

Youth Well-Being Along Their Learning to Earning Journeys



Guidance for understanding
and designing holistic
youth employment programming



Acknowledgments

This guide is the result of an extended consultative, youth-led research process with youth in Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine.

Authors:

IREX staff: Maxie Gluckman and Isabella Petros-Weber;

Youth research collaborators: Vitalii Mykhailiv, Ivan Diachenko, Maryna Kobzar, Myrsoslava Kosiakova, Anastasiia Huliatytska, Daryna Zavorodnia, Darlene Dzimwe, Charles Mwale, Periana Kalonga, William Chawinga, Lilian Olivia Orero, Kevin Ndura, Emmanuel Ng'ososei, and Ivy Osebe;

Consultant: Sarah Mattingly

Community collaborators:

Sharon Lang'at, Chris Ouma, Silvy Kananu, Consolate Ojwang, Clion Okoth, Barwani Msiska, Yasinta Nakoma, Rachel Surkin, Olena Dzhevaga, Tetiana Liubyva, Mehri Druckman, Yuliya Tkachuk, Micah Johnston, and Cai Thomas

Reviewers:

IREX internal: Jill Miller, Matthew Vanderwerff, Sara Hill, Magdalena Fulton, Rachel Surkin, and Brian Batayeh;

External: Ann Hershkowitz (USAID), and Tsega Belachew

Designer:

Sebastián Molina.

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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.



Table of Contents

- Executive Summary4
- Introduction and Background6
 - Why is youth well-being important and urgent now? 6
 - Why is youth well-being important to addressing youth employment? 7
 - The challenge for youth programs and policies 8
 - Introduction to “Youth Well-Being Along Their Learning to Earning (L2E) Journeys” 10
- Research Methodology13
- Discussion of Key Findings14
 - Youth learning to earning journeys are complex and diverge from expectations. 14
 - Youth learning to earning journeys and well-being are intertwined in diverse ways. 18
 - Youth intersectional identities and surrounding context influence well-being and L2E journeys. 21
 - Youth possess knowledge, skills, and attitudes that support their well-being and resilience as they navigate complex L2E journeys. 29
- Recommendations31
- Appendix A: Narrative about Research Phases and Methods34
- Appendix B: Bibliography39
- Appendix C: Country Spotlight Report: Ukraine42
- Appendix D: Country Spotlight Report: Kenya49
- Appendix E: Country Spotlight Report: Malawi57

Executive Summary

Youth employment continues to be one of the most inextricable challenges to global economic, social, and environmental development. Recent research conducted by IREX in Kenya, Malawi, Ukraine, Iraq, and Guatemala suggests that the transition from school into work has become increasingly long and challenging, exacting a negative emotional toll for youth, aged 18-35, during defining life stages.¹ Young people's disrupted and/or prolonged transitions into the workforce, coupled with periods of unemployment, have been identified as impediments to acquiring the skills and experiences crucial for supporting lifelong employability, fostering social and economic opportunities, and promoting overall well-being.²

In their own words, youth navigating the learning to earning (L2E) journey voice that they are worried, sad, frustrated, ashamed, lost, angry, defeated, and hopeless, which in clinical terms points to poor well-being—possibly depression or anxiety—or worse yet, suicidal ideation or more serious clinical diagnoses.³ Youth experiencing decreased well-being are more likely to face barriers to accessing decent work and to demonstrate stunted workforce productivity.⁴

In the context of a growing youth unemployment crisis and rising rates of poor mental health—disproportionately affecting youth from marginalized, low income, and conflict settings⁵—it is critical that youth-led and serving organizations and policymakers and donors enter well-being in youth workforce development programming to ensure holistic, relevant, and timely supports and improved youth labor market insertion and experiences. To support this aim, in 2023 IREX conducted research entitled “Youth Well-Being Along Their Learning to Earning Journeys” alongside 14 youth researchers, consulting 111 youth participants, aged 18–35, from across Ukraine, Malawi, and Kenya.

Centering well-being in youth workforce development programming can help to ensure holistic, relevant, and timely supports and improved youth labor market insertion and experiences.



1. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a.
2. Chacaltana, Elder, and Lee, 2019; Paul and Moser, 2009; World Health Organization, 2022.
3. UNICEF, 2022c.
4. World Economic Forum, 2020; World Health Organization, 2022.
5. UNICEF, 2019.

Four primary findings emerged:



Grounded in youth voice and perspectives, this resource unpacks each finding and its relevance for youth programming and supports. We also present recommendations geared toward youth-led and serving organizations and donors, providing guidance on how these actors can support youth well-being along their L2E journeys.

Introduction and Background

Why is youth well-being important and urgent now?



“From an economic perspective, youth is a crucial period when ‘mental capital’ is formed. Mental capital broadly refers to a person’s cognitive and emotional resources, including their flexibility and efficiency of learning, the ability to transfer skills from one area to another, and ‘emotional intelligence,’ such as social skills and resilience in the face of adversity.⁶ Disruptions to acquiring mental capital can adversely affect future life opportunities, including success in education, skills acquisition and the transition to employment.”⁷

Youth employment continues to be one of the most inextricable challenges to global economic, social, and environmental development. Recent research conducted by IREX in Guatemala, Iraq, and Kenya suggests that the transition from school to employment is increasingly long and emotionally exacting, and it takes a negative toll on youth well-being and general economic development.⁸ International Labour Organization research indicates that youth in low- and middle-income countries spend an average of 11.8 months unemployed before securing their first job.⁹ Nearly 40% of youth never transition into stable employment regardless of their educational level, with longer periods and higher rates of unemployment among youth from marginalized, low-income, and conflict settings.¹⁰

Related research suggests that unemployment and insecure or adverse employment situations are linked to increased rates of poor mental health.¹¹ Furthermore, global evidence links mental health

challenges to a loss of US \$1 trillion each year through lost productivity.¹²

Taking this as a whole, we are at a critical moment for further understanding the confluence of youth employment and well-being as we attempt to recover from the long-term impacts of the youth unemployment crisis and exacerbation caused by COVID-19.



6. Government Office for Science, 2008.
7. WHO, 2020; McDaid and Cooper, 2014.
8. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a.
9. Chacaltana, Elder, and Lee, 2019.
10. UNICEF, 2019.
11. Paul and Moser, 2009; World Health Organization, 2022.
12. World Health Organization, 2022.

Why is youth well-being important to addressing youth employment?



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

IRAQI YOUTH¹³

In their own words, youth navigating the learning to earning (L2E) journey voice that they are worried, sad, lonely, ashamed, bored, angry, defeated, and hopeless, which in clinical terms points to poor well-being—possibly depression or anxiety—or worse yet, suicidal ideation or more serious clinical diagnoses.¹⁴ This is significant, as research has shown that well-being can impact a young person’s success in transitioning into and remaining in the workforce. For example, youth experiencing decreased well-being are more likely to face barriers to accessing decent work and to demonstrate stunted productivity.¹⁵ This is important because 50% of young people will have experienced at least one period of mental ill-health¹⁶ by the age of 25.¹⁷

This number can also be predicted to increase, given the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth mental health globally. Early scientific evidence has shown a 25% increase in global prevalence of anxiety and depression, with youth and women in low- and middle- income countries being most affected.¹⁸ Youth were impacted by multiple stress factors, including fear of infection; social



isolation; loss of family and friends; disruptions of support systems such as schools, universities, health care services, and places of employment; and increased uncertainty over financial resources and future plans.¹⁹

This context is relevant given that the increased duration and challenging nature of youth’s L2E journey can exact an emotional toll during important life stages for youth.²⁰ Youth’s interrupted and/or prolonged transitions into work have been found to be detrimental to acquiring the skills and experiences necessary to support their lifelong employability, social and economic opportunities, and well-being.²¹ Unemployment has also been found to negatively impact mental health, with stronger effects found in countries with weak levels of economic development, unequal income distributions, or weak unemployment protection systems.²²

13. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a.

14. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a; UNICEF, 2022c.

15. World Economic Forum, 2020; World Health Organization, 2022.

16. Mental ill-health is an umbrella term often used in policy documents and prevention work to describe both mental health concerns and mental illness.

17. World Economic Forum, 2020.

18. World Health Organization, 2022.

19. OECD, 2021; World Health Organization, 2022; Bell, et al., 2023; Wade, Prime, and Browne, 2023.

20. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a.

21. Chacaltana, Elder, and Lee, 2019; World Health Organization, 2022.

22. Paul and Moser, 2009: This meta-analytic review of 237 cross-sectional and 87 longitudinal studies found an average overall effect size of $d = 0.51$ with unemployed persons’ mental health levels being a half a standard deviation below that of employed persons.



The challenge for youth programs and policies

“Mental health issues are not merely personal issues but have a social impact too. Systems and structures influence the mental health of a person. It is a political issue and requires community effort.”

INDIAN YOUTH ADVOCATE²³

While governments and large employers, especially in high-income countries, are increasingly investing in well-being—defined by USAID as “the state where youth thrive” related to “individual well-being, interpersonal well-being, and skills and knowledge”²⁴—most youth employment program approaches do not prioritize participant well-being.²⁵

Youth employment initiatives often neglect to address the well-being implications associated with the multifaceted L2E journeys. On one hand, educational institutions and parents often promote an idealized image of success, which can have detrimental effects

on youth.²⁶ The false notion of a straightforward, onetime linear transition into full-time, formal employment is unrealistic, especially in many low- and middle-income countries where the informal economy dominates.²⁷ Youth who are not able to achieve formal employment may experience feelings of failure, shame, and hopelessness, as well as a loss of confidence.²⁸ Furthermore, an excessive focus on formal employment may result in insufficient or inadequate support being available to young individuals who wish to pursue nontraditional careers or entrepreneurship. This can more acutely impact those whose education, socio-economic class, geography, or other factors may limit their opportunities in the formal employment sector.²⁹ Consequently, some youth find themselves in a state of “waithood” or prolonged unemployment driven by the pursuit of an ideal but elusive formal job position.³⁰

23. DIYouth Advocacy, 2022.

24. UNICEF, 2019b; USAID, 2021.

25. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a.

26. Ibid

27. International Labor Organization, 2023; UNICEF, 2019.

28. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a; Mokona, Yohannes, and Ayano, 2020.

29. International Labor Organization, 2023; UNICEF, 2019.

30. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a.

Mental health and well-being are impacted by a youth’s socioecological context, which includes relationships, cultural norms and beliefs, policies, and support systems.³¹ As part of this system, there are many conditions that may impact youth well-being such as poverty, social inequality, marginalization, exposure to war, and social upheaval. Similarly, youth’s intersectional³² identities, including gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, and so forth, greatly impact well-being and success in the L2E transition, as marginalized groups have a higher risk of poor mental health and limited access to support.³³ Similarly, services that are supposed to help can be harmful when they lack social cultural competence. Research suggests that youth have better experiences when services are provided by people who share or at least understand their lived experience.³⁴



Despite these challenges, education and employment programs have an opportunity to strengthen the capacities of youth to cope with well-being ups and downs of the L2E journey and beyond. These efforts, when integrated into proven, successful workforce development models—including life and soft-skill development, technical and vocational training, and on-the-job learning opportunities—can promote youth resilience to changing workforce demands and contexts.

Implementing holistic employment interventions that position well-being as integral to achieving workforce outcomes requires supportive funding climates as well as task sharing across diverse sector actors. In addition, programmatic relevance and efficacy hinge on these efforts to map youths’ needs and engage them in the design of efforts for their

benefit. The “Youth Well-Being Along Their Learning to Earning Journeys” initiative seeks to support global development stakeholders in achieving these aims, presenting targeted recommendations to drive the conversations and actions urgently needed to meet the needs of young people worldwide.

31. The Center for Child and Family Wellbeing, 2020; Bronfenbrenner, 2000.

32. 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 acknowledgment that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalize people.

33. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022b.

34. Boylorn and Given, 2008.

Introduction to “Youth Well-Being Along Their Learning to Earning (L2E) Journeys”

IREX’s work in youth employment programming is grounded in a positive youth development (PYD) framework³⁵ and the importance of understanding and designing interventions that are responsive to the needs, struggles, and lived experiences of youth (aged 15–35). To support this goal, IREX is investing in research to better understand the varied youth L2E trajectories with a focus on how youth experience this important period of economic, societal, and personal transition.

In 2022, IREX’s Center for Applied Learning and Impact conducted research³⁶ and developed program design tools and guidance³⁷ about how youth employment programs can better support youth during this increasingly uncertain and emotionally exacting transition from education into the world of work. Because well-being came up as a major challenge in that research, as a next step, IREX took a deeper dive into how

youth well-being impacts and is affected by the L2E journey. Well-being has been found to have both enabling and hindering effects on youth’s success in the transition from education to employment in both the immediate and long term.³⁸ There is also a significant gap in youth employment research. While governments and large employers in high-income countries are increasingly investing in well-being, programs designed to support youth employment for low-income and marginalized youth may not place sufficient emphasis on youth well-being.

USAID’s recent guidance on youth development emphasizes youth well-being, including the provision of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)³⁹ across sectors and in three primary domains: individual well-being, interpersonal well-being, and skills and knowledge.



35. USAID, 2023. The Positive Youth Development framework recognizes youth participation as vital to development. In order to achieve the vision of healthy, productive and engaged youth, PYD programs, practices and policies must work with youth to improve their assets, agency, contribution, and enabling environment. The present work supports these aims by promoting youth leadership and voice to inform and drive actions related to the design and execution of more responsive youth-led and serving workforce and well-being programming.

36. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a.

37. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022b.

38. OECD, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022.

39. USAID, 2022; USAID, 2021.

Dimensions of Well-Being⁴⁰



Individual well-being

includes positive thoughts and emotions such as hopefulness, self-esteem, and self-confidence and relates to youth agency in the PYD framework. Agency includes positive identity (i.e., beliefs and values that a person holds about themselves and their future) and self-efficacy (i.e., belief in one's ability to do things well).



Interpersonal well-being

speaks to nurturing relationships, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and self-confidence. It is a combination of assets and contributions in the PYD framework. Assets include having interpersonal skills (i.e., communication and social skills), recognizing emotions (i.e., ability to identify feelings and emotional reactions), and having self-control (i.e., ability to manage emotions and regulate one's behavior). Contribution includes engagement in activities that have a sense of meaning.



Skills and knowledge

are needed to make positive decisions, effectively respond to life changes, and express oneself. Skills and knowledge relate most directly to the enabling environment in the PYD framework. Enabling environment includes bonding (positive emotional attachment), belonging and membership (sense of being cared for and supported), and a sense of safety (both physical and psychological).

