

Catalyzing Youth Potential: IREX's Approach to Youth Development

Youth can drive lasting social and economic change that benefits their communities, their families, and themselves.

Youth can be a tremendous force for positive, transformational change at the local, national, and global levels. IREX reaches youth at the *right time* to catalyze their potential and enable them to proactively shape a rapidly changing world. IREX believes that this people-centered approach, in which individuals and institutions are supported to create change in their own communities, is the most effective road to building just, prosperous, and inclusive societies today and for the future. IREX defines youth as young people ages 15–35, a critical demographic and life stage.

Trends & opportunities

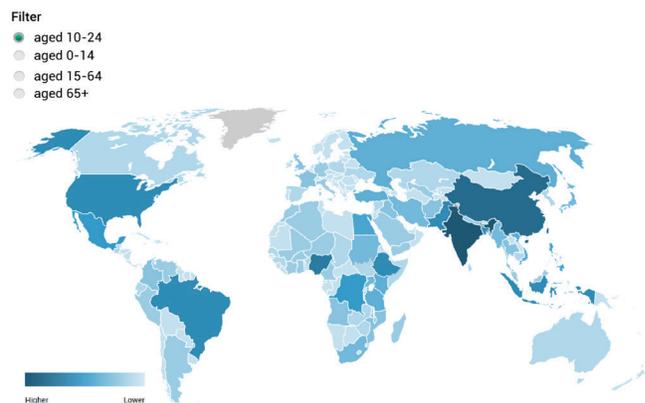
There are about 1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24¹ in the world today—the largest youth population ever. Forty-two percent of the global population is under 25. While in most areas, populations are decreasing or flatlining, youth populations are increasing in the Middle East, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Currently half of the world's young people live in Sub-Saharan Africa.² Between now and 2030, 25.6 million young workers aged 15–29 will enter the labor force and need jobs; this increase in the youth labor force will occur almost entirely in Africa.³

More young people are staying in school instead of entering the labor market at an early age, one in five youth are not in employment, education, or training (NEET), and three out of four youth in this category are women.⁴

Today's massive youth population has unprecedented opportunities to connect with each other and drive change. Advances in the internet, digital platforms, mobile phones, and digital financial services offer youth access to knowledge and increased employment. Youth advancement in the digital age must be balanced with ensuring targeted attention is paid to the realities of gender and social inclusion. While more than 70% of youth are active Internet users,⁵ internet access has grown unevenly and has resulted in a digital gender divide in two-thirds of countries worldwide. Globally, roughly 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone and can access mobile internet; "women are on average 26% less likely than men to have a smartphone. In South Asia and Africa, these proportions stand at 70% and 34%, respectively".⁶

Population density of youth 10-24 years old, by country

Population aged 10-24, per cent, 2017



<https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population>

Youth can leverage technology to organize and solve societal problems. Digital technologies may enable more efficient matching between labor supply and demand and may allow for the subdivision of jobs by youth located in different parts of the world. The gig economy creates opportunities for youth to enjoy the flexibility and benefits of short-term training which lead to traditional and virtual employment. Youth connected with digital technological breakthroughs can shape economic, civic, employment, environmental, and health outcomes.⁷ Bridging the digital divide can provide new opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship, enable youth to seek and generate information, raise awareness, and work with others to respond to real-world challenges. In recent years, youth have mobilized people and resources to organize national and international movements, from the Arab Spring to the March for Our Lives, driving change from the U.S. to Bangladesh to Egypt.⁸ The generation between ages 15 and 30 are digital natives who are poised to contribute to breakthroughs.

