IREX

Understanding Youth Learning to Earning Journeys

The Case for a New Learning Agenda

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CONTRIBUTORS

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 (CALI) strengthens the assessment of IREX's impact, develops cutting-edge new approaches, creates a dedicated space for learning, and integrates technology and gender across the IREX portfolio.

Executive Summary

What happens during the 11.6[1] months after youth finish school, while they look for work?

Youth transitions into work have a defining and outsized impact on lifelong employability, wellbeing, economic and social contribution. (*Chacaltana, Juan, Sara Elder, and Miso Lee. "Youth Transitions and Lifetime Trajectory." 2019.*)

What happens during the period that youth seek stable employment after completing their education? For some, the journey from school to work may be short, for others, it is much longer. **For most young people worldwide, this transition has become longer, harder, and less certain.** In this paper, we share our findings from a review of key reports and resources about what youth experience while transitioning from school to work. We undertook a review of these reports as a part of IREX's research initiative to support the school to work journeys of youth within the broader reality of an urgent and escalating global youth unemployment crisis. We conducted this desk research to better understand how influential voices study and discuss youth lived experiences during the school to work journey. We set out to assess whether youth employment research reports and resources that shape policy and program decisions reflect an up-to-date, holistic, intersectional, and youth-centric exploration of young people's realities as they pursue employment.

Our desk research uncovered the following key findings which have informed our recommendation for a new learning agenda to enable youth-serving institutions to have greater impact on addressing youth unemployment: understanding the learning to earning journeys of young people.

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1. It takes young people an average of 11.6 months to secure stable employment (Chacaltana, Juan, Sara Elder, and Miso Lee. "Youth Transitions and Lifetime Trajectory." 2019)

1. False narratives about youth transitions from school to work may be causing harm…

Many youth employment models communicate a specific model of success for youth: achieving a swift, linear transition from full-time formal education into full-time formal employment. A focus on such a homogenized trajectory limits space to recognize the diversified paths and trajectories of youth. If a young person fails to achieve the singular path to success (formal work), they can feel frustration, shame, and disillusionment, derailing emotions that might affect their long-term employability and social progress, even causing them to pursue destructive or violent paths.

2… By impacting youth mental health and making it harder for them to find work.

The youth school to work journey is exacting an emotional toll that can have lifelong impact, but most support models do not prioritize youth wellbeing. The impact on mental health makes it more challenging for youth to make progress toward stable work.

3. Our support models overlook the role that informal work plays in the lives of most young people…

Historically, youth employment support systems have prioritized transitions from full-time formal education into full-time formal employment. This emphasis has limited youth-serving institutions' understanding of how to effectively support youth, because informal work is the reality that most youth in developing countries access or experience.

4… And intersectional frameworks that can reveal youth lived experiences are uncommon…

It is uncommon for research approaches to take an intersectional lens to understand youth needs and contexts. This is an important gap, because evidence shows greater impact is achieved when youth employment program models directly respond to what youth need and experience.

5. But new research models have uncovered more authentic, fluid youth school to work journeys and narratives.

Before the release of recent, pivotal seminal studies, "authoritative" sources of knowledge on youth employment focused on quantitative macroeconomic research that describes employment based on its economic outputs. In contrast, recent studies examine youth lived experience in new ways that highlight shifting, dynamic, and fluid journeys. This approach merits more focus, as it reveals novel insights which help youth-serving groups gain a deeper understanding about the lives of youth, their needs, and gaps in support. The approach is timely and urgently needed because youth and youth-serving groups must continue to learn about local realities to adapt to ongoing uncertainties and disruptions within the present and future world of work.

6. Unfortunately, youth leadership and voices are uncommon in research.

Until recently, research from authoritative sources did not center on youth lived experiences, voices, and leadership within research design and implementation. There is now more focus on learning about youth experiences, but youth are rarely leading or making decisions about the research. Macroeconomic perspectives about youth learning and earning are essential and including them is the norm. When they are not balanced with youth and local perspectives to interpret numbers or deepen understanding with a human-centered perspective, however, the research may unintentionally reinforce false narratives or definitions.

These key findings show that it is important for youth-serving institutions to understand authentic youth lived experiences so that they can increase their impact by expanding their support for vastly more common, varied and fluid pathways through which youth contribute their ingenuity, productivity, and labor. Our findings suggest that youth employment programming would benefit from more research that aims to understand youth experiences from human-centered, intersectional, and youth-centric perspectives.

This paper highlights key findings from IREX's desk research to examine existing youth employment research. The findings surface what young people around the world experience during their transition from school to work, gaps in understanding about their experiences and the support they need. They signal the need for further study about youth transitions from school to work to ensure youth employment programs and policies are responsive and impactful.

False narratives
about youth transitions from school to work may be
causing harm

Mental health challenges
might be making it harder for youth to find work

Support models overlook the role that
informal work
plays in the life of most young people

Youth leadership
and voices are uncommon in research

New research models uncover more authentic,
fluid youth school to work journeys
and narratives

Intersectional frameworks that can reveal
youth lived experiences
are uncommon

Introduction

IREX used desk research to examine existing youth employment research. This paper shares what we learned from that desk research, our recommendation for a learning agenda based on what we learned and how we aim to advance the learning agenda.

This paper is organized into four sections. Section 1, **Background**, provides an overview of the employment challenges facing youth and the potentially inherent limitations of program or policies that rely solely on research methods that primarily see youth through a top-down perspective focused on the economic outputs of employment. In section 2, **Methodology** We explain how and why we undertook this review of key reports, include a discussion of our own research hypothesis, and an overview of our research approach and how this desk research fits into that approach. The main body of this brief is dedicated to a **Discussion of Findings** in section 3. Finally, we conclude this paper with a **Call to Action** in section 4 by describing our intentions to follow the research to further understand youth lived experiences, and we share reflections on how youth-serving institutions can better meet the needs of today's youth towards greater impact on youth unemployment.