40. USAID, 2021



In line with its recognition of the importance of well-being and MHPSS, USAID has been promoting nonclinical, cost-effective, cross-sectoral approaches to deliver well-being support.⁴¹ In the context of youth development, examples include capacity building delivered to education and youth-development staff (i.e., teachers, career counselors, administrators, youth, and youth-led and serving organizations) to provide basic well-being programming such as anti-stigma and bullying awareness, increased psychosocial support content in soft-skill and career development courses, delivery of Mental Health First-Aid,⁴² and dissemination of MHPSS-related referral resources. Peer support programs and dissemination of youth voices on the subject of well-being and MHPSS have also been found to be effective to engage and support youth in their employment journeys.⁴³

UNICEF has also centered youth well-being as a pressing need and institutional priority with the launch of the Global Coalition for Youth Mental Health in 2022, alongside cross-sectoral public and private partners.⁴⁴ Together this coalition seeks to address the increasing global burden of mental health conditions in youth through investment and action—with workplace well-being as a key focus area.⁴⁵ In a complementary call to action, the World Health Organization’s World Mental Health Day on October 10, 2023, called for unity around the promotion and protection of mental health as a universal human right vital to supporting overall health and well-being. One of their primary messages centered on the right to be free from stigma and discrimination that affect employment experiences.⁴⁶

Reacting to these calls for more holistic youth support models and workforce development interventions, in 2023, IREX launched the “Youth Well-Being Along Their Learning to Earning Journeys” study working with youth researchers in Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine.⁴⁷ The present report unpacks our research methodology and findings, privileging the role of youth voices throughout. Our diverse participant sample highlights L2E journeys of male and female youth, aged 18 to 35, with varying education levels and employment statuses. We interrogate commonalities across youth experiences in our three study contexts and present recommendations related to youth programming and support models directed toward practitioners, scholars, policymakers, and donors across the youth-development space. Individual country reports are also presented as appendixes, providing the unique contextual and cultural factors shaping youths’ well-being and L2E journeys.

41. USAID, 2021

42. IFRC, 2021. *Mental Health First-Aid: Approach, assess for risk of self-harm and assist; Listen non-judgmentally; Give reassurance and information; Encourage appropriate professional health; Encourage self-health and appropriate support strategies.*

43. Ibid

44. UNICEF, 2022b.

45. The Global Coalition for Youth Mental Health’s work is driven by four main objectives: 1. Address stigma surrounding poor mental health and raise awareness of the need to protect children’s, young people’s, and their family’s mental health; 2. Call for policymakers and governments to act on youth mental well-being; 3. Increase private and public investment in UNICEF’s mental health programming; and 4. Improve business practice related to workplace mental health to support employees and their family’s mental health.

46. WHO, 2023.

47. IREX has had long-standing programming serving youth in Ukraine, Kenya, and Malawi. They also reflect contexts where youth experience prolonged unemployment and complex school to work transitions—making them ideal spaces for understanding well-being along L2E journeys.

Research Methodology

The report details a multiphase, qualitative approach for data collection, analysis, and dissemination involving youth researchers and participants. This section outlines the desk research phase, methodology design, qualitative field research, data collection, analysis, and dissemination processes. For a full methods description, please see Appendix A.



Desk Research (January–May 2023):

IREX's technical team reviewed 74 sources on youth employment and well-being, selecting 37 authoritative resources for further review. The goal was to establish an evidence base providing initial insights into youth's experiences during their school-to-work transition, identify well-being trends, and inform subsequent field research.



Methodology Design and Contextualization (April–May 2023):

The research methodology design began with recruiting and onboarding 14 youth researchers, aged 19–29, (four from Kenya, four from Malawi, and six from Ukraine). Through the initial onboarding and training sessions, youth researchers contextualized the research design by making technical and semantic modifications to better fit their cultural contexts.



Qualitative Field Research (May–July 2023):

Youth-led research complemented desk research findings, exploring youth perspectives on well-being during the L2E journey in three unique contexts: Ukraine, Kenya, and Malawi. Inclusivity was ensured through diverse participant criteria including gender, geography, education,⁴⁸ age, job status, disability status, languages spoken, tribal status, and migration status, as relevant for each context.



Data Collection:

Youth researchers conducted 15 focus groups (four in Kenya, four in Malawi, and seven in Ukraine) with 111 participants (39

Kenyan, 32 Malawians, and 39 Ukrainians) employing a protocol including open-ended questions and interactive activities (see Appendix A for examples). Youth researchers documented data through note taking, charting responses, collecting handouts, and referencing audio recordings for enhanced data capture.



Data Analysis:

Youth researchers developed guiding questions for qualitative analysis, which was conducted through human analysis and cross-referenced with artificial intelligence (AI) assistance using ChatGPT. Themes and patterns were consolidated, validated by youth researchers, and enriched with additional cultural context.



Data Dissemination and Quality Check:

The research findings were disseminated in “Reflect, React, & Respond” workshops⁴⁹ led by youth researchers and attended by key well-being and workforce development stakeholders from the public and private sectors in Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine. Stakeholders had the opportunity to reflect on the complexities of the L2E journey, react to the factors that challenge and support youth well-being, and respond to the strategies that youth have identified that work well in supporting them. These workshops served as a data quality check when stakeholders reflected on the initial data analysis, suggested future directions of analysis, and added key cultural nuances that informed future analysis and product preparation.



Research Limitations:

The report acknowledges limitations, including a small participant sample and the snapshot nature of youth perspectives. While the findings are not generalizable to youth writ large, they underscore the need for further research with a broader, more diverse sample to comprehensively understand youth challenges and experiences during their L2E journeys.

48. Participant recruitment focused on youth with secondary education degrees or higher, looking at the school to work transitions for this target group. Diverse IREX programming works to serve youth that fit this profile.

49. The Reflect, React, & Respond Workshop is a methodology and tool designed by IREX with the aim of prompting discussions around data and their uptake into practice. It invited participants to ‘respond’ to the data, ‘react’ through a series of prompts, and “respond” through activities by determining how this data may inform their work and providing feedback to the IREX project team.

Discussion of Key Findings

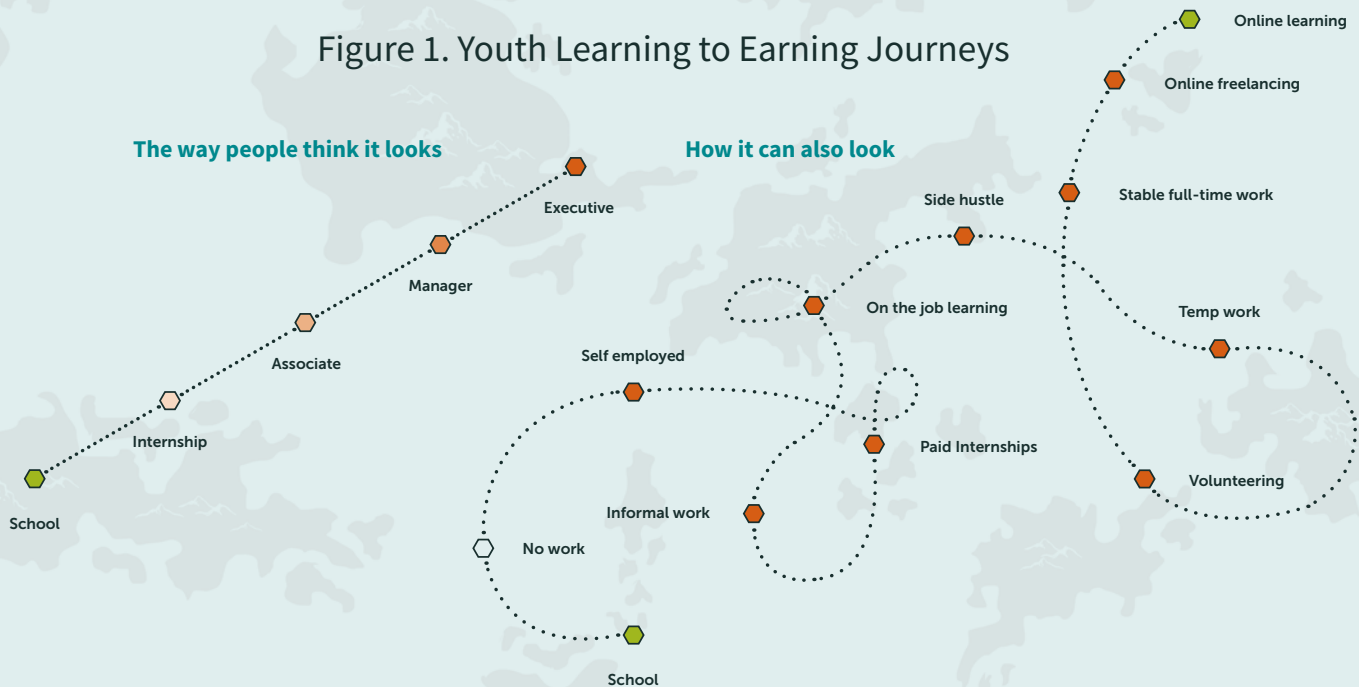
Youth learning to earning journeys are complex and diverge from expectations.

IREX’s first iteration of the L2E research, conducted in 2022, found that youth often experience complex and multifaceted journeys when transitioning from school to work.⁵⁰ These journeys are often nonlinear, winding paths that diverge from the seamless transitions many are led to expect (see Figure 1). In fact, for most youth worldwide, this transition has become longer, harder, and less certain⁵¹—further exacerbated by social, economic, political, and environmental factors including the complex influences of COVID-19, migration, conflict, inflation, and technological advancements including AI on labor markets.⁵²

The present research validated previous findings⁵³ illustrating that many youth in Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine also experience complex, nonlinear L2E journeys. This section covers key themes that emerged through focus groups discussions, foregrounding youth voices through direct quotes as a source of expert knowledge informing richer understandings of local youth’s employment journeys and well-being experiences in these three country contexts. Moreover, it poses critical reflections that may serve to further understand youth experiences in similar environments.

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.

Figure 1. Youth Learning to Earning Journeys



50. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a.

51. Ibid

52. O’Higgins and Verick, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2023.

53. Belachew and Vanderwerff, 2022a.

Visual drawn from Belachew, Tsega and Matthew Vanderwerff. “Understanding Youth Learning to Earning Journeys: The Case for a Learning Agenda.” IREX, 2022.



Society's unrealistic employment expectations cause harm: Youth feel shame and failure.

When asked how the straight line and curvy pathways presented in Figure 1 resonated with them, various focus group participants shared that they experienced a stark contrast between the expectations of a straightforward and struggle-free pathway and the reality of their long, uncertain, and often frustrating journeys with many bends and turns. Youth expressed that these expectations were shaped by input from various actors who carry power, including families, educational institutions, and even societal expectations—reinforcing a feeling of failure should they not be able to achieve the straight, desired trajectory. Youth view these expectations as harmful, particularly if the pathway does not reflect a large majority of their experiences. Below, we include an illustrative quote from a youth participant.

“The emphasis that education is key to success, is the reason for the frustrations; we are encouraged to go to school, and we think, we will graduate and start working, and yet most people don’t go through this journey.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH

The youth consulted expressed frustration with this misalignment between educational curriculum and labor market demands, with many needing to return for additional schooling or choosing to work in a field unrelated to their studies after not securing fulfilling work that aligned with their credentials. This post-graduation disillusionment affected youth in diverse ways, with shame being a commonly referenced emotion. We share some illustrative quotes:

“Only 5% of graduates are on the first path. Most people come out half-baked and have to figure it out after school [meaning] we are mainly taught theory and not how to apply it as well as critical thinking skills which affect the approach we take after graduation.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH

“What we learn in school, and what is actually needed in the industry is not the same.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH



Youth undergo diverse L2E journeys: The importance of validating their lived experiences.

Seeing the curvy pathway of Figure 1 helped to validate and destigmatize youth participants' complex L2E journeys and afforded an entry point to youth sharing both verbally and visually what their diverse pathways to employment looked like. Youth participants in all three country contexts reinforced that everyone's L2E journey is unique and can involve various transitions, such as moving from school to work, volunteering, self-employment, temporary contracts, and exploring different opportunities. The combination of both paths was found to be a common practice, with many youth participants starting out with a linear school-to-work transition, and then shifting to the second path once their initial plans or opportunities did not work out as expected. In the words of youth focus group participants:



“The first path is what we imagine when we are in school but in reality, some do actually go through that path due to luck, but I don't think that happens. I've seen people that started work and worked for over a year after the contract now they are back on internship. It is possible to go back and forth on the path or not follow the path at all.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH



“[I] looked for work, got an underpaying job, then started [my] own business, went back to job searching, got a job in a toxic environment, and now [am] in a temporary job.”

KENYAN YOUTH

Transitioning from internships and on-the-job training to employment poses challenges for youth along their L2E journeys.

Internships appeared as part of many youth journeys in Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine. Internships and other on-the-job training opportunities were seen by focus group participants as critical for gaining the experience often required to be competitive in the workforce. However, youth expressed that they are often hard to find, primarily unpaid, and demanding, without the benefit of leading to long-term employment opportunities.



“I am worried about unemployment. It is impossible to find a job for students with minimal experience. Everywhere vacancies require one year of experience. And where could I get it? Even with volunteer experience, they do not take it because it is unsuitable. There are no internships. You send 20 CVs, but none of them respond. I am losing hope of finding a job.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“It is hard to get even internships, and if you do get them, they are mostly unpaid, but if they are paid, it is low, have heavy workload, and a poor work environment.”

KENYAN YOUTH

In Kenya and Malawi, the government has programs to promote youth internships post-graduation (bachelor’s degree); however, even those formally sanctioned programs did not guarantee a job. Moreover, the conditions of these internships also often left youth with concerns.



“My internship ended midway. [I felt I was] taken advantage of because of desperation.”

23-YEAR-OLD MALAWIAN FEMALE YOUTH

The feeling of being overworked in internships was commonplace among the youth. However, there were some who noted that there was an opportunity to transition into part- and full-time work with the same companies.

Self-employment is a notable step in many youth L2E journeys.

As youth’s pathways evolved, many also pursued self-employment or entrepreneurship opportunities, and they spoke of the benefits of independence, the freedom to explore different avenues, and the potential for success.



“I was able to maintain my well-being because I had multiple sources of income including online thrifting.”

KENYAN YOUTH

However, they also acknowledged various challenges associated with starting and running a business, such as financial risks, client management, and the need for constant adaptation. For many, self-employment was seen to supplement income from other employment sources, or as temporary work while they searched for something more permanent.



“I needed to earn money immediately after graduation, so I started a side hustle. Yet society and friends looked down on me for this informal work.”

KENYAN YOUTH

Youth learning to earning journeys and well-being are intertwined in diverse ways.

Youth experiences captured in Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine demonstrate the diverse ways in which youth well-being and their L2E journeys are intertwined. These influences range from positive opportunities and support structures to detrimental impacts associated with challenges faced throughout their journey. For example, reliable finances; receiving emotional support from family, friends, and community; hobbies (e.g., playing sports, listening to music, journaling); spiritual activities; peer-to-peer socialization; and professional development and meaningful work were found to positively influence youth well-being along their L2E journeys (**Figure 2**).

Contrarily, unsuccessful job applications, unmet expectations, financial constraints, discrimination, and pressure and/or judgment from family and the community were found to have brought frustrations and affected youth well-being (**Figure 3**).

Figure 2. Factors that positively influenced youth well-being along their L2E journeys.



Figure 3. Factors that negatively influenced youth well-being along their L2E journeys.



The factors that youth shared that increased and decreased their well-being represent a snapshot of their experiences at one moment in time, and in many cases the same factor (e.g., family) had both supportive and detrimental effects depending on the context. The next sections highlight a myriad, yet not exhaustive, set of youth experiences focusing primarily on negative impacts with the goal of informing recommendations to improve youth well-being along their L2E journeys. In a later section, we will unpack further youth resilience and existing support structures and practices.

