

Policy Briefing

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Uganda: The Future of Work for Youth

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Recommendations

- The Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, should advocate budget increments in the agricultural sector to facilitate extension services to farmers, increased production and higher household incomes.
- The Inspectorate of Government should ensure that transparency and anti-corruption is practised in all levels of government, by investigating and prosecuting corruption cases, abuse of office and other forms of maladministration.
- The Ministry of Education and Sports, in collaboration with other ministries and stakeholders, should reform the education curriculum to reflect the needs of the 21st-century workforce. This should support critical thinking and problem solving, offering more vocational and technical training by working with businesses to develop appropriate training programmes.

Executive summary

This policy briefing presents the findings and recommendations of the ‘Youth and Social Justice Futures: Identifying Future Skills and Training in Africa’ project, a participatory action research project that engaged Ugandan youth and other stakeholders in exploring alternative futures and addressing the challenge of unemployment. The project used two innovative frameworks: Youth Futures Literacy Labs and the Three Horizons Framework. Futures Literacy Labs enable participants to articulate their assumptions about the future and examine their anticipatory systems and knowledge creation processes. The Three Horizons Framework helps participants to identify patterns of thinking about the future and how they influence each other over time. This briefing outlines the policy recommendations that emerged from the project. These are: promoting transparency and anti-corruption by strengthening laws and agencies that combat corruption; modernising agriculture by investing in infrastructure and mechanisation in agribusiness and related sectors; reforming the education system by aligning it with the needs of the labour market; and providing opportunities for lifelong learning and skills development. These recommendations aim to empower youth and equip them with the 21st-century skills that are essential for the workforce. This briefing urges policymakers to consider these recommendations and engage with youth and other stakeholders in creating a more prosperous future for Uganda.

Introduction

According to one study, the youth unemployment rate 18 – 30 years in Uganda increased from 12.7% in 2012/13 to 13.3% in 2016/17.¹ This is higher than the overall national unemployment rate, which dropped from 11.1% in 2012/13 to 9.2% in 2016/17.² The total Ugandan labour force was 18 197 126 people in 2023, with male and female unemployment rates at 13.5% and 20.4% respectively.³ In Uganda, young people with some level of education are more likely to be unemployed, since there is a bias towards wage-paying jobs in the formal sector, which are harder to find than jobs that do not have educational requirements.⁴

Marital status significantly influences employment prospects, with marriage often propelling men toward career advancement and high-skilled positions, whereas it tends to hinder women’s career trajectories. Research indicates that unmarried people,

1 Abel Egezza, John Bosco Nnyanzi and James Muwanga, “Determinants of Youth Unemployment in Uganda: The Role of Gender, Education, Residence, and Age”, *IZA Journal of Labor Policy* 11, no. 1 (2021).

2 Madina M Guloba et al., “Employment Creation Potential, Labor Skills Requirements and Skill Gaps for Young People” (Working Paper 37, Economic Policy Research Centre and Brookings Institute, Washington DC, 2021).

3 Uganda Bureau of Statistics, *The National Labour Force Survey 2021: Main Report* (Kampala: Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

4 Gemma Ahaibwe and Swaibu Mbowe, “Youth Unemployment Challenge in Uganda and the Role of Employment Policies in Jobs Creation”, *Africa in Focus* (August 26, 2014).

particularly young people, are more likely to secure employment than their married counterparts. As women age, their employment opportunities diminish. Notably, the disparity in management roles favours single individuals over married ones in 90% of countries studied. In professional occupations, this trend is observed in 82% of countries. On the other hand, single individuals dominate in elementary occupations compared to their married counterparts in 39% of countries. Key labour statistics by marital status show how family life shapes individuals' positions, underscoring the persistent gendered effects of married life on economic and career choices. Although single individuals face a higher risk of unemployment than their married counterparts, this discrepancy appears linked to married individuals experiencing other forms of labour underutilisation.⁵ In the Uganda National Household Survey 2016/17 by the Uganda National Bureau of Statistics case of Uganda, the proportion of youth unemployment varies by marital status. The report observed that divorced youth (32.37%) are most likely unemployed, followed by married ones (16.13%) and then the single youth (7.99%).

About 165 000 Ugandans currently work in the Middle East,⁶ with some in search of greener pastures through what the labour movement terms labour expropriation. Many of these Ugandan youths in the Middle East – mostly young women – face physical and sexual abuse from their employers.⁷

The Ugandan government has adopted various policies and initiatives to address the issue of youth unemployment. Among the most important is the National Youth Policy (NYP), adopted in 2001. The NYP focuses on agriculture and associated industries, as it is the main livelihood source for Ugandans and contributes more than 20% of the gross domestic product.⁸ Out of a national population of approximately 41 million people, 83.2% live in rural areas.⁹ Small-scale agriculture is a major source of employment,¹⁰ and several analysts agree that commercial food crops have the potential to generate economic opportunities.