Background

Why this is important and urgent now

> "A major concern is that a large number of youth (nearly 4 in 10) do not make the transition to stable employment even when they are older – this means that opportunity to earn a decent living will remain elusive to many for the rest of their lives." *(UNICEF, Unpacking School to Work Transitions, 2019)*

For decades, policymakers and donors have recognized the need for programming and policies to improve youth employment outcomes. **During those decades, the youth unemployment challenge has become even more urgent. The impact from current solutions is not aligned to the scale of the challenge.** We have identified reasons a deeper understanding about what youth experience when transitioning from school to work is urgent.

First, youth unemployment has been elevated as a key global[2] priority, as this crisis exasperates

broader social issues, hindering economic growth and productivity, worsening social instability, division, crime, and inequality, and contributing to recent spikes in global and local migration.[3] Despite significant investments to curb the unemployment crisis through policies and programs, youth entering the world of work today endure an increasingly difficult, long, and uncertain transition into work. It takes an average 11.6 months for youth to find their first job, which is not usually their desired job; it takes an average 13.8 months for a job with strong satisfaction and security. This period is longer for some and shorter for others, 12.5 months for females, 11.3 for males[4]. Other reports find that youth can be in this transition period for many years. **The transition is precarious; nearly 40% of youth do not find stable employment even once they are older.[5]**

Second, **formally educated youth have long been struggling to get the kind of jobs they have been**

> "10% of international migrant workers forced to migrate for work are youth. Along with climate change, which makes certain informal work less viable (e.g. agriculture) high youth unemployment rates at home force youth to migrate" *(ILO, Youth and Migration).*
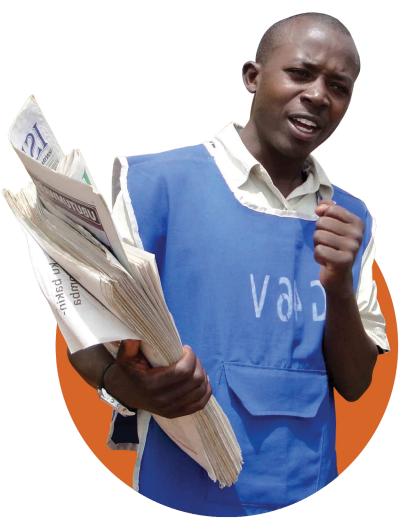
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2. Goal 8 in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals indicators include "substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training" and "develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization" and other relevant targets. From "Employment, Decent Work for All and Social Protection." The United Nations.

3. "Youth and Migration." International Labour Organization.

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

5. 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.

socialized to expect from a young age through narratives about the school to work journey from educators, leaders, their community, families, and the media. After graduation, they expect to quickly enter formal employment. The reality is vastly different; compared to adults, youth are three times more likely to be unemployed.[6] 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.[7] In Kenya, the employment rate among degree holders has declined from 79% in 2011 to 13% in 2017.[8] In Iraq, IREX found that 75% of university graduates surveyed in 2020 were unemployed.[9] Some members of specific religious or ethnic groups are formally excluded; in Iran, the Baha'i people are excluded from attending higher education and entering the workforce.[10] Third, until recently, youth employment support models, such as programs and policies, were designed based on a top-down view of youth transitions focused on a homogenous linear trajectory into fixed economic definitions: employed, unemployed, inactive, or not in education or employment (NEET), rather than a human-centered understanding of diverse, fluid, and dynamic youth journeys that shift across these employment definitions. Many support models prioritize one transition from formal full-time education into full-time formal employment as an ideal. In some contexts, earnings can be improved through formal employment, and such work can provide protections and benefits (paid leave, medical insurance). However, a sole focus on formality obscures the reality that youth face and the support they need or can access. **The promise of full-time formal employment, a priority goal for most program and policy models, has become increasingly unreliable and unattainable for large swaths of youth populations who experience informality or inactivity.[11]**

> "At the global level, the gap between male and female employment is 14.7 percentage points but rises to more than 30 percentage points in the Middle East and North Africa and the South Asia Region." (*UNICEF, Unpacking School to Work Transitions, 2019*)

6. "Global Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Analysis: Global Trends and Recommendations for Youth Excel." IREX, March 2021.

7. "Education Pays Off, But You Have to Be Patient." International Labour Organization, August 2020.

8. Khainga, Dickson and Mbithi, Juliana. "Employment Distribution of Youth Graduates Across Economic Sectors in Kenya." 2019.

9. "Evaluation of Career Development Centers in Iraq." IDinsight for IREX, January 2021.

10 "Summary of the current situation of Baha'is in Iran." Baha'i International Community, July, 2021.

11. Whipple, Tom. "Nigeria's Graduates Live 'Hand to Mouth' as Jobs Crisis Worsens." *The Energy Bulletin,* April 2021.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing displacement due to conflict and climate change have deepened the unemployment crisis, putting more youth, particularly those from underserved populations, at risk of experiencing extended periods outside of education or employment. This reality critically hinders both their long-term employability and mental and social wellbeing.[12]

> "Youth in some fragile and conflict states (e.g. West Bank Gaza, Libya, Haiti, Sudan, Somalia) find themselves at a disadvantage; more than one in four youth who are active in the labor force are unemployed." *(UNICEF, Unpacking School to Work Transitions, 2019)*

The Challenge for Youth Programs and Policies:

Decision-makers for youth employment research, programs, and policies often seek to understand youth lived experiences from a macroeconomic lens. These efforts study young people's employment experiences based on economic outputs: "employed," "unemployed," and, "not in education or employment" (NEET). This view is essential to inform program and policy design decisions, fix broader labor market gaps, and invigorate markets to create jobs. However, it is likely not enough alone.