Youth experience stress and frustration associated with their L2E journeys.

A common experience shared by youth across all three countries was the stress associated with the job search process and periods of unemployment, often resulting in disappointment, frustration, and insecurity.



“Because as you search and you are not getting the jobs, or getting any responses, you start asking yourself, is there something wrong with my CV? Is my academic experience not worthy? Why did I suffer through the four years in university?”

MALAWIAN YOUTH

“It is not the process of looking for a job itself, but the realization that you are unemployed, you are still in the process, creates a feeling of vacuum and instability or unsafe”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

This resulting self-doubt and blame that youth participants experienced was also found to contribute to stress and larger mental health challenges.

“When you get to 25, you probably had certain goals for yourself, and if you haven’t achieved them, this leads to stress which might lead to the use of drugs, loss of focus, and mental health issues. ”

MALAWIAN YOUTH

Societal expectations and peer pressure exacerbate youth well-being challenges.

Findings from this research also suggest that societal expectations and peer pressure can add to the toll that the L2E process enacts on well-being. For example, the pressure to be independent, stable, and successful after completing education can lead to feelings of inadequacy, apathy, and regret when these expectations are not met.

“I had problems with anxiety when I finished high school. Lots of my friends had diagnoses too. Social expectations create pressure. You need to have a good life, a car, a family, and a career, and if you don’t, it affects your well-being.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

Comparing themselves to peers who seem to be doing better was also found to further intensify negative emotions youth were experiencing.



“This is the stage where reality hits because you are not in the industry after expecting your life to turn around after school; at this stage one [feels bad] if you feel like you don’t fit in the community, or among a certain class of people. Your social life is full of shame, you want to do things people your age are doing, but you cannot afford [to], you go to the shops, just to get a bottle of water.... So, you judge yourself, and you choose to just go home and sleep, it adds to your stress, that’s why when you sleep, you escape the thinking, once you are awake, it’s the same cycle.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH

While our research did not delve into how youth were exposed to and participated in social comparison, trends of youth’s increased access and use of social media in low- and middle-income countries⁵⁴ may contribute to increased peer-to-peer comparison.

Youth failure to achieve their desired L2E journeys may lead to an increase in destructive behaviors.

For some youth, the experience of shame and derailing emotions may even cause them to pursue destructive or violent behaviors. Youth who participated in the focus groups were candid and shared that they had experienced periods of depressions and alcoholism, and had used drugs to escape their feelings of failure at certain points of their journeys—with some even reporting suicidal ideation.



“Inability to secure a job leads people to resort to alcohol abuse, uncontrolled emotions and overall change in behavior which does not reflect their true values.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH



While youth reflected on how the current generation is more outspoken and accepting of mental health issues—signaling a positive trend toward attention to and inclusion of well-being considerations in daily conversations—they expressed that there is still societal stigma attached to seeking out support. In Malawi there is even a social term for it, *mamuna salira*, which refers to when men are going through something that they feel ashamed to share because they don’t want to be called weak and, as a result, end up self-destructing.

Job security and work environments actively shape youth well-being.

Challenges associated with the labor market opportunities and structures also contributed to shifts in youth well-being. Job insecurity, for example, came up in all three country contexts as a significant concern, with many youth having experienced periods of short-term and informal employment—leaving them feeling in a state of constantly searching for employment. The youth described this prolonged instability as being detrimental to their well-being, leading to stress, anxiety, and even depression.



“Working under short contracts, job insecurity, and increased workload makes one easily disposable and uncertain about the next paycheck.”

KENYAN YOUTH

54. Ghai, et al., 2022.

While the ability to access employment in some form was recognized as something to be grateful for, the characteristics of the work environments, contracts, and expectations also influenced youth well-being. For example, toxic work environments and poor relationships with co-workers or bosses, as well as having to take a job outside of their area of study due to lack of opportunities, all had an impact on youth L2E journeys.



“I have stress due to complex work without contract. It is unstable and I feel [that I] have a physical and mental coma.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“I completed school, got a job in a private company, got lower pay, and am now just exhausted. I am lucky to work and not hustle looking for work, and salary.”

KENYAN YOUTH

While youth have many strategies, skills, and support systems to maneuver these challenging employment circumstances—a point further discussed below—these examples serve to illustrate the complex nature in which well-being evolves across youth L2E journeys.

Youth intersectional identities and surrounding context influence well-being and L2E journeys.

Participants in Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine highlighted the interconnectedness of various identity factors, such as gender, geography, spoken language, age, education, religion, class, race, immigration status, sexual identity, tribalism, political affiliation, and marital status in impacting their well-being and access to opportunities along their school-to-work transitions (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The identity factors most mentioned by youth focus group participants as influencing their well-being along their L2E journeys.



In many cases, youth's identities served as both supportive and restrictive factors in accessing work opportunities. Gender and networks were two of the most referenced in this regard. Youth participants shared examples of gender-based discrimination in accessing work opportunities and their treatment in the workplace for both women and men. In some illustrative examples:



“What stood out was the aspect of discrimination especially from men in our office when I worked as a psychologist. They bad-mouthed me due to my good performance and accused me of sleeping with my clients which eventually pushed me to quit.”

KENYAN FEMALE YOUTH



“For some employers, the fact that you are a woman and planning to have children or already have them can be a red flag.”

UKRAINIAN FEMALE YOUTH



However, in some circumstances and job categories, being a woman was seen to be an advantage for employment. For example, certain industries such as hospitality and service were said to specify preferences for female applicants in their job advertisements.



“[You might see] “we need a girl, single, no bad habits” for a cook, for example.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

As these previous examples reflect, youth's various identities, such as gender and marital/family status, may interact in complex ways shaping employment opportunities.

Youth participants also shared various instances of discrimination and bias they faced based on their identities. Appearance, age, and education were some of the most frequent examples. Youth across all three countries said that certain jobs require that they meet specific physical characteristics or that they must dress in a particular way to reflect cultural and behavioral norms.



“Certain jobs require specific characteristics, e.g., perfect body structure for a sales lady.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH





“The way you dress matters a lot because most of the old people in Malawi are still very traditional, and the way you dress has a direct reflection of who you are in terms of culture and behavior ... they assume you might be a thief, not intelligent or into some other activities.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH

Ageism was also a theme that emerged in all three countries, with youth facing challenges by assumptions that equate youth to limited experience, unprofessional, and/or unable to demand respect from clients.



“I have been told you can’t be here because you look younger and don’t gain authority”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

However, in some cases age was seen as a pathway to employment, for example, job postings stating specific age requirements or desires.



“It is common to see ads saying: “We need young girls, etc.””

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“Some people prefer younger people because they easier to exploit, for example, unpaid work”

KENYAN YOUTH

Age often also interacted with educational qualifications in erecting barriers to youth employment as employers were said to often prefer those with a degree over those who did not have one—and these degree programs require additional income and time to complete. While the stigma of



technical and vocational education or certification programs in comparison to four-year programs has been highlighted in youth employment literature previously,⁵⁵ this research adds to the discussion by considering the ways in which youth’s identities may intersect and influences their well-being and L2E journeys.

Contextual factors beyond youth shape their well-being and L2E journeys.

When participants were asked to share what external factors influence their well-being and L2E journeys—presented with the bioecological model inspired by Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory⁵⁶—they shared various examples that map to each level of the circle in **Figure 5**.

55. The World Bank, UNESCO, and International Labour Organization, 2023.

56. The Center for Child and Family Wellbeing, 2020; Bronfenbrenner, 2005.

Figure 5. The bioecological model: Contextual factors shaping youth well-being⁵⁷



For example, youth in each country mentioned the role that connections—often associated with family socioeconomic status, friend and community connections, and educational networks—play in facilitating job opportunities. These connections, when coupled with support and guidance from family, friends, and mentors, were mentioned as greatly contributing to overall well-being as well as job prospects and success.

“For one to find a job, they need connections; if you don’t have connections, you suffer.”
MALAWIAN YOUTH

“Thanks to my social capital, I succeeded in avoiding discrimination at work or just negative things because people would recommend me to each other, and that has been helping along the way.”
UKRAINIAN YOUTH

57. The Center for Child and Family Wellbeing, 2020; Bronfenbrenner, 2005.



During their personal L2E journey reflections, many youths noted that the absence of these networks made them feel hopeless about being able to change their current circumstances and advance in their professional careers.



“They say birds of the same feathers flock together; I feel like most people living in the [suburbs] stand a better chance of networking through community based/ neighborhood groups. ”

MALAWIAN YOUTH

The supportive and restrictive influence of education systems on youth employment was also noted by many youth across all three countries. Regarding supportive factors, youth who were able to access higher degrees commented that some schools offered alumni networks and mentorship opportunities to support their entry to the workforce; however, these were primarily present at private schools that required considerable financial investment. Several participants expressed frustration that their efforts to secure bachelor’s and advanced degrees did not always result in practical knowledge and skills they could apply to the workforce. In the words of youth focus group participants:



“What you study in school doesn’t rhyme with what the job market wants.”

KENYAN YOUTH



“After university, you don’t immediately leave with the skills for work, so you still need time after it.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

As a result, many youth sought out additional certifications, took unpaid internships, and pursued self-driven online learning and/or learning on the job. Yet youth’s opportunities to develop job skills and experience in Ukraine, Kenya, and Malawi were still seen to be limited and insufficient.



“When you look at adverts, you may find jobs in line with your education background, and then you see under experience “Five years’ experience” and you ask yourself, I have just finished school, where will I get five years’ experience from? So, you indeed just end up going for internship opportunities, knowing it is hard to get a job.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH

Youth in all three countries said that they experienced tensions between the importance of completing their degree and the need to gain practical, on-the-job experience and earn income—with many university faculty being inflexible to the needs of youth to simultaneously work and study.

Youth also reported that they felt family, social, and personal pressures to earn income as quickly as possible after their studies, in order to support and pay back those who helped them along the way. In Malawi and Kenya, this cultural norm was referred to as a “black tax” and placed a strain on youth well-being as many struggled to find permanent, gainful employment.



“Family has expectations that when you go to school, you will help elevate your family, and we even fail to do so. So it is hard.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH

In many cases, youth expressed frustration at this pressure because despite their continued efforts, the broader economic and social conditions continued to not be conducive to youth employment.



“Most of the things that actually stress us are beyond our control, for instance, no employment and not being able to have enough capital to start a business. When faced with these situations, no one knows what to do and as a result are left hopeless.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH





Along these lines of external factors outside of youth's control, work environments and relationships with co-workers and bosses were also found to shape L2E experiences. While excessive workloads were commonplace in youth journeys across all three countries, youth identified how having good colleagues and meaningful work could help to counteract these detrimental effects.

“The ability to provide for myself and realize my desires increased my well-being, but all-day work and a toxic team led to constant fatigue and apathy.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

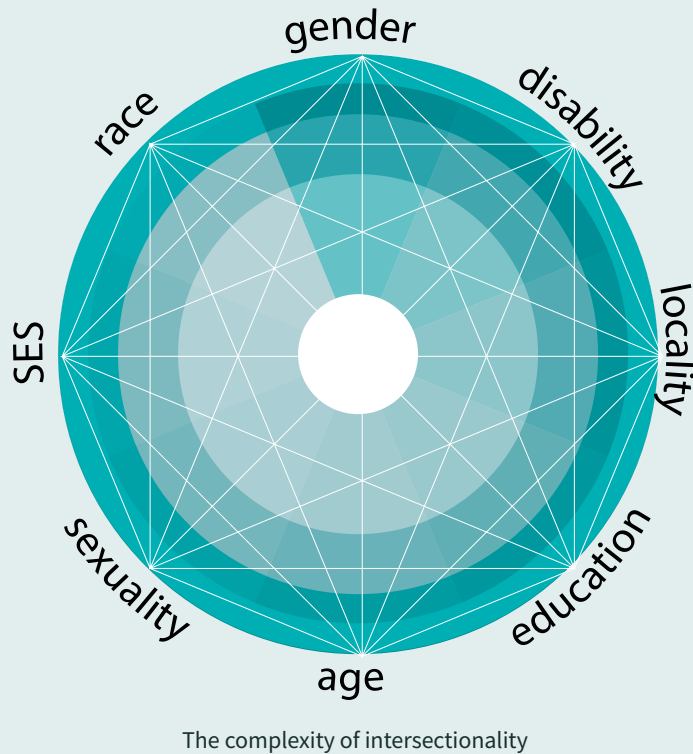
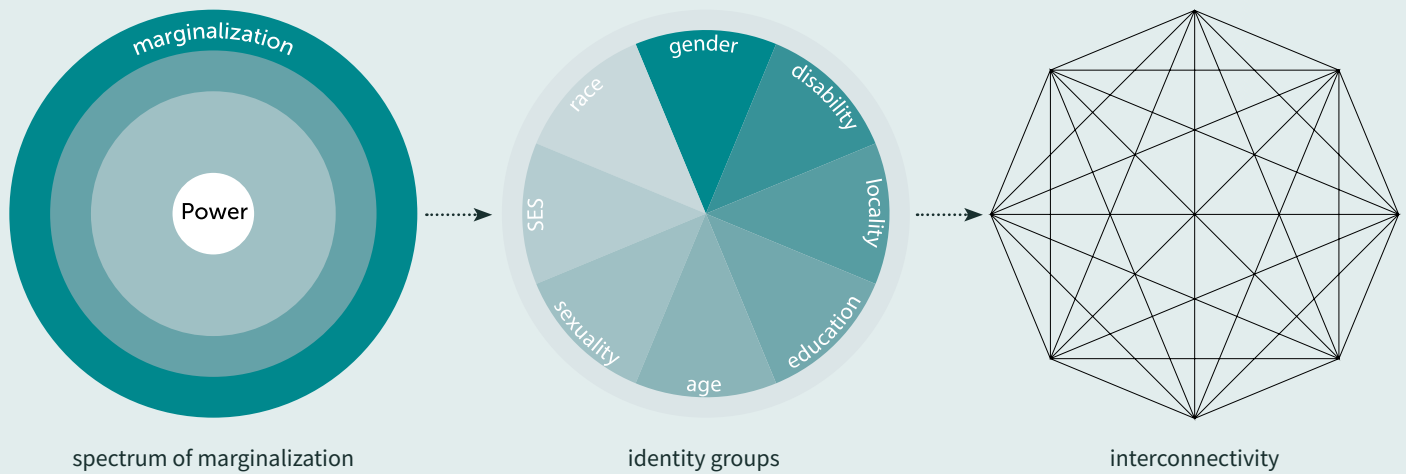
While it was rarely mentioned explicitly in youth's reflections, the COVID-19 pandemic has had

significant impact on youth employment and well-being. The pandemic led to dramatic consequences that have shaped labor markets and economic opportunities in Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine. While we cannot say with certainty that this was what youth were referring to when they mentioned high inflation rates, labor markets shrinking, and changing employer priorities and skills needed for the workforce, it is an important factor to consider. Youth's experiences also echo the well-documented effects the pandemic has had on youth well-being globally.⁵⁸ In addition, the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine was a key contextual factor affecting youth participants' well-being and economic experiences; to give appropriate attention to this unique circumstance, we cover this in the Ukraine country report in Appendix D.