Conflict and economic insecurity are driving youth to migrate. Migration is often a rational choice made by young people with few job prospects or fears of violence, and many countries welcome young people's energy and willingness to work hard. Youth are migrating within and across borders to urban centers, increasing pressure on cities to provide options for housing, education, health, and employment. Of the 177 million migrants of working age, 59% have migrated to developed economies where they seek security and better economic opportunities.⁹ The bulk of international migrant flows consists of young people—around 70 percent are younger than 30.¹⁰ This number is likely to rise as youth populations grow across Africa and Asia, where 48% of young migrants originate. Youth need information, skills, mentorship, and networks to migrate legally and in ways that maximize opportunities and avoid exploitation.¹¹

The world of work is changing. The world economy is not producing the number of jobs needed for its burgeoning youth population, particularly in lower- and middle-income countries, where one in three young men and one in two young women are out of work.¹² While the rest of the world's youth population will shrink over time, Africa's youth population is set to more than triple to 830 million by 2050.¹³ In Sub-Saharan Africa, where the issue is most acute, only 3 million jobs are produced for the 12 million young people joining the workforce yearly.¹⁴ Moreover, as the demand for highly skilled workers grows and as industries incorporate technology that decreases the demand for low-skill workers, economic inequalities that cut across gender and demographic lines will continue to increase.

The evolving nature of work has also intensified the need for young people to develop a foundation of specific, transferrable skills such as social, emotional, and communications skills, while also building up industry-specific skills in business, entrepreneurship, and technology. For example, approximately 65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that do not yet exist.¹⁶ By 2020, 85–90% of all jobs will require digital skills. In many instances, the private sector has stepped up to offer youth opportunities to become entrepreneurs and gain the right job skills through internships, mentorships, and on-the-job training. These well-prepared, energetic young employees then allow companies to continue to grow, innovate, and thus profit. However, not all organizations have the capacity to offer these opportunities, and the need for these opportunities outstrips the supply. Companies and the education system must collaborate to ensure that young people receive the necessary education and training to prepare them to enter the workforce. In today's changing world of work, youth also benefit from access to technologies that give them unprecedented opportunities to learn, network, innovate, and adapt.

Currently, 69.5 million youth are unemployed. At age 23, 20% of young men and 42% of young women in low- and middle-income countries are still unemployed and uneducated, signaling that school entry and work transitions are difficult to navigate. **This puts these youth at risk of lower lifetime wages and negative social outcomes.** In Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, over 90% of employed youth occupy informal and/or vulnerable jobs, making them less likely to ever access fair wages or to move into more stable work in the formal economy.¹⁵