What IREX Has Learned:

IREX conducts ongoing strategic learning efforts to strengthen the impact of youth-serving institutions (implementers, donors, researchers, policymakers) to address the escalating global youth unemployment crisis within a rapidly changing world of work.

Our learning from practice shows us that while essential for design decisions related to youth support models (programs and policies), top-down macroeconomic and quantitative studies about youth employment do not capture important voices and perspectives. The voices of the most underserved youth, those directly affected by the problem and those who deeply understand the local context and culture from a human-centered,[13] intersectional lens. Systematic reviews of the evidence highlight that these grassroots perspectives are essential for greater impact – the most effective and impactful youth employment program models understand and are directly responsive to youth and local realities, constraints, and contexts.[14] This kind of responsiveness requires an in depth understanding of youth lives and circumstances along with the overlapping impacts of their social identities, cultures, societal and

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).

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12. "World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2021." International Labour Organization, 2021.

13. Human-centered design is about cultivating deep empathy with the people you're designing with; generating ideas; building a bunch of prototypes; sharing what you've made together; and eventually, putting your innovative new solution out in the world. (IDEO)

14. The evidence shows greater impact from working in lower-income countries and with disadvantaged youth. There is limited evidence of 'modest' impact on employment and earnings from models doing entrepreneurship promotion and skills training. Other models, such as employment services which connect youth to jobs by strengthening the functioning of labor markets are falling short of expectations or showing mixed evidence. Further evidence is needed about most models; including ones that have been a recent focus; demand-side models (that address market failures or strengthen job creation) or ones strengthening synergies between these and supply-side models (that support youth). From Kluve, Jochen, Susana Puerto, David Robalino, Jose Manuel Romero, Friederike Rother, Jonathan Stöterau, Felix Weidenkaff, Marc Witte. "Interventions to Improve the Labour Market Outcomes of Youth: a Systematic Review." Campbell Systemic Review 2017:12, December 2017.

structural constraints (an intersectional lens). It is resource-intensive to obtain quantitative data to provide this level of nuance through most data systems and research models.

We also have learned that macroeconomic definitions of employment and work are rapidly diversifying as disruptions ripple through the world of work, redefining the future, such as technological changes (new forms of e-commerce, platform, gig, online work, and self-employment), the COVID-19 pandemic (new work modalities: virtual, remote, and hybrid), political shocks, economic shifts (long-term shifts towards less wage work and more contract or temporary work), rural-urban labor shifts, conflict, climate change, local and international migration, etc. Based on what we had learned from our practice, we constructed a hypothesis about how youth-serving institutions can examine youth experiences so that their support models can achieve greater impact.

Hypothesis:

Youth are living through historic shifts in the world of work. Therefore, effective youth employment support models must be relevant, responsive, and adaptive. Such models recognize that youth are not a homogenous group, but in fact have diverse lived experiences. Research about youth employment can play a crucial role in equipping development actors (implementers, donors, and policy makers) to design impactful programs and policies. Research approaches focused on macroeconomic trends are essential but insufficient on their own. Youth employment support models are strengthened when research approaches also examine the authentic, lived experiences of youth and use holistic, intersectional, and youth-centric lenses to identify the human, cultural, societal, and contextual factors that shape young people's lives.

To assess whether this hypothesis merits further study, we conducted a desk review of existing research.

A note about terms used:
In this paper, we use the following terms: transitions, trajectories, journeys, pathways, school to work, and learning to earning interchangeably to refer to young people's experiences after they complete their education and go through a process to secure work. At the end of the paper, we share our recommendations on what our desk review findings show us are the specific terms which more accurately reflect youth experiences.

Methodology

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

Desk Research:

We considered more than 52 sources and closely reviewed 30 key resources, reports, and articles focused on youth transitions from school to work and youth employment. The sources, published between 2015 and 2021, cover a range of geographical scales, from global to regional to country-specific. This review prioritizes specific knowledge sources that are frequently used by global and local development policymakers, implementers, and donors to inform policy and program design decisions. In this paper, we refer to these as "authoritative sources." We conducted this review with the purpose of determining areas for further study to inform our field research design.

Our focus was to a) analyze youth employment research from "authoritative" sources, i.e., ones that shape policy and program design decisions; b) find gaps or trends in how youth experiences are studied; c) assess whether the research reflects an up-to-date, holistic, intersectional, and youth-centric exploration of youth experiences while transitioning from school to work.[15]

Field Research:

We will conduct follow-on field research to expand upon the findings from this paper to examine youth perspectives and lived experiences within the learning to earning journey to answer the above question:

Our field research will focus on uncovering insights about youth lived experiences by cultivating deep empathy for the realities and local contexts impacting young people's lives, including their priorities, needs, and gaps in existing support. Findings from the field research will be used to identify recommendations for future programs and policies.

Field Research Participants:

The field research will focus on understanding the lived experiences of young people who have completed education and earned credentials to help them secure work. This includes earning a tertiary degree or its equivalent to enter the workforce, such as a college or university degree. We focus on this group of youth because sizable youth populations across many developing countries complete their education then struggle to secure "decent" employment. We recommend further research to understand the experiences of other youth groups. To provide a "scan" of youth experiences in diverse contexts, we focus on three countries that are different from a socio-economic and political perspective: Guatemala, Iraq, and Kenya. IREX has a presence in these countries and can directly engage youth to conduct this research.

Proposed Research Process:

Desk research:

To analyze the need for a broader learning agenda and determine the focus of a follow-on field research effort under the learning agenda.

Field Research:

Qualitative:
- Youth-led interviews of youth going through school to work transitions in Guatemala, Iraq, and Kenya.
- Youth-led focus groups with youth-serving career support professionals to better understand their perspectives on youth journeys into work and gather feedback on the proposed research design and field research knowledge product.

Quantitative:
A survey through market research firm Happydemics which will reach 200-300 youth in each of the three countries.