58. Bell, et al., 2023.

Figure 6. The complexity of intersectionality.

These visuals—drawn from prior IREX Implementation Research conducted in Kenya, Guatemala, and the Democratic Republic of Congo⁵⁹—demonstrate the complex relationship that exists between a person’s identities, their marginalization, and their surrounding contextual and structural factors in shaping their employment journey. This finding was echoed in the present study.



59. Godoy, et al., 2023.

Youth possess knowledge, skills, and attitudes that support their well-being and resilience as they navigate complex L2E journeys.

Youth in Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine discussed the various challenges they faced during their L2E journey, including financial strains, limited job opportunities, discrimination, toxic work environments, and societal expectations to prove themselves. However, they also highlighted their resilience, willpower to learn, and the ability to adapt and grow from these challenges. Positive support systems made up of family, friends, and community members, including religious figures, were critical in helping youth navigate and overcome L2E challenges. Regarding family, the most referenced members were mothers, with parents in general and siblings also being recognized as key pillars of support.

The support youth sought from these contacts was mainly emotional. They greatly valued opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings freely and have the receiver actively listen and provide words of affirmation. While youth also valued-career related advice from these contacts, it was referenced to a much lesser degree—signaling that having space to be heard and supported may be often more impactful in helping them with their L2E journeys than anything more directly related to employment.⁶⁰

Meaningful employment challenges and opportunities positively influence youth well-being.

Youth also demonstrated a wide array of internal strategies and attitudes that they harnessed to support L2E transitions. For example, youth found value in tackling new challenges and opportunities—particularly those that engaged them in contributing to society and connecting with others.

“Positive people around me, new skills and challenges, gaining more experience, and a socially important job increased my well-being.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

“A sense of usefulness as a person, doing work where you can show your strengths and demonstrate the best result, [and] a sense of involvement in something more global and an understanding of personal contribution.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

While the social impact was regularly connected to the context of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine—further discussed in Appendix C—the desire to push oneself and learn new things was present across all three countries.

Youth pursuing their hobbies and interests enhances their well-being along the L2E journey.

Youth participants also mentioned activities they undertook to support their well-being, such as relaxation, sports, connecting with nature, eating healthy, meditation, writing, dancing, and reading (see Figure 2). For those who were able to achieve it, possessing a work/life balance brought joy to youth. In addition, health and physical wellness were seen as critical to maintaining positive well-being, including regular exercise, proper nutrition, and enough sleep. However, demanding work environments and societal, family, and financial obligations made these goals difficult for many to achieve.



60. It is possible that youth may also regularly seek out career-related support, yet direct those requests towards alternate contacts such as teachers, counselors, and/or mentors; however, these individuals were less frequently cited in the research when youth shared who they go to for support along their L2E journeys.

Table 2. The Who, What, Where, When, and How Youth Seek Support for throughout Their L2E Journeys

Who	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family • Friends/relationships • Self • Spiritual leaders • Colleagues • Mentors • Psychologist
What	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional support: active listening, advice, quality time, words of affirmation, empathy • Financial support • Career mentoring and networking • Spiritual guidance
When	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As needed • Weekends • After work/school • During therapy sessions • Daily/always • During holidays
Where	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family home • Friend’s home • WhatsApp • Nature • Church • Neighborhood • Home • Parks • Cafes • Gyms • Community centers • Cinemas • Safe spaces • Online
How	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By phone • Walking • Texting • By bike • By car • Social media • Subway and public transportation



Youth’s personal attitudes and practices play a meaningful role in their well-being and L2E journeys.

As various youth participants shared, their well-being—while greatly influenced by external factors—also was strongly rooted in internal beliefs and attitudes.

“Well-being is a particular foundation for moving on. It matters how much you know about your difficulties, why you feel what you feel, and your understanding of well-being. After reflecting on it, you can move toward improving your well-being and employment, resulting in self-affirmation due to having a job”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

As this example demonstrates, understanding personal well-being per se can serve as a tool for increasing well-being and positively influencing youth’s L2E experiences. For a broader understanding of Malawian, Kenyan, and Ukrainian youth’s strategies for supporting their well-being, see Table 2, which highlights the most referenced people, places, and ways they sought out this support.

Recommendations

The present research spotlights the critical interplay between youth employment and well-being, calling to action youth-led and serving organizations, policymakers, and donors to respond accordingly. The following recommendations aim to guide these efforts, reinforcing key actions and presenting new workforce development directives through a well-being framing. IREX believes that through multisectoral, holistic approaches, development programming can ensure more relevant, timely, and effective youth workforce solutions.

Call to action:

Center well-being in youth workforce development programming to ensure holistic, relevant, and timely supports and improved youth labor market insertion and experiences.



Youth learning to earning journeys are complex and diverge from expectations.

- Identify ways that youth employment support models can help youth and youth support systems including public sector, academic, and family and community actors, unlearn false narratives and celebrate young people's authentic paths to employment and see that their complex, difficult, dynamic, unique, fluid journeys are valid.
- Calibrate youths' expectations with the employment realities of their contexts. International development organizations alongside the local public sector and academic institutions that offer youth-oriented programming at critical moments of youth's school to work transitions are well positioned to take on this role.
- Diversify employment support programming to effectively meet youth's needs at various points of their journeys, which may include accessing and thriving in internships, self-employment, entrepreneurship, and informal and formal employment.
- Interrogate access challenges for internships and on-the-job learning opportunities to reduce barriers to entry. These efforts should also prioritize facilitating the transition from these professional opportunities to formal employment.
- Fund and design programming that aligns education and the labor market.

Youth learning to earning journeys and well-being are intertwined in diverse ways.

- Generate more holistic support structures within education and employment programming.
- Include relationship building, mentorship, and recreation and leisure activities in employment programming to strengthen youth resilience to the challenges they face along their L2E journeys.
- Research the role that social media plays in shaping youth's experiences with social comparison and well-being to inform targeted development and public policy interventions.



Youth intersectional identities and surrounding context influence well-being and L2E journeys.

Youth possess knowledge, skills, and attitudes that support their well-being and resilience as they navigate complex L2E journeys.

- Consider how identity and contextual factors influence youth well-being and L2E journeys to remove barriers and promote opportunities across social, economic, and political lines that center youth needs and experiences.
 - Engage the private sector to promote more gender, age, cultural, linguistic, and disability inclusive workforces that are contextualized to the unique needs of each local labor market.
 - Provide networking opportunities, mentorship programs, and career guidance services through educational and community spaces to help youth access employment.
 - Research L2E experiences for youth who may have dropped out of school prior to completing secondary education to expand understanding and relevant well-being and employment support to meet their needs.
-
- Ensure that youth are at the center of and partners in the co-design of actions and programs directed to support their well-being along their L2E journeys.
 - Leverage and build up pre-established, local community care networks to provide relevant, just-in-time support to improve youth well-being and employment opportunities and success.
 - Implement trauma-informed programs that integrate psychosocial support and equip youth to navigate the impact of unemployment and challenges they face along their L2E journeys.
 - Strengthen and expand peer-to-peer support networks, networking, and mentoring to improve youth's labor market insertion and L2E experiences.



Appendix A: Narrative about Research Phases and Methods

The in-text methods section of this report provides an overview of the multiphase qualitative approach employed to collect, analyze, and disseminate data with youth researchers and youth participants. This section provides a more detailed roadmap for understanding how the study was conducted and the findings presented, including relevant limitations faced throughout.

Desk Research (January–May 2023): IREX’s technical team considered over 74 sources (35 programmatic tools and 39 research documents) focused on the link between youth employment and well-being and selected 37 resources (17 programmatic tools, 20 research documents) for a further review. This included a diverse sample of resources that were published between 2015 and 2023 and varied in geographical scope (i.e., global, multicountry, national, and regional). This review prioritized “authoritative sources” including peer-reviewed research and knowledge sources used by global and local development policymakers and implementers to inform policy and program design decisions.



The goal of the desk research was multifold: (1) establish an evidence base for the bidirectional link between youth well-being and employment outcomes, particularly during the transition from school to work; (2) understand the lived experience of youth related to well-being during the transition from school to work; (3) understand trends in well-being support during the transition from school to work; and (4) inform the focus, scope, and design for subsequent field research. We prioritized resources focused on lower- and middle-income countries but considered high-income country resources to inform the evidence base for and programmatic trends related to youth well-being and employment outcomes.

Methodology Design and Contextualization (April–May 2023):

The technical team conducted a multistage research design working alongside youth research teams based in Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine. Fourteen youth researchers, aged 19–29, (four from Kenya, four from Malawi, and six from Ukraine) were recruited from youth leadership members associated with IREX country offices programs and/or IREX-supported youth organizations.⁶¹ They were provided with compensation commensurate with their workload, acknowledging their pre-existing skills and leadership as working professionals.



61. IREX has been working in Malawi since 2021, Kenya since 2014, and Ukraine since 1995. The youth researchers in Malawi and Kenya were recruited with the support of country staff, as they had engaged as leaders in prior IREX initiatives. In Ukraine we partnered with the Ukrainian Leadership Academy (ULA)—an implementing partner in IREX’s SHE’s GREAT! program. ULA is a values-based formative platform of personal and social development for young people a engaging motivated teenagers aged 16 to 20 in large-scale social projects.



The three country research teams were first trained in the research methodology by serving as participants in the focus group discussion, facilitated by the technical team. This allowed the youth researchers to experience the focus group design from a participant point of view and observe how the technical team facilitated the proposed activities, prior to contextualizing it by making technical and semantic modifications to better fit their cultural contexts. Youth researchers were also given a detailed script to help guide their focus group discussions, which they edited to adapt to their country team's preferences. As the aim of the project was to design youth-led research, it was imperative that the youth researchers had the agency to provide input into the methodology and revise it in tandem with the technical team.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, ethical considerations guided the research design and practices. Youth researchers were trained on

creating brave spaces,⁶² mental health first-aid, do no harm principles,⁶³ and ensuring confidentiality with participants' data before approaching fieldwork.

Qualitative Field Research (May–July 2023): IREX conducted youth-led research to complement the findings of the desk research and to probe youth perspectives on lived experiences related to well-being within the L2E journey. In addition to identifying youth priorities, needs, and gaps in support, we sought to build the awareness of youth participants of issues related to well-being.

Field Research Participants

The youth researchers, in partnership with IREX, sought to include a diverse array of participants in their study, recruiting a total of 111 young people. The youth researcher teams employed various recruitment methods, drawing from their personal networks, prior connections with IREX, and partnerships with organizations targeting specific demographic groups, including individuals with disabilities. To ensure inclusivity, the youth researcher teams were guided to create participant groups by considering factors such as geographical location (urban, peri-urban, rural), employment status (unemployed, short-term employment, informal/business owner, long-term employment, multiple income sources⁶⁴), educational attainment (TVET graduate, community college graduate, four-year university graduate, etc.), gender (male, female, other), age range (18–25 or 26–35), spoken language, residency status (permanent, refugee, internally displaced person, etc.), and other relevant criteria. Focus groups featuring mixed demographic groups were favored to promote peer-to-peer exchange of experiences and strategies. A full breakdown of youth participant demographics can be found below.

62. *Brave spaces: Places where individuals feel encouraged to speak up and share their perspectives, even when they might be outside the norm, uncomfortable, or challenging. Training materials were developed based on anecdotal information provided by Rosie Bick-Mera, LICSW, informed by experience working in community mental health and providing psychotherapy.*

63. Scott, 2022; IREX, 2022. *Do no harm principles: Create safe and brave spaces, create a culture of inclusion, center dignity, practice informed consent, protect confidentiality, person-centered.*

64. Youth were asked to self-select their employment category. Those who identified as short-term employed shared experiences of working without a contract or a fixed, months-long contract including work that did not include benefits or job protections. Long-term employment was more commonly associated with employment in the formal sector with a contract that was either longer than a few months or indefinite.

Participant Demographic Table

	 Ukraine	 Kenya	 Malawi
 Age	Thirty-eight 18- to 25-year-olds, one 26- to 35-year-old	Nineteen 18- to 25-year-olds, twenty 26- to 35-year-olds	Fifteen 18- to 25-year-olds, seventeen 26- to 35-year-olds
 Gender	26 female, 13 male	19 female, 20 male	15 female, 17 male
 Geography	25 urban, 14 rural	14 urban, 12 rural, 13 peri-urban	16 urban, 16 rural
 Education Level	5 high school graduates, 2 community college graduates, 17 current bachelor's students, 13 bachelor's graduates, 1 current master's student, 1 master's degree graduate	2 technical and vocational training graduates, 29 bachelor's graduates, 7 diploma holders, 1 certificate holder	17 4-year university graduates, 14 community college graduates, 3 certificate holders, 2 Malawi School Certificate of Education graduates, 1 Form 3 graduate
 Job Status	11 unemployed, 8 short-term/temporarily employed, 1 informal/business owner, 14 long-term/formal contract employed, 5 multiple income sources	11 unemployed, 9 short-term/temporarily employed, 8 informal/business owner, 4 long-term/formal contract employed, 7 multiple income sources	6 unemployed, 13 short-term/temporarily employed, 6 informal/business owner, 5 long-term/formal contract employed, 2 volunteers
 Languages Spoken	37 Ukrainian speakers, 2 Ukrainian and Russian speakers	19 English speakers, 20 English and Swahili speakers	13 English and Chichewa speakers, 4 Chichewa speakers, 15 English and Tumbuka speakers
Total Number of Participants	39	39	32

Data Collection and Focus Group Activities

Youth researchers conducted a total of 15 focus groups in all three countries (four in Kenya, four in Malawi, and seven in Ukraine). The data were collected by facilitating a standardized set of open-ended questions and interactive activities. The overarching data collection question guiding the interactive activities was, “What influences your well-being and learning to earning journey?” The youth researcher teams took notes, recorded participants’ responses on chart paper during the discussions and activities, and collected participant handouts with the notes from their personal reflections. Audio recordings of the focus groups were referred to afterward to enhance the data and to fully capture participants’ quotes.



In the first activity, impactful statistics, images, and quotes about youth well-being and employment and the connection between the two were presented. Participants were asked

to openly share their reactions and reflections. Second, the metaphor of a cup was used to measure well-being. A full cup is full of well-being. An empty cup is mental illness, struggle, and so forth. Participants were asked, “What are some of the factors or things in our everyday lives and L2E journeys that contribute to filling up and/or draining or emptying our cup?” “On the day-to-day, what do you do to fill your cup? Or that might drain or empty your cup?” For in-person focus group discussions, a pitcher of water and cup of water were passed around, and participants were asked to either fill or empty the cup based on the examples that they shared.

The focus group facilitators then introduced how intersecting identities and external factors can influence well-being along youth’s L2E journeys. Participants were asked to reflect on the following prompts: “How would you describe your identity?” “How do different parts of your identity affect your well-being and L2E journey?” “What are the environmental factors that influence your well-being and L2E journeys?”

Participants were also given time to illustrate the various stages in their personal L2E journey as well as document their well-being status, including factors that increased and decreased their well-being, at each stage. They started with completing education and ended their journeys at their current employment status, reflecting on each of the steps along the way.

