

CIES 2023

Highlighted Session: How youth-led research surfaces gaps and influences policy in local youth workforce development systems

Mon, February 20, 9:30 to 11:00am EST (9:30 to 11:00am EST), Grand Hyatt Washington, Floor: Declaration Level (1B), Penn Quarter A

Chair: Rachel Surkin, Youth Excel, IREX

Discussant: Jessica Lopes, DDI Center for Education, USAID

Paper #1: Tsega Tadesse Belachew, University of Maryland

Paper #2: Christopher Johnstone, University of Minnesota

Paper #3: Rachel Surkin, Youth Excel, IREX

Paper #4: Evan Bloom, Root Change

Abstract:

Globally, many young people are facing an employment crisis. Studies show that 4 in 10 young people never transition into stable employment even once they are older (Alam and de Diego, UNICEF, 2019). This youth unemployment crisis is worsened by other changes that put pressure on young people to quickly adapt — among them ongoing digital transformations and the COVID-19 pandemic, migration, climate change, food insecurity, and social movements like #MeToo. For youth, the struggle to transition into work is an urgent personal crisis that shapes their lifelong wellbeing, economic security, and social contributions. For their communities, youth unemployment has serious implications on economic growth and productivity, worsening social instability, division, crime, inequality, and migration. Donors, program designers, and educators need up-to-date data and evidence to design responsive and relevant support models that have a positive impact on young people's employment outcomes.

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

Our team's learning from practice shows us that essential, top-down macroeconomic and quantitative studies about youth employment do not capture important voices and perspectives. These voices are those of the most underserved youth, those directly affected by employment problems, and those who deeply understand the local context and culture from a human-centered, intersectional lens. Systematic reviews of the evidence highlight that these grassroots perspectives are essential for greater impact – the most effective and impactful youth employment program models understand and are directly responsive to youth and local realities, constraints, and contexts.

This kind of responsiveness requires an in depth understanding of youth lives and circumstances along with the overlapping impacts of their social identities, cultures, societal and structural constraints (an intersectional lens). It is resource-intensive to obtain quantitative data

to provide this level of nuance through most data systems and research models.

Youth-led research can fill some of these gaps. It can take many forms. Under the USAID-funded Youth Excel activity, youth-led research sought to uncover young people's lived perspectives and realities about the transition to work, and youth leaders used their findings to influence policy-makers.

Central to our and our partners' approach is that young people who represent and are deeply familiar with the lived experiences of the populations studied are leading key research decisions and processes, with support and facilitation from more experienced researchers as needed in research methods, tools development, and ethical approaches.

In this panel presentation, we will share four specific examples where youth-led research uncovered important gaps in local and global bodies of knowledge around youth workforce development systems. We will also explore what changes to policy or practice were made as a result of the findings and what ripple effects have occurred based on these findings to date.

Paper #1: Developing a new Learning-to-Earning Guide: How to design employment solutions that meet youth needs

What challenges do young people experience when they transition from school to work and how can the development community better support their needs?

To answer this question, we engaged teams of youth researchers in Kenya, Iraq, and Guatemala. To better understand what youth really experience and what kind of support they say they need, our youth-led team conducted in-depth interviews with 78 youth and surveyed more than 1000 youth across all three countries. We learned that the transition from school to work most youth experience is a winding path, not the seamless transition that many are led to expect. Youth experiences related to accurate expectations of the world of work, mental health needs, practical work experience, as well as support for non-traditional forms of work such as informal labor, self-employment and entrepreneurship guided us to identify targeted programmatic and funding recommendations that can help the development community be more responsive to youth needs. These findings include the following: false narratives about youth transitions from school to work may be causing harm; as they impact youth mental health and make it harder for them to find work; that support models often overlook the role that informal work plays; and that intersectional frameworks reveal that youth-lived experiences vary greatly. To make this knowledge as useful and practical as possible, we have compiled it into a guide that can help decision makers and program designers produce better solutions for youth.

In this paper, we will share the key takeaways from our research, including samples of the 'personas', or data-informed stories of diverse youth through young people's voices. These personas include recommendations for program designers and policy-makers. A persona is a composite based on our research that represents the needs, thoughts, struggles, goals, and lived experiences of potential youth employment program participants. The personas in this guide are not meant to be an exhaustive representation of young people's work statuses or intersectional identities. Personas are created to help designers empathize with people to deeply understand their realities, passions, motivations, desires, barriers, and challenges to design solutions that can effectively meet their needs. As a tool, a persona helps designers see and experience the world from the perspective of young people and prevents them from

generalizing all youth into one bucket. For each persona we created career journeys that depict the winding career path that the persona experiences. The career journey for each persona is based on our qualitative data. That is to say, these are real examples of young people's career journeys that youth interviewees shared with us.

Paper #2: Inclusion and exclusion in youth economic opportunities: identities, opportunities, and barriers

What does a synthesis of youth-led research reveal about shared and unique barriers that youth experience in the transition to work? Under the USAID-funded Youth Excel activity, over 40 local, community-based youth organizations conducted implementation research in their specific areas of interest but aligned with the theme of strengthening youth economic opportunities.