15. We included reviews about youth employment trends and evidence about the effectiveness of programmatic models, overview of program frameworks, impact studies, statistical studies of labor markets, research reports addressing emerging areas that are shaping youth transitions; the digital economy and impact of COVID-19, as well as research that considered human-centered approaches to studying youth lived experiences.

16. Decent work: "Opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity." From *International Labour Review: Vol. 160 No. 4.* 2021.

Discussion of Key Findings

1. False narratives about youth school to work transitions may be causing harm

If a young person fails to achieve the idealized and swift journey from school to work, they may feel frustration, shame, disillusionment, and other derailing emotions that can affect their long-term employability and social progress, even causing them to pursue destructive or violent paths. Therefore, youth need to hear an honest story about the journey into work that they are likely to encounter so that they are equipped to effectively navigate their emotions as well as adjust and adapt to succeed.

Many youth employment models communicate a specific model of success for youth: a swift, and seamless one-time linear transition from full-time formal education into full-time formal employment. The emphasis on formal employment can make it seem like it is more attainable than it is. Within many economies where the informal economy dominates this is a false narrative, causing some youth to enter what experts call a "waithood;" remaining unemployed for protracted periods until they too can achieve the idealized path to success.

A focus on a homogenized trajectory limits space to recognize, support, and celebrate diverse paths and authentic youth experiences. When young people experience transitions that are different from the idealized model of success, they might feel like they failed to become valued members of their society. These feelings of failure can feed into the mental toll of navigating the school-to-work transition, causing derailing and overwhelming emotions such as hopelessness, disillusionment, shame. Studies have found that such negative emotions can even lead youth into destructive paths: gender-based violence, crime, and substance abuse.[17]

These negative impacts: protracted waithood and mental health challenges that negatively affect individuals and communities suggest that false narratives about school-to-work transitions may be causing harm.

It is essential for youth to hear an honest story about the learning to earning journey reflecting what they are likely to encounter so they are equipped to adjust, adapt, and navigate their emotions to find success. These narratives can play a critical role in youth career decisions; the skills they choose to develop and the careers they pursue. How youth feel about their journey also impacts how well they can navigate it; optimism is a driver for successful transitions.[18]

Youth-serving groups can benefit youth by taking a closer look at how they are studying and sharing narratives about school to work journeys based on current realities and future trends. As a study about the future of work in Ukraine

"Universities should teach things that will be in demand in five years, not things that are in demand today." (IREX, 2021, Future of Work 2030, How to Prepare for Change in Ukraine)

shows, traditional educational institutes are not keeping pace with changes in the workforce. While 71% of young people would be happy to receive more employment support and recommendations, only 14.3% believe that schools are preparing them for employment in 2030.[19] School to work transition narratives are pervasive throughout the education system where youth first formulate their employment expectations. One recommendation from the recent study in Ukraine highlights that career counseling can expand its reach by starting from lower levels to help students realize the diverse skillset they might need for the future workforce.

School-to-works narratives permeate family and community circles; youth-serving institutions alone are unlikely to make a dent in shifting any false narratives without shifting norms and cultures that influence young people's lives. We hope to examine this topic and the other findings from this desk research in more depth through field research.

17. Mokona, Hirbaye, Kalkidan Yohannes, and Getinet Ayano. "Youth Unemployment and Mental Health: Prevalence and Associated Factors of Depression Among Unemployed Young Adults in Gedeo Zone, Southern Ethiopia." International Journal of Mental Health Systems, No. 14, article 61, 2020.

18. "The New Work Reality." The Foundation for Young Australians, 2018.

19. Zaitseva-Chipak, N., M.Saprykina,and O.Hondiul. "Future of Work 2030: How to Prepare for Change in Ukraine." Center for Corporate Social Responsibility for IREX, 2021.

2. The mental health toll of the journey requires more focus

The youth school to work journey is exacting an emotional toll that can have lifelong impact, but most support models do not prioritize youth wellbeing.

Most youth support systems focus on supply- and demand-side interventions separately or in alignment, with the aim of aligning labor market needs by matching the available number of skilled workers with the available number of jobs, invigorating the broader market so that job creation happens, and nurturing the enabling environment to support economic development while equipping youth to access and benefit from dignified and fulfilling work.[20] Support for mental health is notably missing from this list.

Our desk research highlights that navigating an increasingly complex and uncertain learning and earning landscape is taking a mental and emotional toll on youth. Negative mental health effects can have serious lasting impact on young people's long-term social progress, mental wellbeing, and employability.[21] "Prolonged periods of unemployment and underemployment have serious implications on a young person's self-esteem and general mental health as

they transition to adulthood. Today 40% of young people identify as having low levels of social and emotional wellbeing. Among 18 to 24 year-olds who are looking for work, 28% reported anxiety in the previous year and 41% said they were affected by stress."[22]

A study focused on Iraqi youth revealed that if left unresolved, youth unemployment can have serious social repercussions, because unemployed youth tend to feel left out, leading to social exclusion, anxiety, and a lack of hope for the future. There is also evidence of greater mental health problems later in their lives. The impact on mental health includes low self-confidence and self-esteem, low cognitive and non-cognitive skills, anxiety, feeling of exclusion, anger, depression, suicidal ideas, and more.[23]

Mental health impacts of unemployment can result in broader social ills, such as a rise in crime, substance abuse, and gender-based violence.[24]

In contrast, positive mental wellbeing and an optimistic mindset can have a significant positive impact on a young person's trajectory. According to one longitudinal study done over ten years, a young person with an optimistic mindset about their career prospects begins working full-time hours two months faster than a young person who is not happy with their career prospects. Mindset and wellbeing can greatly impact the opportunities that a young person perceives as available to them.[25]