In the final section of the protocol, participants were shown an image of the pyramid for MHPSS⁶⁵ and asked to identify examples of each level of the pyramid (basic needs, self-help, informal community care, primary health care, and specialized services) that they knew about in their community. Participants were also asked to describe any support that was challenging to find in their community. Building off this activity, facilitators asked youth to share details about their own well-being support system. For in-person focus groups, participants formed a circle, and one person started with a ball of yarn. They were prompted to share more about their system of support, responding to questions of who, when, where, when, and how they receive this support. As each participant shared their response, they held on to a part of the string and passed the yarn to the next speaker. By the end of the discussion, the string formed a web reflecting the participants’ network of support.

65. IASC, 2007; UNICEF, 2022a; Evangelidou, 2021.

Data Analysis: The data across focus groups in each country context were compiled and organized into four buckets based on the major sections of data collection. Through a collaborative data analysis workshop, IREX technical staff and youth researchers came up with two overarching questions: (1) What are the common themes that can be identified across these data? (2) What are any key differences that can be identified across these data? Subquestions were developed to support a richer understanding of trends present for different youth identities based on demographic data, including gender considerations, geography, and education level, among others. Youth researchers also came up with questions that were unique to the specific cultural and geopolitical contexts of Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine (e.g., the impact of the Russian full-scale invasion) that they were interested in analyzing.

The data were first analyzed qualitatively by hand by IREX team members; then they used ChatGPT, an AI software, to identify and describe themes and patterns in the data—cross-referencing these findings with the original human-generated analysis. The main themes and patterns generated were consolidated and presented to the youth researchers for them to validate the findings, suggest edits, and provide additional cultural context.

Data Dissemination and Quality Check: The project overview, research methodology, and initial analysis were disseminated in three different “Reflect, React, Respond” workshops led by the youth researchers. Attending the workshops were key stakeholders from Kenya, Malawi, and Ukraine who were professionally and personally invested in the employment challenges and well-being of their country’s youth population, such as youth advocates, mental health professionals, career counselors, government officials, and civil society organization staff. They were identified and invited by the youth researchers and IREX staff and partners. Stakeholders had the opportunity to reflect on the complexities of the L2E journey, react to the factors that challenge and support youth well-being, and respond to the strategies that youth have identified that work well



in supporting them. The workshops concluded with a co-design session where the stakeholders collectively brainstormed new strategies they could use to build upon their current youth engagement work with a focus on well-being and employment.

Research Limitations: This research, while offering valuable insights into the experiences of youth in Malawi, Kenya, and Ukraine, has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size of participants is relatively small, which limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, the perspectives shared by youth represent a snapshot in time, and their journeys may evolve in response to constantly changing environmental factors. These limitations underscore the need for further research and a broader, more diverse sample to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and experiences faced related to youth well-being along their L2E journeys.

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Appendix C: Country Spotlight Report: Ukraine

UKRAINE

YOUTH WELL-BEING, LEARNING TO EARNING

Country Spotlight

From May to July, 2023, IREX supported six youth researchers in consulting with 39 youth from diverse backgrounds around Ukraine on their experiences transitioning from school to work, or “learning to earning” (L2E). These focus groups targeted understanding the interaction between youth’s L2E journeys and their well-being. While IREX’s “Youth Well-Being Along Their Learning-to-Earning Journeys” (2023) report captures overall findings and recommendations garnered from the research conducted across three distinct contexts—Ukraine, Kenya, and Malawi—here we spotlight three themes unique to the Ukrainian participants and context and recommendations geared toward the international development community and youth-led and youth-serving programs and organizations.

Authors: IREX Staff: Maxie Gluckman and Isabella Petros-Weber;
Youth researcher collaborators: Vitalii Mykhailiv, Ivan Diachenko, Maryna Kobzar, Myrslava Kosiakova, Anastasiia Huliatytska, and Daryna Zavhorodnia.

A special thank you to the Ukrainian Leadership Academy and IREX’s SHE’s GREAT and Ukraine country office teams including Olena Dzhevaga, Tetiana Liubyva, Mehri Druckman, Yuliya Tkachuk, Micah Johnston, and Cai Thomas for your support throughout this process.

39 Youth Focus Group Participants


Gender:

15 female; 17 male


Age:

Thirty-eight 18- to 25-year-olds, one 26- to 35-year-old


Geography:

25 urban, 14 rural


Job Status:

11 unemployed; 8 short-term employed; 1 self-employed; 14 long-term employed; 5 multiple income sources


Education:

5 high school graduates, 2 community college graduates, 17 current bachelor’s students, 13 bachelor’s graduates, 1 current master’s student, 1 master’s degree graduate


Languages Spoken:

37 Ukrainian speakers and 2 Ukrainian and Russian speakers


Internally Displaced Persons:

6 participants, all within Ukraine

The full-scale invasion has had an important impact on youth employment and well-being.

In order to understand Ukrainian youth’s lived experiences during the data collection period, it is critical to unpack the impact of the full-scale invasion on their well-being and L2E journeys. While the research methods did not probe for this directly—in alignment with our “do no harm” approach—the topic emerged naturally, ranging from reflections on how the war has changed labor market demands and youth’s professional directions, to the personal tolls the stress and uncertainty have had on youth’s employment processes. In the words of one Ukrainian focus group participant, “The war affected the skill set that employers required of workers.” As a result, for this young person, the field and skills they had developed “became useless.” Another youth who was consulted built on this idea, sharing that “when you work for someone, there is a fear that tomorrow you will be fired because the country is at war, and you do not know whether the business will be profitable or not, or whether your skills will be needed.” For others, the war context erected barriers to employment opportunities, with employers avoiding hiring men who might need to serve in the army or discriminating against those with the status of an internally displaced person due to the concern that they would not be around for very long.

On a personal level, various youth expressed stress associated with uncertainty and fear for the well-being of their loved ones—impacting their ability to search for and secure work opportunities. As one focus group participant shared, “When a rocket hit my grandmother’s house nearby, it was challenging to be at the interview.” For others, this absence of stability served as a motivating factor helping them to push forward and be intentional with their employment decisions, gaining greater clarity on what they wanted to do with their lives. One youth research participant expressed that “during the full-scale war, I found myself and understood what I wanted to do. This is since you can die at any moment, so I hurried to decide on my profession as soon as possible.” In another example, a Ukrainian youth expressed:



“It has always been essential for me to know that my work has social significance, that my profession helps people. During the war, this feeling and desire intensified. Now I have chosen a career that will benefit my country the most. During the war, I thought about public organizations, the field of medicine, and something related to helping people and the state.”

While the toll the full-scale invasion has had on youth’s well-being has been documented in prior research,¹ these examples shed light on the interplay between well-being and employment at a critical historical moment that may have longer-term implications on youth’s L2E experiences. As such, it is important that youth-led and youth-serving organizations and programs—and entities that fund these efforts—consider the role that social, emotional, and skill-based supports for well-being may play in the design and implementation of effective youth workforce development programming and outcomes.

1. Chaaya, Celine, Vimala Devi Thambi, Özge Sabuncu, Reem Abedi, Awab Osman, Olivier Uwishema, and Helen Onyeka. “Ukraine–Russia Crisis and Its Impacts on the Mental Health of Ukrainian Young People during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Ann Med Surg (Lond)*. 2022 Jul; 79:104033. doi: 10.1016/j.amsu.2022.104033.

Societal expectations and pressures influence Ukrainian youth's early workforce experiences and well-being.

The present research revealed that many Ukrainian youth start career planning their L2E journeys as early as secondary education, given that working part-time or full-time is common while completing their college degree. This emerged for many reasons, as youth expressed desires to be financially independent, based on financial needs—especially those who relocated to a new city—as well as a means of gaining the practical experience needed to secure a job upon graduation. However, the reality that youth enter the workforce while still in school can create additional personally imposed and social pressures related to what success should look like, which was found to affect youth well-being. A youth focus group participant revealed,

“I had problems with anxiety when I finished high school. Lots of my friends had diagnoses, too. Social expectations and pressure. You need to have a good life, a car, a family, and a career, and if you don't, it affects your well-being.”

Youth also shared that they regularly compared themselves to peers who have already made strides in their professional development, resulting in feelings of resentment and low self-esteem. As a youth enrolled in a bachelor's program shared, “Why do some work and I don't? Everyone is working, but I don't know who I am or my sphere. Maybe I'm studying the wrong major. I'm already 20, and I'm still unemployed.” Youth also shared that they felt stress related to navigating gaining practical, on-the-job experiences with their school demands—particularly when their professors and/or academic institutions did not support these efforts. One current university student shared,

“Even in the university, there are often controversial positions from professors: some of them recommend looking for a job to get some experience, while others always emphasize that we entered university to study, not to work simultaneously and miss lectures. So, during studying, it's an additional pressure to combine this job search or job itself with studying; you must make a choice between studying and learning, and it brings a lot of stress.”

Early career guidance and support within their communities and academic institutions could help youth to alleviate these feelings and equip them with the skills and resources they need to help navigate this stressful life transition and help them find employment opportunities that align with their values and professional goals. In addition, given that youth's L2E trajectories seem to be beginning as early as secondary education in Ukraine, it could also be beneficial to integrate comprehensive workforce development programs and support systems into earlier stages of education, to ensure just-in-time support to youth that matches their needs.



Ukrainian youth experience misalignment between their education and labor market demands.

In the midst of the full-scale invasion, youth across the Ukrainian focus groups shared how they continued to pursue their education driven by their commitments to securing a decent job, fulfilling their potential, and working toward their futures. However, despite their ambitions, many Ukrainian youth expressed that their education alone was insufficient to secure gainful employment, pointing toward a misalignment between their education and the labor market demands. As a university graduate expressed, “After university, you don’t immediately leave with the skills for work, so you still need time after it.” This bred disappointment for many youth, who expected greater success upon graduation. In the words of one Ukrainian youth consulted, this challenge also contributed to broader life stressors related to finances, noting:

“No one taught us financial literacy or that education alone is insufficient. You have to work hard and earn a living. It was a struggle, especially for me...The reality is harsh, especially in big cities where competition is high.”

This anxiety related to securing experience and opportunities that would allow them to be successful in the job market and life was reflected by many focus group participants. As one youth put it,

“I am worried about unemployment. It is impossible to find a job for students with minimal experience. Everywhere vacancies require at least one year of experience. And where [can I] get it? Even with volunteer experience, they do not take it because it is unsuitable. There are few internships. You send 20 CVs, but none of them respond. I am losing hope of finding a job.”



While not always recognized as formal job experience by employers, youth expressed how internship and volunteer opportunities—particularly during the full-scale invasion—proved incredibly fulfilling for their personal and professional development. One Ukrainian youth expressed, “When a person has a lot of informal experience in volunteering and internships, that becomes their foundation. They have some skills that can direct them in choosing a future job.” As such, it is important to consider how these experiences might be further encouraged and valued within formal academic spaces. Moreover, efforts to more adequately align educational programming to labor market needs are crucial in order to prepare youth with the skills and experiences needed to secure meaningful and stable employment both during school and post-graduation.



Efforts to support Ukrainian youth well-being and their learning to earning journeys should:

- ✓ Fund and design workforce development programming that integrates social, emotional, and skill-based well-being interventions to support employment outcomes. Monitor the evolving well-being dynamic, particularly in the context of the ongoing full-scale invasion, to ensure that interventions meet youth's current needs.
- ✓ Partner with higher education institutions and career preparation centers to offer holistic support to ensure that youth have the skills to navigate stress associated with societal pressures along their L2E journeys.
- ✓ Integrate comprehensive workforce development programs and support systems into earlier stages of education, to ensure just-in-time support to youth that matches their needs.
- ✓ Align educational programming in a flexible and responsive way to labor market needs. Generate feedback loops and accountability mechanisms between the private sector and educational institutions to ensure that these changes are sustainable and evolve alongside changing demands.
- ✓ Promote more regular communication and collaboration among educational institutions, government agencies that manage internship opportunities, and private-sector human resource actors to ensure that internships and temporary or on-the-job learning opportunities result in more regular transitions toward stable employment.
- ✓ Leverage and build upon best practices within pre-established informal and formal community networks to best support youth well-being and employment opportunities and success. In addition, it is critical to improve access and affordability of mental health services to complement these localized support systems effectively.



Ukrainian Secondary Education Degree Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys



“Even in the university, there are often controversial positions from professors: some of them recommend looking for a job to get some experience, while others always emphasize that we entered university to study, not to work simultaneously and miss lectures.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



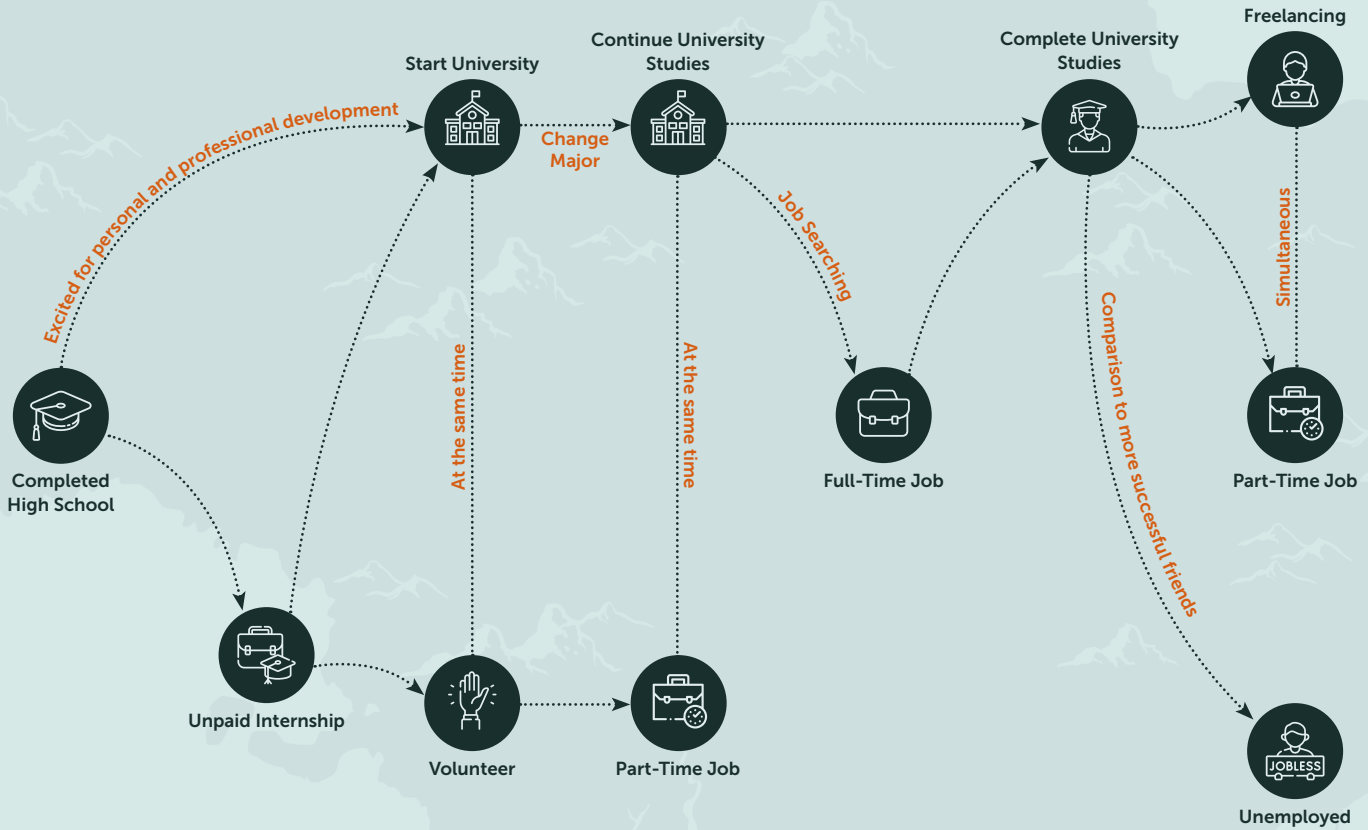
“The ability to provide for oneself and realize one’s desires increased my well-being, but all day work (24h) and a toxic team led to constant fatigue and apathy.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“I have stress due to complex work without contract. It is unstable and I feel have a physical and mental coma.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“When a person has a lot of informal experience in volunteering and internships, that becomes their foundation. They have some skills that can direct them in choosing a future job.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“When a rocket hit my grandmother’s house nearby, it was challenging to be at the interview.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“I have doubts about myself and the future and feelings of worthlessness. I do not understand own interests, there is a discrepancy between salary and work. I am in a depressive state and face a lot of pressure from people around me.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

These journeys are presented as compilations of various youth experiences with the intention of reflecting the complexity of youth L2E and well-being journeys. As such they are not aimed to be generalizable or map to all youth, but to serve to prompt dialogue and reflection related to youth experiences and supportive programming.

