they believe will open doors for their long-term career growth. Another youth-led study surfaced similar insights: lack of funds are a structural barrier for youth across identity groups when it comes to their employment and entrepreneurial prospects. Persons with disabilities are more likely to be indebted, young women are restricted from financial support due to cultural norms, and people in rural areas find it hard to access funds due to geographic limitations.[27]

Career support:
Prioritize context-responsive, customized solutions for youth with diverse intersectional identities:
Youth can benefit from individualized support for barriers that they face due to their intersectional identities: Sexual orientation and gender identity, race, religion, socio-economic status, disability, ethnic identity, etc. This would require a gender equality and social inclusion lens across the full program cycle (from design through implementation and close out) for a youth employment program. Specific interventions might include support for navigating harmful identity-based norms, biases, and harassment while searching for work and "career funds." Fund amounts will need to be tailored and might vary greatly according to the setting and the activity, but program designers can consider $5-10 USD per young person for their program activities to decrease barriers to participation.

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27. Godoy, K., Kough, E., Ma, M., & Ortbahn, C. (n.d.). (working paper). Economic Inclusion and Exclusion: Identities, Opportunities, and Barriers. USAID: Youth Excel Consortium. 2022.

Our research takeaways and their connection with existing Youth Development Frameworks:

This guide is aligned with the [Positive Youth Development Framework from USAID](#) and the socio-ecological model that can be utilized for youth program designs.

a) Youth assets and skills:

This research emphasizes strengthening transferable soft and socio-emotional skills to navigate diversified career paths. Provide support to maximize their success in those opportunities.

b) Youth agency:

This research highlights that it is crucial to support youth to chart their own career paths on their own terms outside of societal myths and expectations while strengthening positive self-concept and emotional wellbeing.

c) Youth contribution:

This research emphasizes the importance of creating spaces for youth to learn through practice and expand networks and experiences through trial and error while testing out different career pathways.

d) Enabling environment:

Youth are more productive in attaining positive outcomes when their environment is supportive. For that reason, it is helpful to strengthen the enabling environment and to utilize the socio-ecological model within program designs. Our research demonstrates that it is crucial to elevate youth voices and experiences at the center of support systems for youth, tailoring support models through a gender equity and social inclusion lens that recognizes and seeks to interrupt power, create safe spaces, and provide psycho-social and mental health support, along with youth-inclusive program design processes that elevate their contributions to shape decision-making for donor agendas and policies.

Appendix 2. Narrative about Research Phases and Methods

Research question development:

Desk Study:

We conducted a desk review, which resulted in this guide's accompanying desk research paper, to explore how research organizations and policymakers are—and are not—prioritizing youth voices and lived experiences within research done to inform the design of youth employment programs and policies. We did that to determine what we can contribute to that body of knowledge, and to inform our research design, i.e., the research question and methods. To identify sources for our desk review, we searched Google using terms including "youth unemployment" and "young people, work" and sought materials associated with influential global development institutions that frequently publish research that shapes practice. We focused on knowledge sources that global and local development policymakers, implementers, and donors have cited as formative in policy and program design decisions, e.g., International Labor Organization, World Bank, OECD, and African Development Bank. We reviewed 30 key resources (reports, articles, websites) published between 2015 and 2021. While we did not seek to conduct a systematic review of the literature, we did attempt to cover a range of geographical scales, from global to regional to country-specific, and a range of authors, including publications by think tanks, donors, aid agencies, and multilateral institutions.

Research question:

Through our desk study, we found that there is a nascent but emerging effort to understand youth experiences and perspectives to inform donor decisions and programs. However, there is room for much more data and evidence which represents youth voices and lived experiences. This led us to determine our research question and our methods shared below:

Mixed-methods research: We launched a community-based participatory[28] study to answer this research question and explore youth's lived experiences transitioning from learning to earning.

From what we found through the desk review, we saw that there could be more information about young people's lived experiences during their transition into work across multiple geographies. In partnership with youth researchers, we conducted an exploratory sequential mixed methods study collecting qualitative data and then quantitative data. We did the qualitative study to explore how young people experience their transition into work after they complete their education, from their own perspective. Using qualitative data, we created a survey to get a deeper understanding of how common these experiences are across youth populations in multiple geographies and to understand the acceptability of support models to facilitate young people's transition into work.

What kind of support is needed to help today's youth succeed in their learning to earning journeys?

28. Balazs, Carolina L., and Rachel Morello-Frosch. "The Three Rs: How Community-Based Participatory Research Strengthens the Rigor, Relevance, and Reach of Science." *Environmental Justice*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2013, pp. 9–16., https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2012.0017.

Study Population:

The research is focused on young people between the ages of 18-35 who have completed tertiary education (an education level that provides workforce credentials) in three countries where IREX currently supports youth: Guatemala, Iraq, and Kenya. In Guatemala this also included young people who completed career-focused training during their secondary education. We focus on this group of youth because sizable youth populations across many developing countries complete their education then struggle to secure "decent" employment.[29] We recommend further research to understand the experiences of other youth groups. The study also focused on adults above the age of 35 whose vocation is to support youth to succeed in their transitions into work. These professionals include staff and faculty at tertiary educational institutions (universities, community colleges, technical and vocational education training institutions) that provide career support and coaching and who organize workforce readiness programming and mentoring. It also includes professionals who implement programs and support models outside of educational institutions such as skills training, entrepreneurship incubators, and others.