Mental health support is a critical gap within youth employment support systems. Our findings indicate that there is need for trauma-informed approaches within program and policy models that integrate psycho-social support and recognize the importance of equipping youth to navigate the impact of unemployment (low self-esteem, depression) and other difficulties while learning and earning (abuses, discrimination, performance anxiety). These psycho-social supports might be integrated into socio-emotional "soft" skills development models. An applied research pilot[26] in Mombasa, Kenya tested an approach which combines soft skills development with cultivating positive mindsets and self-belief amongst youth. 67.9% of the youth participants said they are confident they can use their experience in the pilot will enable them to advance their long-term professional goals.[27]

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20. The evidence shows greater impact from working in lower-income countries and with disadvantaged youth. There is limited evidence of 'modest' impact on employment and earnings from models doing entrepreneurship promotion and skills training. Other models, such as employment services which connect youth to jobs by strengthening the functioning of labor markets are falling short of expectations or showing mixed evidence. Further evidence is needed about most models; including ones that have been a recent focus; demand-side models (that address market failures or strengthen job creation) or ones strengthening synergies between these and supply-side models (that support youth). (From Kluve, Jochen, Susana Puerto, David Robalino, Jose Manuel Romero, Friederike Rother, Jonathan Stöterau, Felix Weidenkaff, Marc Witte. "Interventions to Improve the Labour Market Outcomes of Youth: a Systematic Review." Campbell Systemic Review 2017:12, December 2017.)

21. See note 20.

22. See note 20.

23. "Youth Employment Situation Report: Kurdistan Region, Iraq." Rwanga Foundation, June 2021.

24. Mokona, Hirbaye, Kalkidan Yohannes, and Getinet Ayano. "Youth Unemployment and Mental Health: Prevalence and Associated Factors of Depression Among Unemployed Young Adults in Gedeo Zone, Southern Ethiopia." International Journal of Mental Health Systems, No. 14, article 61, 2020.

25. "The New Work Reality." Foundation for Young Australians, June 2018.

26. Oduo, Nina. "Youth and Virtual Gigs: A Case Study." IREX, November 2021.

27. Ibid.

3. Support models overlook informality, which requires more focus

Historically, youth employment support systems have prioritized transitions from full-time formal education into full-time formal employment. This emphasis has limited youth-serving institutions' understanding of how to effectively support youth, because informal work is the reality that most youth in developing countries access or experience today.
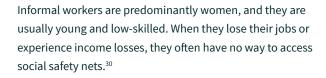
From the studies we reviewed, we identified three related trends about the way youth employment is described and researched. First, **informal employment is overlooked as an area of focus within support models relative to the real role that it plays in the lives of most youth.** According to a 2019 World Bank study, globally, the informal sector (firms and workers outside the line of sight of governments in emerging market and developing economies) accounts for about a third of GDP and more than 70% of employment.[28] 95% of young Africans make their livelihoods in the informal sector.[29]

"**[Youth] simply have to find some way of making a living, often accepting low-paid and poor-quality jobs, especially in the informal economy. The challenge is to bring them to the formal sector or to rewarding self-employment.**" *(UN, Youth Perspectives on Decent Work, 2011)*

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28. "The Long Shadow of Informality: Challenges and Policies." Ed. Franziska Ohnsorge and Shu Yu. The World Bank, 2021.
29. Griffin, Mary. "Advancing Social Justice: Shaping the Future of Work in Africa" International Labour Organization, 2019.

Informal workers are predominantly women, and they are usually young and low-skilled. When they lose their jobs or experience income losses, they often have no way to access social safety nets.[30]

"Informality has been associated with broader development challenges since long before the pandemic." *(World Bank, The Long Shadow of Informality: Challenges and Policies, 2019)*

Second, historically, formal employment has been equated with "decent" work. Positive values,[31] i.e., "good" or "ethical," tend to be assigned to formal employment, which is seen as better for both the worker (social protections, living wages, sustainability, and certainty), and the broader economy (taxable labor, measurable economic outputs, within and regulated by the law). In contrast, many of the studies we reviewed described informal work as a problem that needs to be fixed, characterized by negative attributes (untaxed, unregulated, unlawful, etc.). This **messaging about formal vs. informal fails to consider the fact that in many contexts, youth overwhelmingly experience informality and fluidity between these two categories.** Experts also assert that the dichotomy between formal and informal may be false[32] for many countries where informality prevails as the primary type of economic activity or in places where formal job creation cannot absorb the number of unemployed youth.

It is important to recognize the negative work conditions that can be found in informal work; higher risks, insecurity, and fewer protections that might expose workers to exploitative or abusive work conditions. However, development actors are beginning to see that especially within environments where the informal sector is the primary source of income for most youth, support models can help youth make progress towards dignified and fulling livelihoods in it. These strategies include raising informal work incomes and productivity,[33] alleviating "working poverty" (a reality that impacts youth more than others[34]), strengthening social protections, and improving productivity within informal work.[35] Social innovators are also supporting informal work career advancement, stabilizing incomes, professionalization (helping youth build reputations and portfolios[36]), and supporting the transition from informal work into consistent self-employment or entrepreneurship. These efforts can align with other long-term economic development strategies to strengthen the formal economy.[37]

30. The Long Shadow of Informality: Challenges and Policies, World Bank (2021) https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/37511318c092e6fd4ca3c60f0af0bea3-0350012021/related/Informal-economy-full-report.pdf

31. These insights about the moral nature of work was highlighted by Marc Sommers during workshop proceedings in 2021 which resulted in 'Defining New Paradigms for Work in Africa' was created by The Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania

32. "Defining New Paradigms for Work in Africa." From conference hosted by Lyndsey Farrel and Meghan Ference, March 2021. The Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania.

33. Fox, Louise, and Dhruv Gandhi. « Youth Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa Progress and Prospects." AGI Working Paper #28, Brookings Institute, March 2021.