Ukrainian Bachelor's Degree Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys



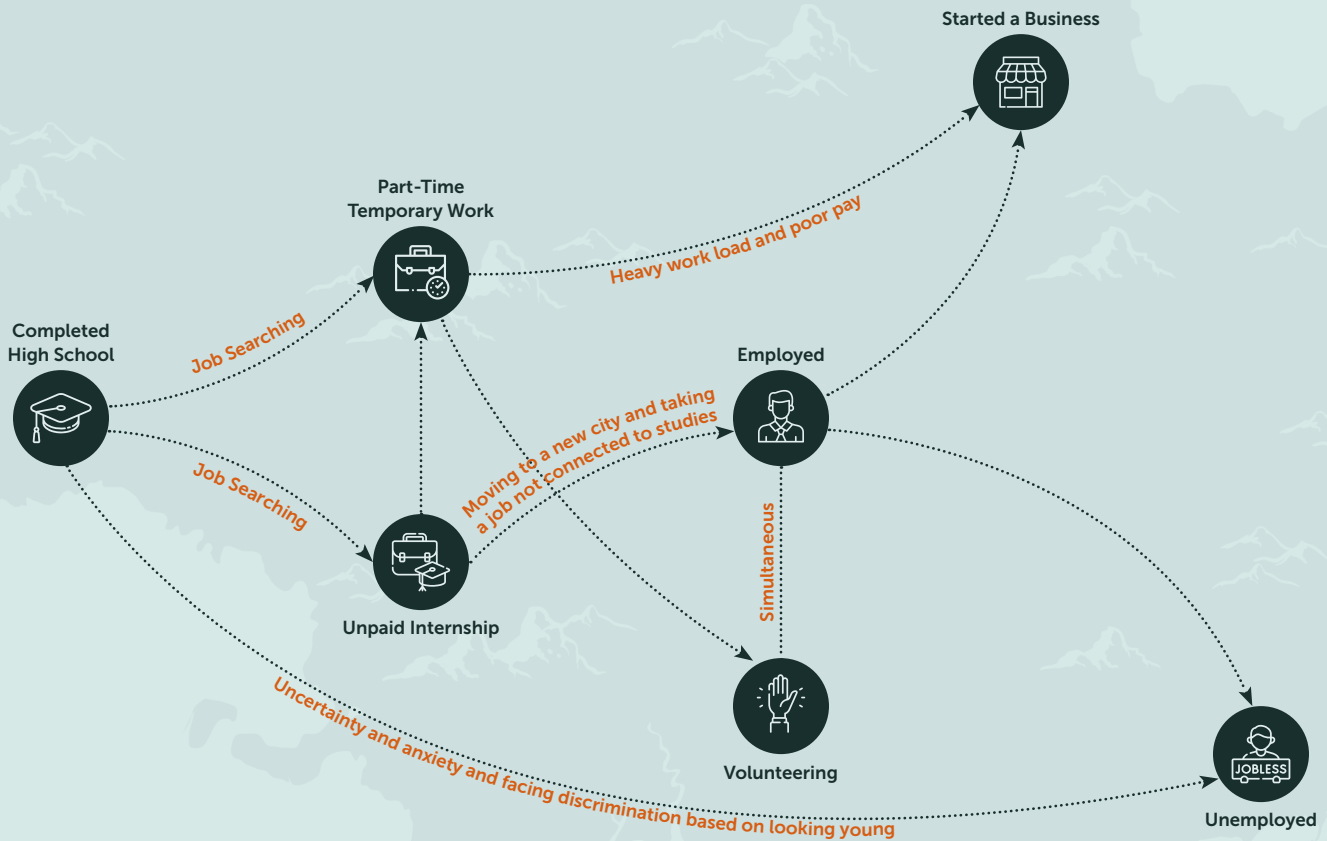
“It has always been essential for me to know that my work has social significance, that my profession helps people. During the war, this feeling and desire intensified. Now I have chosen a career that will benefit my country the most. During the war, I thought about public organizations, the field of medicine, and something related to helping people and the state.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“Working on mistakes, giving sense to each and every day, enjoyment of being present (living here and now) increase my well-being. Homesick, new city and unprofessional approaches from colleagues decreased my well-being.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“After university, you don’t immediately leave with the skills for work, so you still need time after it.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“The war affected the skill set that employers required of workers. At one point, the field where I developed became useless.”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH



“Uncertainty and anxiety and facing discrimination based on looking young”

UKRAINIAN YOUTH

These journeys are presented as compilations of various youth experiences with the intention of reflecting the complexity of youth L2E and well-being journeys. As such they are not aimed to be generalizable or map to all youth, but to serve to prompt dialogue and reflection related to youth experiences and supportive programming.

Appendix D: Country Spotlight Report: Kenya

KENYA

YOUTH WELL-BEING, LEARNING TO EARNING

Country Spotlight

From April to June 2023, IREX supported four youth researchers in consulting with 39 youth from diverse backgrounds around Kenya on their experiences transitioning from school to work, or “learning to earning” (L2E). These focus groups targeted understanding the interaction between youth’s L2E journeys and their well-being. While IREX’s “Youth Well-Being Along Their Learning to Earning Journeys” (2023) report captures overall findings and recommendations garnered from the research conducted across three distinct contexts—Ukraine, Kenya, and Malawi—here we spotlight four themes unique to the Kenyan participants and context and associated recommendations geared toward the international development community and youth-led and youth-serving programs and organizations.

Authors: IREX Staff: Maxie Gluckman and Isabella Petros-Weber;
Youth researcher collaborators: Lilian Olivia Orero, Kevin Ndura, Emmanuel Ng’osei, and Ivy Osebe

A special thank you to the IREX Youth Excel and Kenyan country teams including Sharon Lang’at, Chris Ouma, Silvy Kananu, Consolate Ojwang, and Clion Okoth for your support and guidance throughout this process.

39 Youth Focus Group Participants


Gender:

19 females, 20 males


Job Status:

11 unemployed, 9 short-term/temporarily employed, 8 informal/business owners; 4 long-term/formal contract employed, 7 multiple income sources


Age:

Nineteen 18- to 25-year-olds, twenty 26- to 35-year-olds


Education:

2 technical and vocational training graduates, 29 bachelor’s graduates, 7 diploma holders, 1 certificate holder


Geography:

14 urban, 12 rural, 13 peri-urban


Languages Spoken:

19 English speakers, 20 English and Swahili speakers

Supportive relationships play a key role in maintaining youth well-being during their L2E journeys.

In Kenya, youth expressed that family, friends, and community members play a large role in supporting their well-being and L2E journeys. Regarding family, the most referenced members were mothers, with parents in general and siblings also being recognized as key pillars of support. About friends, a 28-year-old Kenyan female youth mentioned that her “best friend helped me overcome depression and anxiety” related to unemployment. A 24-year-old male youth added, “I have hope, self-confidence, and a community that supports me,” which was crucial in navigating and overcoming challenges. In fact, youth primarily sought out emotional support from friends, family, and community members, greatly valuing opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings freely and having the receiver actively listen and provide words of affirmation. The youth noted that these acts were incredibly helpful as they navigated challenging employment processes.

Youth also valued career-related advice from friends and family, but to a much lesser degree—signaling that having space to be heard and supported may be often more helpful to their L2E journeys than anything more directly related to employment.

Given that many of these supports fit within the “informal community care” category on the pyramid of mental health and psychosocial support,¹ employment programming needs to consider how to leverage these pre-established networks to best support youth well-being and employment opportunities and success.

The Kenyan labor market is flooded, limiting youth employment opportunities.

The L2E journey presents formidable challenges for youth in Kenya, particularly due to the great number of annual graduates entering the job market. This “labor market flooding” as many youth participants referred to it, results in many youth never hearing back when submitting CVs and subsequently feeling hopeless about securing gainful work. As a 26-year-old male youth shared, “The labor market in Kenya is oversaturated [with job seekers], leaving few available job opportunities, forcing many to accept positions unrelated to their studies or passions solely to make ends meet.” This sentiment resonated widely among the Kenyan youth consulted, intensified by their aspirations for independence and self-sufficiency clashing with the experience of having to rely on their families for financial support and/or moving home after graduation.

The Pyramid of Mental Health and Psychological Support



1. IASC. “Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings,” 2007; UNICEF. “Global Multisectoral Operational Framework,” 2022. Evangelidou, Stella. “Migrant Mental Health in Barcelona City: A Collective Challenge.” *ISGLOBAL*, 2021.

In many ways, this present reality in Kenya reflects the consequences of expanded access to higher education, surpassing the capacity of the stagnant public-employment sector. As a 30-year-old Kenyan man reflected, “Older individuals are not retiring, which limits job prospects for younger generations,” highlighting the need for youth to diversity their skillset to be qualified for online gigs within a growing digital economy. As demonstrated by the launch of the 10-year Information Communication Technology Digital Masterplan 2022–2032, the government of Kenya has taken a proactive shift toward digital infrastructure and transformation across various sectors, giving rise to new employment opportunities and roles for youth. However, this trend has not always been met with positive public sentiment. During the focus group discussions, two youth ages 24 and 25 shared their experiences of starting side hustles immediately after graduation, driven by their urgent need for income. Despite demonstrating creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, they faced stigmatization from peers who viewed this type of informal work unfavorably; this negatively impacted their well-being, resulting in feelings of shame and perpetuating a view that informal work should only be temporary.



Given the rapidly growing youth population in Kenya—projected to reach 85 million by 2050 according to the World Bank’s predictions—creative methods for growing the local job market remain critical. Adequately preparing youth to take up these new jobs and roles, however, may require youth programming to focus attention toward the social and emotional well-being impact this may have on youth job seekers and entrepreneurs.

Poor Kenyan labor market conditions present challenges to youth well-being.

Most youth consulted in Kenya expressed anticipating a straightforward and easy transition from school to work; however, their experiences rarely matched their expectations. The focus group youth participants shared various challenges related to job security and work environments. As articulated by a 32-year-old male focus group participant,



“I completed school, secured a position in a private company, received a lower salary, and now I’m simply exhausted. I consider myself fortunate to have a job and not be constantly searching for employment and a paycheck.”

Various youth shared that the uncertainty inherent within the labor market was “mentally draining,” leaving many at a crossroads, unsure of which career path to pursue. A 26-year-old Kenyan female youth said, “There is a lot of unpredictability with the job search, and it leads to stress and depression.” This shortage of gainful employment—particularly jobs that aligned with their studies—negatively affected youth motivation.

Experiencing toxic work environments also appeared to be a common issue among youth consulted, with many sharing how this adversely affected their well-being. Youth participants expressed that they often faced great difficulty obtaining an internship. Even if they did get an internship, they received meager wages, endured heavy workloads, and experienced poor working conditions. As a 25-year-old female youth reflected, “Working on short contracts, job insecurity, and increased workloads makes one feel easily disposable and uncertain about [your] next month’s income.”

2. Ministry of ICT, Innovation and Youth Affairs. “The Kenya National Digital Master Plan 2022-2032,” 2022. [Kenya Digital Masterplan 2022-2032 Online Version.pdf \(icta.go.ke\)](#).

As these examples show, various factors within the Kenyan labor market have a detrimental effect on youth well-being. While we cannot conclude that this is indicative of pervasive trends, given the limited sample size, it does raise the importance of considering how labor market conditions may influence employment retention and well-being. Youth workforce development programming that seeks to improve these factors may result in positive youth employment and well-being outcomes.

Gender disparities shape Kenyan youth employment experiences.

The present research found that challenges faced by Kenyan youth during their transition from school to work are particularly pronounced for young women—demonstrating enduring gender disparities in employment access and experiences. As a 23-year-old female focus group participant shared, “I’ve witnessed firsthand the formidable hurdles that girls in our community must overcome to pursue education and meaningful careers.” Even for young women who manage to secure gainful employment, numerous barriers in the workplace exist. As one 25-year-old Kenyan participant expressed, “As a woman, I constantly find myself having to prove my worth and facing unfair treatment in comparison to men.” Organizations were also found to explicitly require specific genders for jobs. As a female Kenyan youth shared, “Most employers prefer women for certain jobs like an office assistant, but they will not hire you if you are pregnant or have plans of getting pregnant within the first year of working”—demonstrating gender biases that may shift depending on a youth’s age or marital status.

Women from our focus groups also spoke about specific experiences of gender-based discrimination that influenced their economic opportunities. As one 25-year-old female youth shared,



“What stood out was the aspect of discrimination, especially from male colleagues in our office when I worked as a psychologist. They misaligned my good performance and falsely accused me of inappropriate relationships with clients, which eventually pushed me to resign. Looking at the unexplored path, I was surprised by the career choices made by my peers to advance.”

These types of situations can put youth at a disadvantage, because their skills and experiences are not highly valued in the workplace—which would negatively impact their opportunities for professional growth.