Qualitative Study:

We prepared 15 youth researchers across our target countries to co-lead data collection using an Empathy Interview protocol. Participants were selected for the study using a purposive sampling strategy because we sought youth participants who are familiar with the learning to earning experience and to gain insights into the diversity of experiences among individuals by gender, employment status, and geography. In consultation with IREX, the 15 youth recruited 78 young people (24 from Iraq, 24 from Guatemala, and 30 from Kenya) with an aim to reach diverse individuals by gender, employment status, geography, and type of education completed (vocational training, 4-year or 2-year university, and in Guatemala, those who completed career-focused secondary school preparation). They recruited youth from their own networks, those with previous interactions with IREX, or through organizations that reach specific populations in the country such as NGOs that reach people with disabilities. Youth researchers then conducted two focus groups with adult career service professionals in each of the three countries using a similar set of questions. The interview and focus group data were then analyzed using Rapid Qualitative Analysis and mind mapping exercises to identify and refine themes. This study involved youth researchers and colleagues in local communities at multiple stages by utilizing community-based participatory data checking and synthesis four times.

Quantitative Study:

Using data from our qualitative study and in partnership with youth researchers, we designed and conducted an online survey. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and an independent survey firm recruited participants through online advertisements posted on locally popular digital media platforms. Surveys were launched on March 30, 2022 and concluded after broadcasting for three weeks. In Kenya, 444 out of 1926 respondents met our target criteria (23% target completion rate). In Iraq, 270 out of 3089 respondents met our target criteria (8.7% target completion rate). In Guatemala, 382 out of 1270 respondents met our target criteria (30% target completion rate). Survey participants did not receive incentives for their responses.

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29. In 82% of low-income countries, highly educated people are over-represented among the unemployed, i.e., the share of people with an advanced educational level is higher among the unemployed than among the employed. From "Education Pays Off, But You Have to Be Patient." International Labour Organization, August 2020.

What we learned is shared through this guide.

Strengths and limitations of this study.

This study has several strengths. First, we used a community-based participatory approach[30] through which youth were involved in developing the study, collecting data, and interpreting results, increasing our confidence in the inferences that can be drawn from this study. Using a mixed-methods study design, we were able to explore and identify commonalities among the lived experiences of youth across multiple geographies, gender identities, and employment experiences. The study allowed us to explore what young people experience during this important period in a person's lifetime,[31] and how young people live through and feel about their experiences. Our study also has multiple limitations.

The desk study was not systematic and prioritized reports that shape practice and donor decisions, so we potentially excluded articles relevant to our topic of interest. The study participants are not representative of the youth population in each country, limiting the generalizability of the study results. The quantitative study was conducted through a mobile or desktop user's journey by reaching youth through digital inventory and advertising spaces. This limited the reach to young people with access to the internet and devices. Finally, this study is cross-sectional, and the results cannot determine or assign a cause for why youth struggle or are successful in their journey to work.

30. Balazs, Carolina L., and Rachel Morello-Frosch. "The Three Rs: How Community-Based Participatory Research Strengthens the Rigor, Relevance, and Reach of Science." *Environmental Justice*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2013, pp. 9–16., https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2012.0017.
31. Chacaltana, Juan, Sara Elder, and Miso Lee. "Youth Transitions and Lifetime Trajectory." International Labor Organization Employment Policy Department, Working Paper No. 253, 2019.

Appendix 3. Glossary of Terms

Youth

In this paper, youth are individuals between the ages of 15-35. Around the world, the status of being young or an adult varies greatly according to context and can be subjectively defined by a young person's self-sufficiency, role in their family, and social progress.

Lived Experiences

Lived experience responds not only to people's experiences, but also to how people live through and respond to those experiences.

School to Work Journey or Transition

The process that young people go through once they complete their education to secure decent work. According to this desk review, this phrase is used to describe a one-time linear and progressive journey from full-time education into full-time employment.

Learning to Earning Journey or Transition

The process that young people go through that can happen multiple times or in an ongoing cyclical fashion throughout one's lifetime. This phrase is used to describe an inclusive definition of "learning" to encompass formal and informal learning and "earning" to describe formal and informal income sources. The desk review showed that this process, depicted as complex, fluid, and dynamic, is more representative of the reality for many youth around the world.

Intersectionality

The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalize people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. (Oxford Dictionary and Crenshaw K., 1989).

Emotional wellbeing

The ability to have a positive mindset and cope with and adapt to adversity or stressful situations. Positive mental health allows people to realize their full potential, cope with the stresses of life, work productively, and make meaningful contributions to their communities. Some symptoms and issues related to mental health are:

- Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- Pulling away from people and usual activities
- Having low or no energy
- Feeling numb or like nothing matters
- Having unexplained aches and pains
- Feeling helpless or hopeless
- Smoking, drinking, or using drugs more than usual
- Feeling unusually confused, forgetful, on edge, angry, upset, worried, or scared

(Mentalhealth.gov)

Decent work	Opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity. (ILO and UN)
Non-traditional forms of work	This includes work that is not full-time formal employment such as self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal work.
Social and emotional skills	A set of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies that children, youth, and adults learn through explicit, active, focused, sequenced instruction that allows them to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (USAID Education Policy)
Soft skills	A broad set of skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals. (USAID Education Policy) These skills might include socio-emotional skills such as empathy, positive self-concept, etc. IREX defines these skills broadly as "Youth Essential Skills" which are 11 research-backed skills in IREX's Essential Skills approach that have been proven to contribute to workforce and entrepreneurial success, civic participation, resilience, and youth leadership.
Support models, support systems, models, or youth employment models	These terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to youth employment programs and donor models that aim to address youth unemployment. These models might include specific interventions such as skills development and entrepreneurship creation or solutions that focus on the enabling environment and system, for instance, policies to align efforts between employers, educators, and donors.
Youth-centered or youth-centric	Youth are meaningfully engaged in a process that engages youth perspectives, voices, and experiences at the core of research and programs. Within such processes, youth lead and shape decisions.