34. "What Stands Between Youth and Decent Jobs?" International Labour Organization, June 2018.

35. Melis, and Raphaela Karlen. "Supporting Africa's Urban Informal Sector: Coordinated Policies with Social Protection at the Core." World Bank Blogs, December 2020.

36. Flip Africa founder Abu Musuuza highlighted strategies for helping gig workers professionalize during workshops in 2021, which resulted in 'Defining New Paradigms for Work in Africa' was created by The Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania

37. See note 20.

4. Intersectional frameworks that can reveal youth lived experiences are uncommon

It is uncommon for research approaches to use an intersectional lens to examine youth needs and contexts. Yet evidence shows that programs achieve greater impact when they are directly responsive to youth needs, contexts, and structural constraints.

Impactful support models recognize that youth are not a homogenous[38] group. Systematic reviews[39] of the evidence from youth employment programs show that models directly responding to specific youth needs and contexts are more effective. How program models are implemented matters; it is more effective to combine multiple models to directly respond to bottlenecks and youth needs.[40] Therefore, it is critical for development actors to have a deep and nuance understanding about youth needs and contexts to develop impactful support models.

One study highlights the importance of understanding context: culture, policies, access to education, institutional supports etc. According to the study, many individuals steer the course of their lives and actively cope with structural constraints, but others are overwhelmed by the lack of socioeconomic and psycho-social support. Without support they move into NEET or are unable to transition their educational credentials into employment.[41] This suggests that **research about youth lived experiences, structural constraints, and contexts can reveal key bottlenecks to be addressed in program models.**

We found that most of the reports included in our review assume that one demographic category (e.g. gender, educational level, etc.) has an outsized impact on a young person's school to work journey without recognizing how intersectionality or overlapping identities can impact the specific journey that a young person experiences. A greater focus on intersectionality would be beneficial for approaches to offer a more nuanced understanding of how social identities, privilege, and marginalization impact youth employment.

A Global Gender Equality and Social Inclusion study[42] uses an intersectional lens to highlight areas where support can make a difference within young people's school to work transitions.

> "Given the varied outcomes it seems fair to conclude that [youth employment] program type, per se, is not an indication of effectiveness. Intervention design, including the appropriate identification of target groups and focus on specific bottlenecks, as well as implementation, is likely to matter more." *(World Bank, Stocktake of Evidence on Youth Employment Programs, 2018)*

38. 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.
39. See note 20.
40. See note 20.
41. Schoon, Ingrid, and Mark Lyons-Amos. "A Socio-Ecological Model of Agency: The Role of Structure and Agency in Shaping Education and Employment Transitions in England." Longitudinal and Life Course Studies 2017 Volume 8 Issue 1 Pages 35 – 56, July 2016.
42. "Global Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Analysis: Global Trends and Recommendations for Youth Excel." IREX, March 2021.

One third out of the **58 million** children who were out of school in 2015 had a disability,[43] signaling that inclusion in learning needs to be a priority for improving employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.

19.5% of males 15 years or older believe that it is unacceptable for women to work,[44] this introduces unique barriers of bias that young women face in order to secure employment.

40% of the world's population lacks access to education in a language they speak or understand, with ethnic minority populations, girls, and women more significantly affected.[45] This data point highlights the need for culturally appropriate support during school to work journeys.

In two thirds of countries worldwide, men are more likely to be internet users than women.[46] This underscores the importance of digital and internet access to achieve parity. The following data supports this point; there is a strong connection between gender parity in internet usage and gender parity in tertiary enrollment in colleges, universities, and trade schools. The only region where women's participation on the internet is higher is the Americas, where counties also display high levels of gender parity in tertiary education.[47]

These findings illustrate that **an intersectional lens that considers context and structural constraints is essential for youth employment research though uncommon amongst the studies we reviewed.**

43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.

5. New research models uncover more authentic, fluid youth school to work journeys and narratives

New research approaches reveal novel insights and narratives about youth school-to-work journeys, which differ from the traditional narratives that emphasize a one-time linear journey into formal work and fixed employment. Youth-serving groups can build on this approach to further identify unaddressed youth needs, gaps in support, structural and contextual constraints to inform support model designs.

"[Youth realities represent an enormous heterogeneity and array of school-to-work trajectories] youth employment policies need to take into account this enormous heterogeneity and support the broad array of trajectories that people follow in the period that defines their youth, with the overall aim of building their capacity for lifelong employability. Traditionally, the majority of youth employment programmes have targeted only one transition which may have limited their potential impacts." *(ILO, Youth Transitions and Lifetime Trajectory, 2019)*

Around 2019, a few seminal reports were released, examining youth school-to-work transitions in new ways by studying youth lived experiences as non-linear journeys.[48] Before such studies were released, authoritative sources of knowledge on youth employment focused on fixed employment narratives based on economic terms and outputs. **In contrast, recent studies examine young people's lives in new ways that highlight their enormously varied, shifting, dynamic, and fluid journeys into work.** These review findings illustrate that the journey from school to work can have multiple entry points and youth can change the direction of their journey and face interruptions or setbacks. These recent reports, while making notable headway to help us understand youth lived experiences, do not highlight youth voices and perspectives by engaging youth in a meaningful way, nor do they highlight data or insights to identify key gaps or opportunities for support aligned to these new narratives about diverse and fluid youth trajectories.

The table below highlights how new research models are already providing important and novel insights to shift the common narratives about youth lived experiences. This indicates a need for further research with similarly youth-centered research approaches to further advance the learning about gaps and opportunities of support along these dynamic youth trajectories to work.