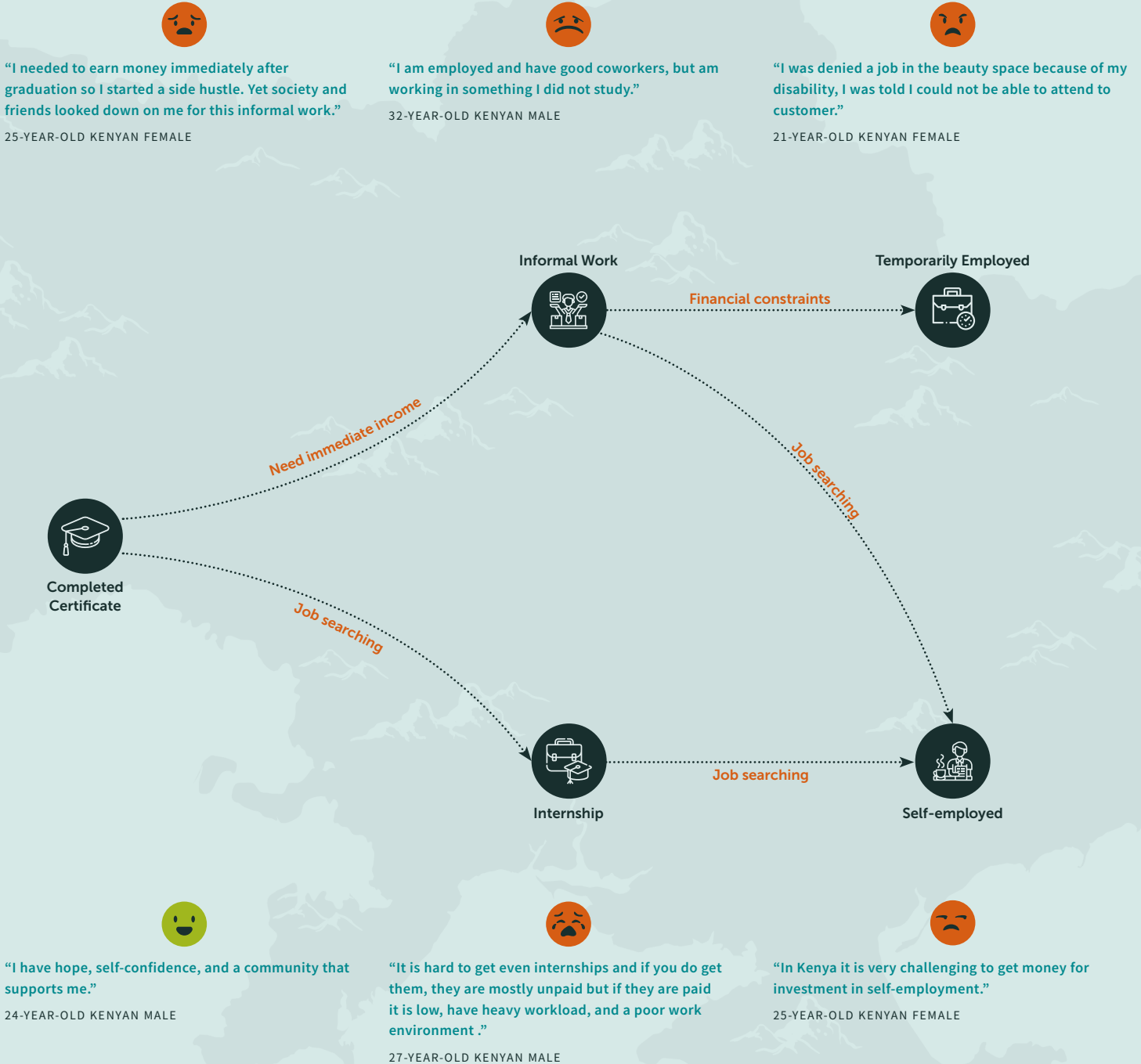
In light of these experiences, youth workforce development interventions that consider gender-sensitive approaches, including mentorship programs and vocational training initiatives tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of young women, may prove beneficial for supporting Kenyan youth employment. Additionally, fostering community awareness and engagement to challenge traditional gender roles may be critical for ensuring sustainable progress toward gender equity and Kenyan youth well-being along their L2E journeys.



Efforts to support Kenyan youth well-being and their learning to earning journeys should:

- ✓ Leverage and build upon best practices within pre-established informal and formal community networks to best support youth well-being and employment opportunities and success. In addition, it is critical to improve access and affordability of mental health services to complement these localized support systems effectively.
- ✓ Develop creative methods for growing the local job market and youth skills including a focus on connectivity to global markets in line with demands for the Industrial Revolution 4.0. These efforts should take into account supports and upskilling that may be needed to ensure youth well-being and protection associated with greater engagement in online spaces.
- ✓ Improve labor market conditions targeting job security and workplace conditions to positively influence youth employment, retention, and well-being outcomes. Various approaches including public policy reform, advocacy, and accountability for the private sector. Youth and stakeholder training related to labor rights for in-person and online work environments may prove helpful for improving and navigating these contextual challenges.
- ✓ Research the connection between labor insertion challenges during the first few years after youth complete their education, their motivation, and their long-term professional opportunities and success to inform workforce and well-being interventions at critical moments during youth's learning to earning journeys.
- ✓ Integrate gender-sensitive approaches including mentorship programs and vocational training initiatives tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of young women. Additionally, foster community awareness and engagement to challenge traditional gender roles to facilitate gender equity within Kenya youth employment.

Kenyan Certificate Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys



These journeys are presented as compilations of various youth experiences with the intention of reflecting the complexity of youth L2E and well-being journeys. As such they are not aimed to be generalizable or map to all youth, but to serve to prompt dialogue and reflection related to youth experiences and supportive programming.



Kenyan Diploma Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys



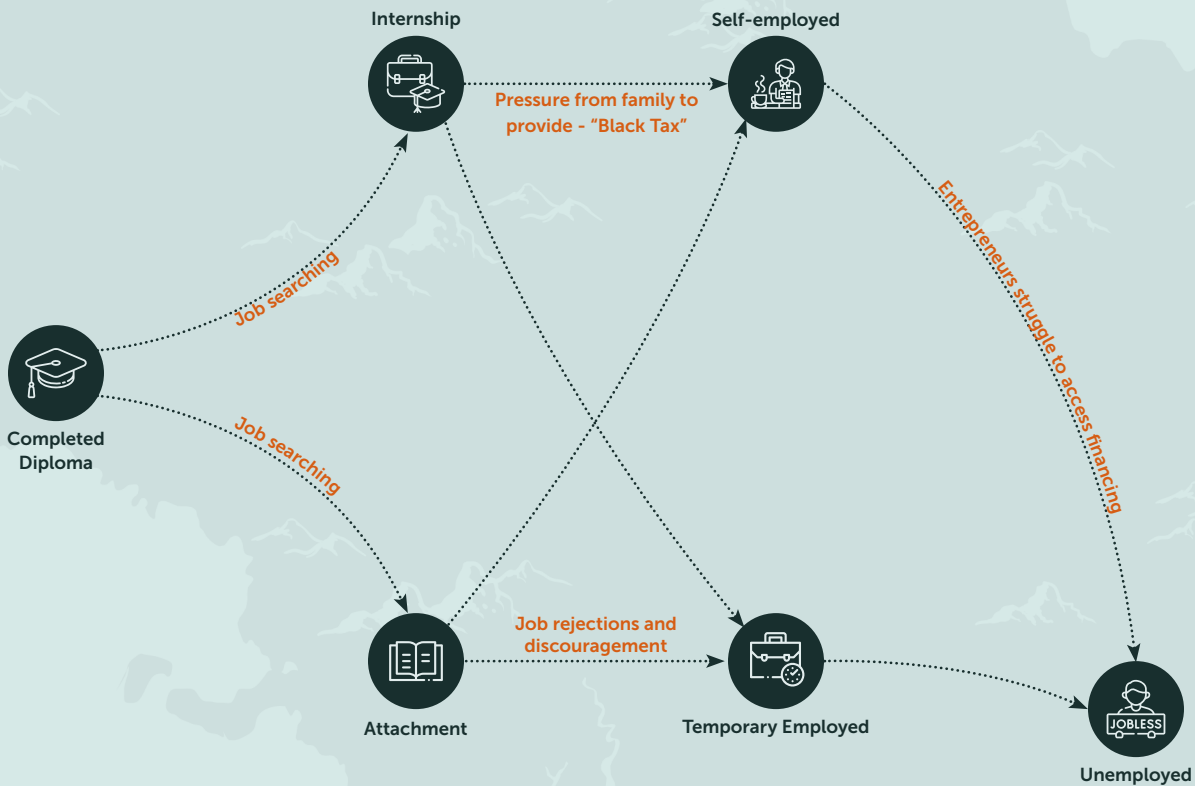
"I started with hope and positive support from family."

28-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



"Mentors on the job market and good colleagues helped me."

32-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE



"I was given a lot of duties and discriminated due to my age, but at least I was gaining new experiences."

23-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



"Working under short contracts, job insecurity, and increased workload makes one easily disposable and uncertain about the next paycheck."

25-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



"Old people are not retiring, which stifles job opportunities for younger people."

27-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE

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Kenyan Bachelor's Degree Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys



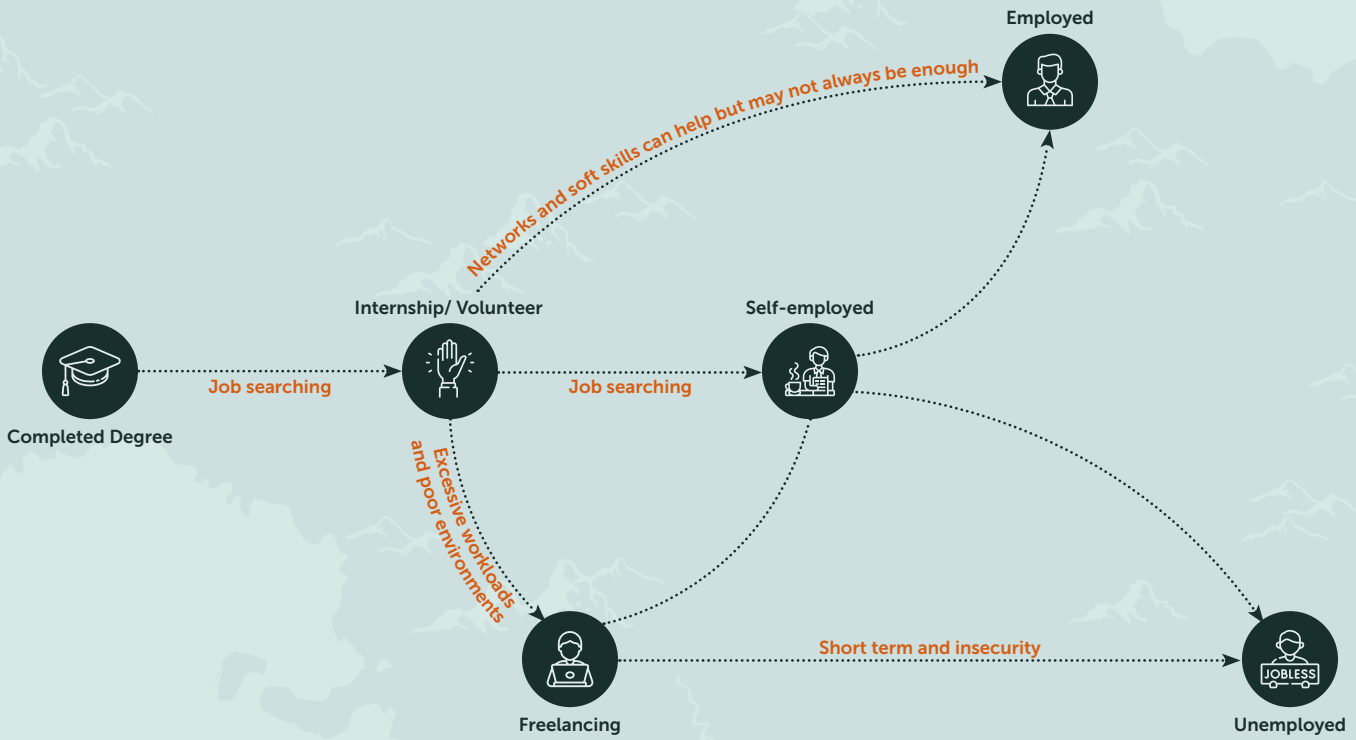
“When I was almost done with school, some of my classmates had already secured jobs and this greatly discouraged me. Therefore, I wasn’t hopeful and didn’t look for work after school instead I was confused and frustrated.”

26-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



“Work is so stressful that I do not have a social life anymore. Job is Monday to Sunday. No time to rest.”

28-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE



“What you study in school doesn’t rhyme with what the job market wants.”

27-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



“I was able to maintain my well-being because I had multiple sources of income including online thrifting.”

24-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



“I am grateful to be employed but toxic work environments, poor conditions, and insecurity negatively impact my well-being.”

24-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE

These journeys are presented as compilations of various youth experiences with the intention of reflecting the complexity of youth L2E and well-being journeys. As such they are not aimed to be generalizable or map to all youth, but to serve to prompt dialogue and reflection related to youth experiences and supportive programming.

Appendix E: Country Spotlight Report: Malawi

MALAWI

YOUTH WELL-BEING, LEARNING TO EARNING

Country Spotlight

From April to June, 2023, IREX supported four youth researchers in consulting with 32 youth from diverse backgrounds around Malawi on their experiences transitioning from school to work, or “learning to earning” (L2E). These focus groups targeted understanding the interaction between youth’s L2E journeys and their well-being. While IREX’s “Youth Well-Being Along Their Learning to Earning Journeys” (2023) report captures overall findings and recommendations garnered from the research conducted across three distinct contexts—Ukraine, Kenya, and Malawi—here we spotlight four themes unique to the Malawian participants and contexts of study with associated recommendations geared toward the international development community and youth-led and youth-serving programs and organizations.

Authors: IREX Staff: Maxie Gluckman and Isabella Petros-Weber;
Youth researcher collaborators: Darlene Dzimwe, Charles Mwale, Periana Kalonga, and William Chawinga

A special thank you to IREX’s Youth Excel and Malawi team including Barwani Msiska, Yasinta Nakoma, Silvy Kananu, and Rachel Surkin for your support and guidance throughout this process.

32 Youth Focus Group Participants


Gender:

15 female; 17 male


Age:

Fifteen 18 -to 25-year-olds, seventeen 26- to 35-year-olds


Geography:

16 urban, 16 rural


Languages Spoken:

13 English and Chichewa speakers, 4 Chichewa speakers, 15 English and Tumbuka speakers


Job Status:

6 unemployed; 13 short-term/temporarily employed, 6 informal/business owners, 5 long-term/formal contract employed, 2 volunteers


Education:

Seventeen 4-year university graduates, 14 community college graduates, 3 certificate holders, 2 Malawi School Certificate of Education graduates, one Form 3 graduate


Tribal Affiliation:

13 Tumbuka, 5 Chewa, 2 Ngoni, 2 Ngonde, 1 Lomwe

Emotional support from friends, family, and community is key to maintaining youth well-being during their L2E journeys.

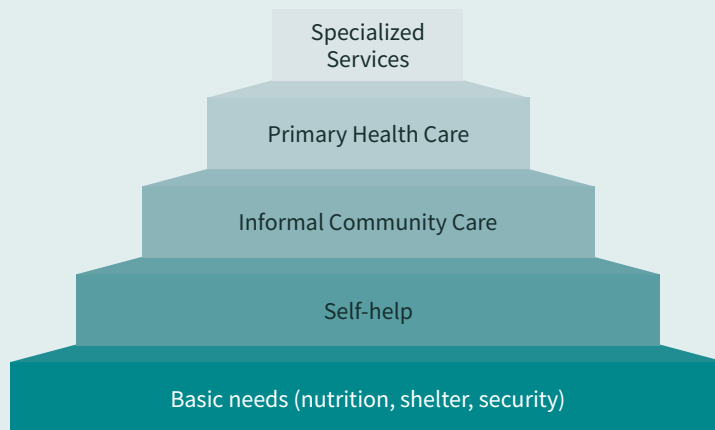
Malawian youth across the focus group samples highlighted the positive role that receiving emotional support from family, friends, and community played throughout their L2E journeys. Mothers were the most frequently cited source of support, followed closely by other family members such as siblings, aunts, and fathers, as well as friends and church groups, which showed the multifaceted nature of support networks in Malawian youth’s lives. In the words of a 24-year-old female youth, “Being unemployed and having a child really gets to your head, and my mother has been my pillar honestly.” A 29-year-old Malawian male youth echoed this sentiment, saying “*masteni amavutilka*, but she is really supportive,” appreciating how his mother pushed him while also emotionally supporting him. However, some youth lamented that they had to rely so much on familial networks, because that clashed with their desire to be independent. In one youth’s perspective, “everything gets dumped on mothers,” underscoring how youth’s heavy reliance on social networks can also be seen as a burden.