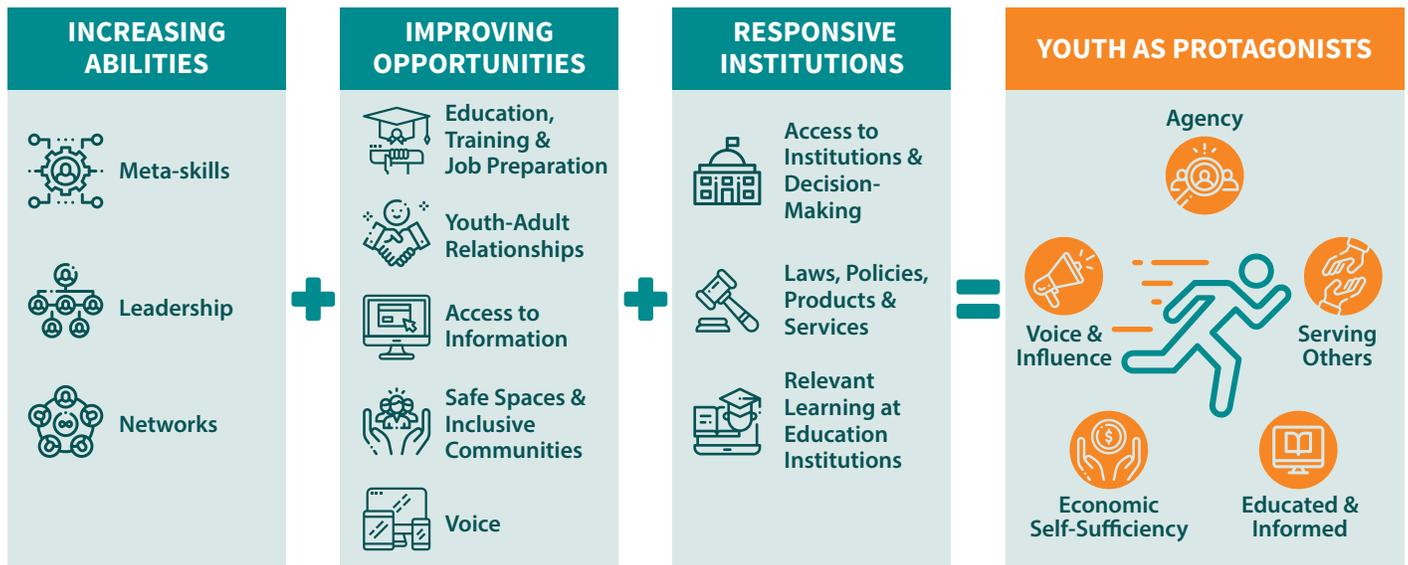


Youth lack agency and voice in decisions that affect their lives and futures. Many youth are marginalized from political processes and excluded from participating in economic, social, and political decisions that affect their lives. Too frequently, youth see those in power act without accountability and fail to address national development and community needs. Within this landscape, youth may become easy prey for divisive rhetoric and misinformation created to sow confusion, heighten emotions, and foment radicalization, intolerance, or conflict. They may feel frustrated, angry, alienated, or hopeless. Sometimes this sense of frustration and alienation risks drawing them into more negative networks such as gangs or extremist groups.¹⁷ Engaging youth who are ready to participate in making productive change can benefit communities and counter extremist tendencies, while building their resilience and allowing them to exercise positive leadership now and in the future.

The need for deeper youth engagement persists. Some governments and international organizations have recognized a responsibility and incentive to empower youth, creating youth representative bodies to advocate for young people from the local to the national level. National governments, multilaterals, foundations, NGOs, and the private sector have created youth-focused policies to tackle the pressing needs of this generation while working to promote and support youth wellbeing, employment, and civic engagement. However, the need for continued, deepened youth engagement in institutions and within networks remains. We need to prepare and clear the way for future generations to effectively navigate a dynamic landscape of change as adaptive, innovative changemakers, able to create opportunity for themselves and for others and develop positive solutions for their communities and nations.

Catalyzing youth potential: theory of change

IREX increases youth's **abilities** to better position them for work and participation in society, improves **opportunities** to help youth apply and strengthen those abilities, and supports **institutions** to become more responsive to youth needs while empowering youth as forces for positive change.



With these abilities, opportunities, and responsive institutions, youth can be **protagonists** who drive positive change in their own lives and in the lives of their peers, communities, nations, and beyond.



Sense of agency: Youth who 1) view themselves as valuable contributors to their families and societies, 2) have a sense of control over their lives, and 3) have confidence that they can improve their situation can channel their energies in positive directions. This sense of agency allows youth to navigate transitions and societal change, developing solutions to meet their own needs as well as the needs of their families and communities. Building youth agency is particularly important for poor and vulnerable youth, who may be more marginalized than an average young person and may have even less support needed to recognize or achieve their own potential.



Leading to serve others: Youth leaders can catalyze action for positive societal change. Youth who create positive societal change can serve as intentional and unintentional role models. They can also inspire other youth to become changemakers; contribute to making positive community change; develop supportive, inclusive peer groups; and create innovative solutions to address the problems of our time. Youth leaders can also motivate adults to create better societies.



Educated and informed youth: Relevant education—both formal and informal—positions youth to achieve individual success, serve others, and create societal change. Educated and informed youth have clearer pathways to positive life outcomes such as income, social status, health, and overall wellbeing. Educated and informed youth are also better able to make informed decisions, participate in governance, and hold those in power accountable.



Economic self-sufficiency and opportunity: Navigating transitions in learning, working, and earning are crucial to moving youth into an economically productive adulthood and building dignity, self-confidence, and hope. Within the rapidly changing world of work, youth economic opportunity requires 1) developing relevant skills for a dynamic economy through formal and nonformal education, training, professional experience, mentorship, and peer mentorship, 2) adjusting to new ways of earning, and 3) contributing to inclusive economic growth.



Voice and influence: Research demonstrates that if youth voices are expressed and listened to by decision makers and influencers to inform action in political, economic, and social spheres, those voices will contribute to positive development outcomes. Youth advance their own learning, mental wellbeing, motivation, and belief in their ability to succeed, and through their networks and agency, they protect themselves from alienation and depression.¹⁸ Experience shows that youth can provide lucid, passionate, and effective calls to action on local, national, and global issues and can leverage large populations to bring global attention to issues ranging from the right to fair working conditions to the protection of civil liberties.