> "[Support for] multiple youth transitions can be done via strong multi-intervention coordination (an integrated approach) and / or including specific advisory or coaching for lifelong trajectories in each intervention." *(ILO, Youth Transitions and Lifetime Trajectory, 2019)*

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48. These five reports include: ILO Youth School Transitions, 2) UNICEF Unlocking School to Work Transitions, 3) World Bank, the Long Shadow of informality 4) Caribou/MasterCard Foundation Report on platform-based work 5) Secondary school education in Africa/Master Card Foundation report

Common Narratives

New Narratives

Youth employment is
studied and defined
according to
**fixed employment
statuses,**
employed versus
unemployed.

**Other categories of work increasingly recognized
and centered:**
• Informal work[49]
• Self-account work (self-employment without employing
others)
• Self-employment, with a recognition that there is a
spectrum of entrepreneurial activity in which youth could
engage
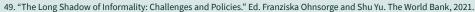• NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training)

**"Hustling" = fluidity of job titles, employment status, and
working multiple jobs:**
• Multiple work engagements at a given time[50]
• Strategically adapting how to describe one's work status
based on what is economically advantageous or social and
familial expectations, such as communicating different
job titles or roles or employment status based on the
situation[51]
• "The rising tide of non-standard employment," temporary,
part-time, multi-party, disguised employment, and
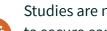dependent self-employment.[52]

49. "The Long Shadow of Informality: Challenges and Policies." Ed. Franziska Ohnsorge and Shu Yu. The World Bank, 2021.
50. "The New Work Reality." Foundation for Young Australians, June 2018.
51. "Defining New Paradigms for Work in Africa." From conference hosted by Lyndsey Farrel and Meghan Ference, March 2021. The Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania.
52. "The Rising Tide of Non-Standard Employment." International Labour Organization, May 2017.

Common Narratives

New Narratives

Many varied youth journeys and multiple transitions:
Studies are now recognizing there is a vast variety of journeys to secure earning, how youth are affected by other trajectories (e.g. reproductive trajectories),[53] and that they go through multiple transitions.

Emphasis on one pathway to success:
transitioning along a one-time linear journey from fulltime formal education into fulltime formal employment.

Dynamism and fluidity between learning and earning:
Youth learn, earn, adapt, and adjust at the same time in order to succeed. For instance, moving from on-the-job learning to online learning to only working, shifting to new fields (e.g., from ecommerce to entertainment), or changing work types (e.g., from freelance to virtual work). This dynamism is likely impacted by disruptions to the world of learning and work.[54]

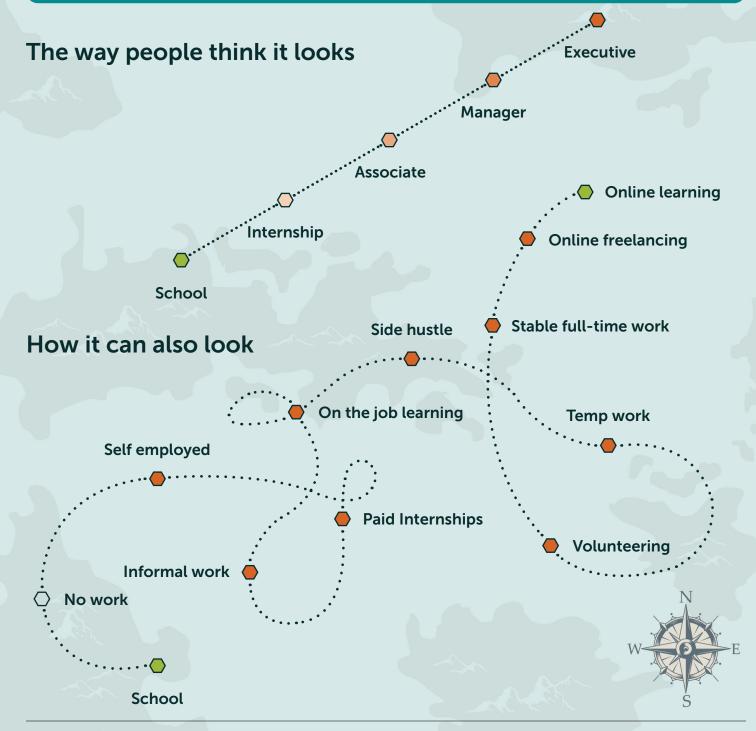**Fluidity between formal vs. informal and rapidly diversifying new work models**
• Youth shift between formal and informal employment and work across an increasingly diversifying and widening spectrum of formats, as well as in new jobs/careers:
• Work formats: online and gig work, freelancing, partnering with an existing business in 'joint ventures', consulting with existing businesses, etc.[55]
• New jobs: cyber security, cloud computing, e-commerce etc.

53. Chacaltana, Juan, Sara Elder, and Miso Lee. "Youth Transitions and Lifetime Trajectory." International Labor Organization Employment Policy Department, Working Paper No. 253, 2019.
54. "The Future of Jobs Report 2020." World Economic Forum, October 2020.
55. Schwatrz, Jeff, Steve Hatfield, Robin Jones, and Siri Anderson. "What is the Future of Work?" Deloitte Insights, 2019.

This **comparison between common narratives and new narratives** shows that disruptions to work and learning prompt us to make changes to our language about school-to-work transitions so that it is representative of authentic youth experiences. The journey between learning and earning is a more accurate depiction of the fluid and dynamic nature of youth transitions between formal as well as informal learning and work.

The way people think it looks

Executive

Manager

Associate

Internship

School

Online learning

Online freelancing

How it can also look

Side hustle

Stable full-time work

On the job learning

Temp work

Self employed

Paid Internships

Volunteering

Informal work

No work

School

Visual inspired by LinkedIn CEO Ryan Roslansky.

6. Youth voices and leadership are uncommon in research

Until recently, research from authoritative sources did not center on youth lived experiences, voices, and leadership within research designs or implementation. This may have produced limited definitions or frameworks for understanding the realities youth experience. While macroeconomic perspectives are essential, when they are not balanced with youth and local perspectives to translate numbers into the nuanced factors which shape young people's lives, research approaches risk elevating assumptions or false narratives.