The Presidential Initiative for Skilling the Boy and Girl Child, Parish Development Model, Youth Livelihood Programme and the consequent Youth Livelihood Fund are government programmes established under the NYP. They are designed to support young people to find employment by extending grants and other forms of support to small groups of young entrepreneurs, helping them start small businesses.¹¹

5 Rosina Gammarano, "International Day of Families: How Marital Status Shapes Labour Market Outcomes", International Labor Organization, ILOSTAT, August 23, 2022.

6 Ahaibwe, Gemma, Sarah Ssewanyana, and Ibrahim Kasirye. "Education, Marriage, Fertility and Labour Market Experiences of Young Women in Uganda: Evidence from a Qualitative Assessment." No. 674-2018-5537 (2018); Zahara Nampewo, "The illusion of Greener Pastures: Violence and Justice for female Ugandan Migrant Workers in the Middle East", *Strathmore LJ* 5 (2021): 11. Nampewo, "The Illusion of Greener Pastures".

8 Dele Raheem et al., "The Contribution of Cereal Grains to Food Security and Sustainability in Africa: Potential Application of UAV in Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, and Namibia", *Urban Science* 5, no. 1 (2021): 8.

9 Onyekachi U Aghasili, "Fuel Choice, Acute Respiratory Infection and Child Growth in Uganda" (PhD diss., Purdue University, 2015).

10 Ben White, "Agriculture and the Generation Problem: Rural Youth, Employment and the Future of Farming", *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 6 (2012): 9–19.

11 Rita Makumbi, "Uganda's National Youth Policy and Job Creation for Youth", *IDS Bulletin* 49, no. 5 (2018).

Ugandan youth and external stakeholders, including members of government, participated in the 'Youth and Social Justice Futures: Identifying Future Skills and Training in Africa' project, which consisted of a series of workshops that involved participants from East and Southern Africa. Here the youth imagined alternative futures, spoke about the issues faced in their countries and thought of innovations to help address these problems. The workshops employed a participatory action research methodology, which consisted of two parts: Youth Futures Literacy Labs and the Three Horizons Framework. The Youth Futures Literacy Labs allow people to make their participatory assumptions explicit and thereby reveal not only the determinants of the future imagined but also attributes of anticipatory systems and knowledge creation processes. The Three Horizons Framework describes three patterns of thinking about the future.

Reflections on the project

The world is complex and uncertain, with challenges such as climate change and mental health issues that hinder youth from achieving their desired futures. Young people inherit the world, which makes their perspectives and voices crucial in understanding the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

The workshops employed a non-judgemental approach that created room for participants to examine their needs, biases, desires and expectations for the future. The workshops also introduced new terms, such as the probable future, reframed future and causal layered analysis, as well as new tools such as jam boards. This enabled youth to acquire new techniques to navigate futures thinking.

Through the Youth Futures Literacy Labs, participants identified their expectations for the probable future. They envisioned a change in leadership, a reformed and uniform education system, technological advancements and effective youth representation in decision-making. The reframed futures triggered curiosity to envision a future that has not transpired yet and pushed participants to showcase their creativity and talents in imagining what such a future would look like.

The workshops enabled participants to understand that it is necessary to take action to achieve a desired future. The uncertainty of the future requires youth engagement through collaborating with the community and elders in addressing society's pressing issues. These include climate change, mental health awareness and sexual and reproductive health. This necessitates doing things differently without being judgemental, promoting the spirit of ubuntu and creating more awareness among the youth, promoting equity. Change starts with youth, who have to shape the envisioned future.

Strategic priority 1

Promoting transparency and anti-corruption

According to Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perception Index, Uganda is ranked 142 out of 180 countries.¹² On a scale of 0–100, the country scores 26, as a 'most likely corrupt' country. Various sectors, such as the judiciary, customs, public procurement, ministries and related government departments and agencies, are prone to corruption. There is thus a need for government to operationalise and implement anti-corruption laws such as the Anti-Corruption Act of 2009 to prevent corruption and hold offenders accountable. To this end, it should empower anti-corruption institutions such as the Inspectorate of Government, the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Authority (PPDA) and the State House Anti-Corruption Unit to investigate and prosecute corruption cases. It should sensitise the public about corruption and its implications, as well as the aims of task forces or agencies fighting corruption. Participants emphasised the need for the judiciary, Inspectorate of Government and PPDA to be independent, in order to uphold the rule of law and punish corrupt individuals without fear or favour.

There was also an emphasis on the importance of transparency. This promotes an open government by making government information and decision-making more accessible to the public and so improving accountability. This, in turn, facilitates easy tracking of government spending and decision-making, aids citizen collaboration and promotes the quality of government decisions and responsiveness.

- **Inspectorate of Government:** Should investigate, arrest and prosecute cases involving corruption, abuse of authority or public office.
- **PPDA:** Must ensure that public procurement is conducted in a fair, transparent and competitive manner.
- **Auditor General's Office:** Should audit government accounts, track spending and protect the public interest by ensuring public money is spent for the benefit of all Ugandans.
- **Parliamentary Accounts Committee:** Must oversee the work of the Auditor General's Office and ensure that government spending is transparent and accountable.