When asked what they went to their social networks for, emotional support emerged as the primary form of assistance sought, with youth valuing the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings and receive empathetic listening and

words of affirmation. While youth also appreciated receiving career guidance from family, friends, and community, that was mentioned to a much lesser extent. This suggests that providing opportunities for youth to express themselves and receive support may often have a more significant impact on their L2E journeys than initiatives exclusively focused on employment. Given that many of these forms of support fall under the category of “informal community care” on the pyramid of mental health and psychosocial support,¹ it is crucial for youth workforce development programs to explore ways to harness these existing networks effectively to promote the well-being of young people and enhance their employment opportunities.

Moreover, this focus on localized support is relevant given the various challenges youth participants faced when trying to access professional mental health services—most notably that these services were relatively new and often prohibitively expensive. To ensure that youth are provided with different avenues for well-being support during their L2E journey, youth in the focus groups called for more accessible and integrated mental health services, primarily through already existing health centers. While family, friends, and community provide vital emotional support to Malawian youth during their transition from school to work, this also signals a pressing need to improve access and affordability of mental health services to complement these pre-existent support systems.

The Pyramid of Mental Health and Psychological Support



1. IASC. “Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings,” 2007; UNICEF. “Global Multisectoral Operational Framework,” 2022. Evangelidou, Stella. “Migrant Mental Health in Barcelona City: A Collective Challenge.” ISGLOBAL, 2021.

Limited internships and the lack of pathways to formal employment pose challenges to youth L2E journeys.

Internships play a crucial role in the lives of youth in Malawi, offering them opportunities to gain practical experience and skills. However, the stark reality is that these internships often do not lead to formal employment, as expressed by a 28-year-old Malawian male youth who shared, “I had a paid one-year government internship, but it did not lead to a job.” This sentiment was echoed by a 23-year-old female youth who felt her internship ended abruptly, leading to a sense of being taken advantage of. These experiences highlight the challenges faced by youth in translating their internship experiences into sustainable employment opportunities. As one youth aptly pointed out, the envisioned path from internship to permanent employment is an ideal scenario taught in schools, but many individuals find themselves cycling back to internships after working for a significant period. This inconsistency in the transition from internships to formal employment creates uncertainty and a feeling of helplessness among youth, as they navigate their career paths. To address this issue, workforce development interventions that promote more regular communication and collaboration among educational institutions, government agencies that manage internship opportunities, and private-sector human resource actors could help to ensure that internships serve as a more reliable steppingstone toward stable employment, thus reducing the precariousness of youth transitions into the job market.

Youth’s intersectional identities influence their employment and well-being experiences.

In Malawi, appearance, gender, tribal affiliations, and religious beliefs play an influential role in shaping workforce dynamics and well-being, according to youth focus group participants. In line with the role physical attributes play in influencing job opportunities, a 29-year-old Malawian male youth pointed out, “Certain jobs require specific characteristics, e.g., perfect body structure for a sales lady.” In another example, a 22-year-old Malawian female youth expressed:



“The way you dress matters a lot because most of the old people in Malawi are still very traditional, and the way you dress has a direct reflection of who you are in terms of culture and behavior ... they assume you might be a thief, not intelligent, or into some other activities.”



Thus, attire and appearance can lead to misconceptions about one’s abilities and potentially limit employment opportunities.

In discussions with youth about their identities, gender emerged as predominant factor shaping Malawian male and female youth’s L2E journeys in unique ways. Participants expressed that certain jobs are culturally perceived as male or female, creating challenges for individuals who attempt to defy these norms. For instance, women were preferred as hairdressers. A Malawian youth said that if a “male decides to have a salon, few females would be willing to go to that salon compared to a female owning a salon.” Conversely, females said they were hindered from securing employment in jobs perceived to be male dominated, such as government positions. As one youth participant expressed, “Other workplaces or organization require certain genders, and again promotions are mostly given to men; and in politics, it is seen as a male profession.”

An additional identity factor that was commonly referenced by focus group participants in shaping L2E journeys was tribal affiliation. A 24-year-old female youth shared that

“Nepotism is very common in Malawi. People employ each other depending on the tribe you come from. Some tribes are looked at as wise and are mostly preferred in office work. They say birds of the same feathers flock together; I feel like most people living in the [suburbs] stand a better chance of networking through community based/neighborhood groups.”

Connections and community networks, beyond strictly tribal lines, were also found to regularly influence youth participants’ job search experiences and employment outcomes.

Religious beliefs and practices also play a multifaceted role in Malawian youth’s well-being and L2E journeys. In some instances, organizations specify religious criteria for job opportunities; in other cases, the criteria were more implicit and based on alignment with organizational beliefs. As one Malawian youth stated, “If you are a Muslim applying for an accounting job at an [non-Muslim] community organization ... they can’t hire you even if you are qualified because you won’t be in line with the vision of the company.” Youth also shared examples of how identity, gender, and religious beliefs interacted and shaped employment decisions, with LGBTQIA+ individuals being more often excluded from jobs in Malawi. From another perspective, religious practices and prayer in particular were also cited as common coping mechanisms used by focus group participants to help them navigate the emotionally draining L2E journey. Youth also shared that religious leaders served as part of their community support systems, helping them emotionally as well as in locating jobs.



In summary, youth participants highlighted various supportive and prohibitive ways in which appearance, gender, tribal affiliation, and religious beliefs and practices influence Malawian youth employment. In response, youth workforce development programs need to implement research-based interventions related to shifting social and institutional norms; this can support the reduction of biases and the promotion of inclusivity in the workforce as an essential component to ensure youth well-being and equitable employment opportunities for all Malawian youth. A greater understanding of tribal and religious dynamics within youth employment would also help youth to leverage community networks and successfully navigate the challenges they face along the L2E journey.

Short-term and informal work impact youth well-being.

Short-term and informal work, often referred to as ganyu in Chichewa, plays a complex role in the well-being of youth in Malawi. For many, these opportunities are seen as undesirable, yet necessary, when experiencing prolonged unemployment. As expressed by a 26-year-old male youth from Lilongwe,

“Doing ganyu [influences my well-being] since it helps me earn something; however, there is never-ending stress since these are temporary opportunities which are unpredictable, and sometimes I get it and sometimes I don’t. So stress is a part of my life.”

This sentiment underscores the precarious nature of short-term employment, where financial gains are accompanied by constant uncertainty and stress. A 27-year-old female youth added that such work often comes with “low pay and depression,” leading to a sense of inadequacy in meeting basic needs and an overwhelming burden of stress. This instability in employment can have profound consequences on the well-being of youth, pushing some to the brink of despair. As a 29-year-old Malawian male shared,



“As you approach the age of 25, you are trying to be independent, and when things don’t work out, you lose focus and resort to drug abuse or even suicide.”

In this context, addressing the challenges associated with short-term and informal work becomes crucial to safeguarding the well-being of Malawi’s youth, offering them more stable and secure economic prospects. Moreover, given that short-term and informal work serve a critical role in the Malawian workforce, developing youth skills to navigate the challenges engendered in these environments and assess and mitigate risks can help those who do engage in ganyu to do so with more success and protection.





Efforts to support Malawian youth well-being and their learning to earning journeys should:

- ✓ Leverage and build upon best practices within pre-established informal and formal community networks to best support youth well-being and employment opportunities and success. In addition, it is critical to improve access and affordability of mental health services to complement these localized support systems effectively.
- ✓ Promote more regular communication and collaboration among educational institutions, government agencies that manage internship opportunities, and private-sector human resource actors to ensure that internships and temporary or on-the-job learning opportunities result in more regular transitions toward stable employment.
- ✓ Seek to address biases and promote inclusivity in the workforce through research-based interventions that aim to shift social and institutional norms to ensure youth well-being and equitable employment.
- ✓ Research the connection between labor insertion challenges during the first few years after youth complete their education, their motivation, and their long-term professional opportunities and success to inform appropriate workforce and well-being interventions at critical moments during youth's learning to earning journeys.
- ✓ Improve labor market conditions related to short-term and informal work that influence youth employment, well-being, and safeguarding. Various approaches including public policy reform, advocacy, and accountability for the private sector, and youth and stakeholder training related to labor rights and in-person and online protection may prove helpful for improving and navigating these contextual challenges.

Malawian Secondary Education Degree Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys



“Doing ganyu [increases my wellbeing] since it helps me earn something, however, there is never ending stress since these are temporary opportunities which are unpredictable, and sometimes I get it and sometimes I don't. So stress is a part of my life.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH



“I had to go back to the village, where I was extremely hit by poverty, and this made me go astray, and was drinking...This made life hard for me and my family, there was no peace between me and them.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH



“The joy of finishing secondary school, thinking it would help me get a job.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH



“Encouragement from family members gives hope for future employment prospects.”

MALAWIAN YOUTH



“I am still unemployed or have no opportunities (ganyu), and this makes me feel disappointed with life all together”

MALAWIAN YOUTH

These journeys are presented as compilations of various youth experiences with the intention of reflecting the complexity of youth L2E and well-being journeys. As such they are not aimed to be generalizable or map to all youth, but to serve to prompt dialogue and reflection related to youth experiences and supportive programming.

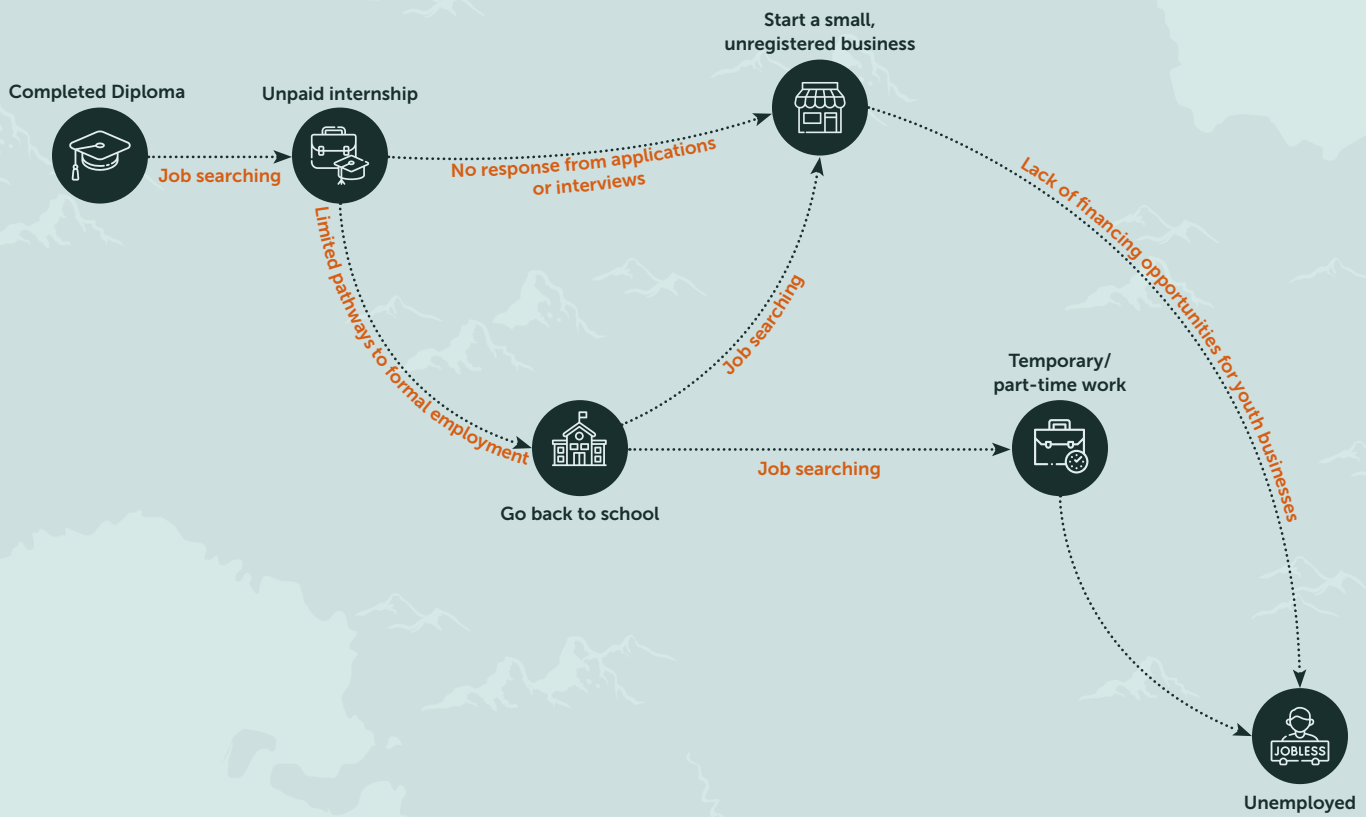
Malawian Diploma Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys

“My internship ended mid-way. [I felt I was] taken advantage of because of desperation.”
MALAWIAN YOUTH

“Spirituality and friendship has helped my wellbeing.”
MALAWIAN YOUTH

“I got confidence that I can create a job for myself and other youths in the future.”
MALAWIAN YOUTH

“Even though I am employed, [I am] not meeting expectations and earning enough.”
MALAWIAN YOUTH



“I started with high expectations.”
MALAWIAN YOUTH

“A bachelor’s earns more and is preferred. [There is] discrimination based on education.”
MALAWIAN YOUTH

“Uncomfortable working conditions - lost hope from staying home too long - not being included in some work activities - unmet expectations.”
MALAWIAN YOUTH

“I hate going back to a state of being helpless even to myself.”
MALAWIAN YOUTH

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Malawian Bachelor's Degree Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys

- "I was motivated to search for jobs."**
MALAWIAN YOUTH
- "I had a paid 1-year government internship, but it did not lead to a job."**
MALAWIAN YOUTH
- "I receive "low pay and am depressed. My pay is not enough to cover needs. I have too much work and am stressed."**
MALAWIAN YOUTH
- "Good working environments and colleagues and meaningful work increase my well-being."**
MALAWIAN YOUTH



- "A lack of connections and high competition in the job market makes it difficult."**
MALAWIAN YOUTH
- "[I had] no job, I barely ate, [I had] no health insurance ."**
MALAWIAN YOUTH
- "I am still searching for work but grateful to have improved health and supportive family and friends."**
MALAWIAN YOUTH
- "There is nothing I am doing now and I am very discouraged as I have become a laughing stock."**
MALAWIAN YOUTH

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