This report is a meta-synthesis of the implementation research (IR) performed by community-based, youth-led organizations in three different sites in Guatemala, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Four (4) young researchers from three (3) different countries conducted this learning activity. This meta-learning activity is centered around the themes of inclusion and exclusion in youth economic opportunities. This report highlights commonalities and differences across place-based groups as well as identifies contextualized learnings that are specific to certain groups. Findings in this report are also presented using a positive youth development framework, which acknowledges that youth who hold certain identities are not at a deficit, but that societal institutions and structures have different impacts on different youth.

The content of this report is completely intersectional. This report draws from intersectionality as described by Crenshaw (1989) in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex", where she argues how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics "intersect" with one another and overlap and influence how society sees an individual and reacts to them.

The report helps the reader to understand the intersections present in what young researchers and practitioners have been learning, their similarities and differences in program implementation, and their lessons learned. The first section highlights the methodological approach used to compile the findings. The second section describes the findings, which is split into five main sections: structural barriers, identity barriers, opportunities for support and collaboration, entrepreneurship, and implementation research process learnings. Considering the scope of work for this report, findings focus heavily on the intersectional barriers to economic inclusion rather than proposed solutions. The last section proposes next steps for continued research.

The presentation will highlight the particular barriers and gaps that young people in the three (3) countries experience in their transitions to employment, as uncovered by their own research, as well as the recommendations made by the meta-synthesis learning team based on their analysis.

Paper #3: How intersectional, youth-led data leads to system strengthening in Kisumu, Kenya

This paper highlights how [10 local youth organizations in](#) Kisumu, Kenya worked as a collective to share implementation research that they conducted through Youth Excel's Issue-Based Collaborative Network (ICON) model and use their [data and findings](#) to engage with more stakeholders and strengthen the youth employment system in their county.

What is an Issue-Based Collaborative Network (ICON)? Youth Excel's ICON whole-system-in-the-room model convenes a diverse group of youth-led and youth-serving organizations and groups to form a place-based collaborative that collectively tackles a shared problem. The participants build skills in Research-to-Change (implementation research), conduct research to strengthen their own work, share data, create new knowledge collectively, learn from each other, and produce knowledge products to support youth advocacy and engage with local decision-makers.

Youth Excel's ICONs model addresses multiple barriers that youth leaders and youth-led organizations face by: engaging informal YL/YSGs and unaffiliated youth; providing a safe space and a collective for inclusive dialogue to build skills in inclusive, youth-led implementation research (IR) and trust between diverse youth, and between youth and adults; supporting intergenerational collaboration around shared priorities; and offering opportunities for youth-led work to achieve collective impact in a sector. Collective impact is the commitment of actors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem in a place; leaders must adopt a collective approach to a shared goal. (Kania & Kramer, 2011)

Recognizing that learning does not fit into linear steps and requires space for failure, mistakes and adaptation over time, ICONs leverage key learning principles, including social learning and experiential learning supported by reflection and peer-to-peer coaching/learning to provide iterative processes to develop IR skills by doing IR. ICONs convene in a specific place, around a specific cross-sectoral issue and associated learning agenda co-identified by local stakeholders.

In Kisumu, Kenya, 10 community-based youth-led organizations worked together over 18 months to collect data around their individual organizational priorities (for example, supporting entrepreneurship for youth with disabilities, and supporting young women in agriculture). They identified shared goals, pooled their data around these goals, engaged local stakeholders and decision-makers, and advocated for stronger systems outcomes based on their data and findings. This presentation will share how youth-led research, when elevated collectively by local youth actors, can identify key systems gaps and give youth leaders credibility to support systems change.

Paper #4: Measuring Mutual Accountability to Enhance Youth Leadership

Despite the common sense understanding among global development leaders and local activists that progress on local ownership and youth participation in aid is dependent on the quality of relationships between adult allies and other systems influencers, few development actors exert to, first, understand their own unconscious biases and cultural baggage, and second, ask how they “show up” to the youth they work with within the aid system.

While we cannot directly address the first issue (self-awareness), this report shows how we might provide an answer to the second (how others see me) by visualizing relationship dynamics and quality in an aid intervention. By mapping the relationships in Kisumu, Kenya,

between ten local youth organizations and over 600 organizations and institutions from the government, the private sector, and civil society, we demonstrate the utility of a mutual accountability metric. In essence, mutual accountability says that those working towards program goals and objectives hold each other to account for equitable, inclusive relationships that are meant to enhance youth leadership and self-reliance while realizing targeted improvements. In this report, we share our success and the many challenges we face in our efforts to support young people and youth organizations to use implementation research (IR) to influence decisions about local solutions, policy, and funding.

Robert Chambers writes that relationships are of “paradigmatic significance...To shift from relationships that are distant, impersonal, auditing, and controlling to become more face-to-face, personal, trusting, and empowering takes time. It also needs staff and motivation. Instead of continually reducing staff and ratio of staff to finance, as so many funders have done, value for money will come out of augmenting staff and encouraging them to get closer, face-to-face with their partners, and more in touch with the ground and the action”.¹ In this report, we posit that by creating a practical, affordable way for aid system actors to see the whole system and see how they are working together with youth, they will be more likely to realize their shared goals by holding each other to account by improving their mutual accountability metrics.

While the mutual accountability metrics we tested in Kisumu cannot directly address the resourcing, motivation, and deployment challenges funders must tackle for themselves, it can create a steady and reliable signal derived from those they mean to help, that funders may manage to, in order to realize their agreed objectives. Although there is nothing inevitable or easy in this, past experience makes it clear that meaningful progress on youth equity will not happen absent these kinds of accountability mechanisms.