Strategic priority 2

Modernising agriculture

Agriculture is Uganda's backbone and its largest employer, as well as a major source of exports.¹³ Investing in modern agriculture is a pathway to boost economic growth,

¹² Transparency International, "Uganda", <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/uganda>.

¹³ Uganda, Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, "Agricultural Sector: Potential". (n.d.)

increase value addition, create jobs, increase income for farmers, reduce post-harvest losses and improve food security. The government should invest more in roads, storage facilities and other infrastructure to improve market access for farmers, access to credit and creation of market linkages. This will provide a market for their produce, thereby facilitating the required investment in agricultural research and development. Such new technologies and practices include improved seeds and fertilisers, pesticides, irrigation and farm machinery. The provision of training based on practical skills tailored to the needs of farmers and making such training accessible regardless of location and income levels will boost agriculture. This can be achieved by providing scholarships, transport to training facilities, follow-up training and mentoring. Training on post-harvest handling, pest and disease control, fertilisation, irrigation, land preparation and planting improves crop yield and productivity, thus contributing to economic growth.

- **Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries:** Should formulate policies, plans and programmes for the agricultural sector; provide extension services to farmers; and promote agricultural research and development.
- **National Agricultural Advisory Services:** Should provide agricultural extension services, training, advice and support to farmers on issues such as crop production, livestock management and marketing.
- **National Agricultural Research Organization:** Should conduct agricultural research and develop new technologies and practices that can improve agricultural productivity.
- **Non-governmental organisations:** Should provide funding, training, scholarships, advice and support to farmers.

Strategic priority 3

Reforming the education system

It is crucial to reform the education system to help address unemployment. Education must be linked to the labour market by working with employers to identify the skills needed and tailoring the education system accordingly. Entrepreneurship should be promoted through entrepreneurial training, access to finance and exhibitions for students to showcase their innovations and so encourage them to start their own businesses. The government should make vocational training more accessible without bias in terms of financial background. Additionally, vocational institutions should be constructed, and scholarships and other financial assistance provided to the students. Emphasis should be put on the practical skills in agriculture, manufacturing, construction and information technology that are demanded by employers.

Reforming the education system is a complex and challenging task. However, with the cooperation of all stakeholders it is possible to achieve significant progress, improve the quality of education in Uganda and prepare students for the future.

Youth also have to change their mindset regarding alternative forms of education. University education is not a guarantee of employment and vocational education is vital.

- **Ministry of Education and Sports:** Should develop and implement new education policies and strategies and allocate more resources to the sector.
- **National Curriculum Development Centre:** Should develop and review the national curricula for all levels of education in Uganda and provide guidance and support to teachers and schools in implementing these.
- **Private sector:** Should provide financial support, training and other resources in partnership with schools and local governments to develop innovative solutions to educational challenges.
- **Parents and communities:** Should support schools and teachers and advocate for desired reforms.

Conclusion

This briefing presents diverse youth perspectives that are vital in shaping compelling policy interventions to address the issue of youth unemployment in Uganda.

Uganda has one of the youngest populations in the world, with over 78% of the population below 30, while the unemployment rate for youth (ages 15–24) is 23.8%.¹⁴ Several factors contribute to youth unemployment in the country, including a slow-growing economy, a mismatch between skills and the needs of the labour market, corruption, a cumbersome bureaucracy and a lack of access to finance. The high rate of youth unemployment has led to increased poverty, social unrest and a brain drain. However, there are many entrepreneurial and resilient young people with small-scale businesses and a passion for innovations such as developing applications in health, security and transport or fabricating farming machinery and food processing machinery.

The government of Uganda has taken some steps to address the problem of youth unemployment by investing in education and training, creating jobs through infrastructure development and promoting entrepreneurship. However, it is crucial to create a more

¹⁴ Rebecca Namatovu et al., “Youth Entrepreneurship Trends and Policies in Uganda”, in *Young Entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa*, eds. Katherine V Gough and Thilde Langevang (London: Routledge, 2016), 18–31.

business-friendly environment, invest in education reforms, offer training and youth skills programmes tailored to the needs of the labour market, hire more young people and provide them with opportunities for training and advancement in business.

This policy briefing is part of a series. The policy recommendations herein are the output of 36 foresight workshops across East and Southern Africa, forming part of the 'Youth and Social Justice Futures: Identifying Future Skills and Training in Africa' project. The aim of the project was to identify and address youth skills needs in the region by employing futures thinking. This research was co-created with youth participants from Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia and South Africa in workshops that engaged decision makers in government, civil society, industry associations and the private sector. The research employed both a decolonial-informed method (Futures Literacy Labs) and a policy action-oriented method (Three Horizons Framework).

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Cover image

Workers process jackfruit to export as a meat substitute for vegans and vegetarians at Enimiro, a private organisation which partners with small hold farmers, in Namakwanda, Uganda 2022 (Badru Katumba/AFP via Getty Images)

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