Power imbalances within research are multi-dimensional, stemming from decisions about who gets to set research agendas, usually these are Global North actors who set broader youth employment agendas and provide funding. Other imbalances take an intersectional slant through biases and norms about who has credibility as a researcher between youth and adults, male and female, based on level of education, class etc.

Since community-based research methods, such as Participatory Action Research, were introduced in the 1940s, there has been a recent and growing focus on youth inclusion in research. There are, however, few "authoritative" studies that center on local and youth voices and agency or put youth in the driver's seat to make decisions and lead research. It is worth noting that there are challenges and barriers to active engagement of youth in research; power imbalances, lack of trust, risks to youth, and related ethical issues.[56] Despite such barriers, there is evidence that suggests significant benefits to youth co-leadership in research that could address current gaps or introduce new and valuable perspectives about young people's lived experiences.

As with community-based research approaches,[57] engaging those closest to the issue may bring to light authentic journeys and lived experiences, strengthening the research's qualitative rigor and relevance. Youth-led research could strengthen trust between research subjects and researchers, introduce more expansive and authentic narratives, and disrupt incomplete perceptions or assumptions about what young people's journey into work is really like or how best to understand and support youth. **Meaningfully inclusive and participatory research within youth employment has the potential to strengthen the rigor of the research by uncovering accurate, relevant, and inclusive insights that can serve as youth-driven guideposts to equip decision-makers to design relevant and impactful youth programming and policies.** It also moves the development sector one step closer to youth employment support models that elevate youth voices and leadership to shape decision-making. Replacing predominant power imbalances within research, policy or program design where adult and Global North actors set the agenda and providing resources with thoughtful intergenerational models for collaboration to shape impactful youth employment programs and policies.

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56. Kim, Jangmin. "Youth Involvement in Participatory Action Research (PAR): Challenges and Barriers." Critical Social Work, Vol. 17 No. 1, May 30 2019.
57. 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 6.1 (2013): 9-16.

A Call to Action

A Learning Agenda

A narrow exclusionary, or inaccurate view of youth employment by the exact systems that are designed to support them has the potential to cause harm or reinforce intersectional barriers and unfair power differentials that can negatively affect youth, placing unrealistic expectations on them to succeed according to one idealized school to work trajectory. Such narrow views only lead to youth struggling to navigate their transitions without relevant or responsive support from systems which are 'blind' to their lived experiences which may include informality, self-employment and precarity.

At IREX, we propose a learning agenda informed by this desk research to understand the authentic, lived experiences of youth navigating the transition from learning to earning. Learning from this learning agenda can strengthen the impact of youth-serving institutions, programs, and policies on addressing youth unemployment at local, regional, or global level. We propose the following question to guide the learning agenda:

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

To advance this goal, IREX will conduct field research focused on understanding youth learning to earning journeys. Our research approach will engage youth as researchers to examine the enablers, barriers, perceptions, and disruptions that affect young people's success during this journey.

Let Us Center Youth Experiences in Our Research and Programming

Share research power with youth

1

Youth are often marginalized in the very research processes that seek to understand their experience. Join us in empowering youth to be protagonists in exploring and understanding the youth learning to earning journey.

Do no (more) harm

2

The ideal but increasingly unattainable career narrative that so many young people hear, including from well-meaning sources, might do more harm than good. It creates new barriers for youth and marginalizes those who fail to achieve formal employment. Youth benefit from safe environments for learning and work that actively work to do (no more) harm.

Share honest stories about the journey

3

Youth need to hear an honest story about the journey into work that they are likely to experience, so that they are equipped to effectively adjust and adapt and ultimately pursue a path that is fulfilling and true to their realities.

Unlearn false narratives, celebrate, and support authentic journeys

4

Identify ways that youth employment support models can help all unlearn false narratives and celebrate young people's authentic paths to employment and see that their complex, difficult, dynamic, unique, fluid journeys are valid. Uncover how narratives about work shape mental wellbeing and define success, such as questioning the narratives that tell youth they need to secure formal work to be fully fledged adults and the idea that jobs should fill us with purpose, passion and fulfillment.

Share feedback

5

Do you think we are on the right track to examine authentic lived experiences by studying enablers, barriers, perceptions, and disruptions that effect youth journeys into work? Are there other questions we need to ask?

Study with us

6

We welcome collaborators who are interested in this learning agenda and want to better understand the youth journey from school to work. Reach us at contact.cali@irex.org to explore opportunities to collaborate and get updates on knowledge products from the field research under this learning agenda.

Youth Development @ IREX

For 50 years, IREX has prioritized youth development, increasing youth's abilities to help them thrive within work and their roles in society today and in the future, strengthening 21st Century skills, improving opportunities for youth apply and strengthen abilities through actions, contributions and leadership, and supporting institutions to become more inclusive of youth needs and engagement so that youth are empowered as forces for positive change in their own lives as well as their local and global communities.

Annex 1: Glossary of Terms

Youth	In this paper, youth are individuals between the ages 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.
Development actors or youth-serving institutions	Researchers, implementers, donors, and policymakers who have set strategic priorities to make an impact on addressing local, regional, or global youth unemployment.
"Authoritative" sources of knowledge	Research, studies, reports, and publications that are frequently used to shape youth employment program and policy design decisions.
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.
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)
Human-centered design	Focuses on cultivating deep empathy with the people with whom you are working by building prototypes, sharing what you've made together, and eventually, putting your innovative new solution out in the world. (IDEO)
Support models, support systems, models, or youth employment models	These terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to youth employment programs and policy 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 policymakers.
Youth-centered or youth-centric	Youth are meaningfully engaged in a process that engages youth perspectives, voices, and experiences at the core of research, programs, or policy. Within such processes, youth lead and shape decisions.

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