Youth employment trends in East Africa

East African youth are seeking a greater voice in their future, according to new youth-led research released today by The MasterCard Foundation Youth Think Tank.

Image by 123RF

At a launch organised by Restless Development in partnership with The MasterCard Foundation, the 15 members of the Youth Think Tank revealed findings from their peer-to-peer research report, providing key insights into youth employment and entrepreneurship trends in East Africa.

"The Youth Think Tank demonstrates the dedication and energy of young people to seek positive change within their communities," said Ann Miles, director, financial inclusion and youth livelihoods at The MasterCard Foundation.

"Their research is an important piece of work that will help to inform not only the Foundation's strategy for expanding youth economic opportunities, but also governments and policymakers in the youth development space."

The Youth Think Tank was established in 2012 to ensure that young people are meaningfully engaged in improving their economic opportunities in Africa. In partnership with The MasterCard Foundation, youth-led international development agency Restless Development recruited, trained and supported 15 youth from Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya to conduct research in their respective communities on the challenges and opportunities facing youth when they enter the labour market.

"I have observed first-hand the sense of disempowerment that comes with youth unemployment," said Youth Think Tank member Hilda Namakula from Uganda. "Through this research, I can be part of the solution by gaining an in-depth understanding of this problem and being a voice for youth."

The report, which includes data from more than 400 interviews with youth, government representatives and other stakeholders across the region, found that young people in East Africa are optimistic about developing their skills, pursuing self-employment and are eager to participate in the policy decisions that impact their lives.

Key findings

Key findings from the report indicate that:

- Young people are committed to improving their skill set. Youth recognise the gap between the types of skills they gain within formal education systems and the types of skills employers seek. They are taking proactive steps such as engaging in volunteer work and using information and communication technology (ICT) to acquire the skills they need for employment.
- Young people in rural areas are carefully considering employment opportunities in agriculture, rather than migrating to urban centres. However, they face many challenges to achieving their objectives as entrepreneurs, including limited access to financial services and limited business management skills.
- Young people recognise the efforts of East African government initiatives to advance youth employment and entrepreneurship but report that there are many missing components, such as individual rather than group loans and business skills training.
- Youth continue to face a number of barriers that impede their ability to earn a sustainable means of living, including gender inequality, limited access to land and limited access to information and technology.

"Young people were in charge throughout the process that led to this report," said Greg Lavender, Uganda country director for Restless Development. "In addition to learning from the findings, we hope that others will be inspired to fully engage young people as leaders in shaping and delivering youth-focused initiatives."

Youth Think Tank members will continue to engage with their communities to generate a discussion on how to address the findings of this research and will also play an active role for future Youth Think Tank research.
The report will be shared among partner and stakeholder networks as well as Youth Think Tank alumni in order to extend the reach of learning and further strengthen approaches to youth engagement across Africa.

**The full report can be found on the MasterCard site.*

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