How IREX supports youth

INCREASING ABILITIES

Youth are an extraordinarily diverse population with differing levels of education, societal inclusion, and access to resources. IREX supports youth to build their abilities to drive development and positive change in their own lives and in their communities.



Strengthening youth meta-skills: To survive and thrive across society's economic, social, and civic dimensions, all youth—but especially those without access to quality, relevant education, civic engagement, and economic opportunities—need to develop key *meta-skills* that will help them effectively transition to productive work, constructive civic engagement, and healthy family life. Acquiring and strengthening these 21st-century meta-skills prepares youth to navigate transitions and contribute as changemakers at all levels of society. These meta-skills include social and emotional skills; communication skills; organizational and self-management skills; a commitment to and skills for lifelong learning; the ability to use data and information for decision-making; and skills to access quality information and knowledge through technology.



Fostering leadership at all levels of society: While not every young person can or should hold a leadership position, youth will need to develop skills to achieve their personal and professional goals, contribute positively to their communities, and be ready to exercise leadership in local, global, and virtual contexts.



Developing inclusive networks and bridges: In a highly interconnected global environment, the right kinds of networks can make all the difference in young people's success. Youth who can capitalize upon existing networks and create new ones gain access to relevant resources, opportunities, and services while drawing motivation and inspiration from connections to other youth, adults, and institutions. Cultivating connections to inclusive in-person and virtual networks is critical for youth to expand their impact, gain mentors and role models, and have access to opportunities to help them identify and pursue pathways to positive futures.

Across IREX's programs, youth are engaged as partners and elevated as leaders in designing, implementing, and evaluating the supports and opportunities that programs provide. They are also able to exercise authentic voice and action to forge the pathway to a more hopeful future.



IMPROVING OPPORTUNITIES

Recognizing the widely varying needs of youth, IREX exposes youth to new people, ideas, and research. This exposure is critical to changing minds, showing what is possible, and helping unlock the potential of all youth.



Aligning education, training, and learning with real-world needs: Formal and nonformal education can provide opportunities and benefits to young people at all levels. Through innovative training and curricula, internships, extracurricular activities, problem-based learning, apprenticeships, and collaborative partnerships between education institutions and industry, youth can receive education and training that is more relevant to employer needs and facilitates improved career pathways.



Strengthening youth-adult relationships: The contexts that surround youth can provide resources (developmental assets) that contribute to their success and wellbeing. One of the most important resources, relevant across contexts, is relationships with committed, caring adults.¹⁹ Adult relationships may be with parents, other adults who youth encounter informally, teachers, or formal mentors. The types of high-quality youth-adult relationships that help youth thrive are ones in which youth and adults are emotionally connected in a positive manner; they are reciprocal, they are progressively complex, and they have a balance of power. In these high-quality youth-adult relationships, youth feel safe, heard, and valued—all of which help them to find the motivation and confidence to lead and connect with others, find pathways to successful economic and social engagement, constructively navigate uncertainty and change, and create positive social change.^{20,21}



Facilitating access to quality information: Youth must have the right to access information. They must be equipped with the skills to access, process, generate, disseminate, discern, and engage with data to make informed decisions, hold those in power accountable, and take actions that will improve their lives. Access to quality information cuts across all elements of a young person's life—facilitating the achievement of economic livelihood, job opportunities, and personal goals; exercising political rights; participating in civic activities; and informing health, education, and security decisions. Youth need access to quality information for their own lives and can become powerful advocates for access to quality information in their communities and society.



Fostering safe spaces and inclusive communities: Safe spaces for all youth—regardless of gender, age, religion, race, ethnicity, and other dimensions of diversity—provide physical and psychological safety, supportive relationships, a sense of belonging, and skill-building and leadership opportunities. Within these in-person and virtual spaces and communities, youth can exchange information and resources; express opinions in a nonjudgmental setting; develop self-confidence and social, emotional, and leadership skills; and grow their networks.



Elevating youth voice: Youth need in-person and virtual spaces where they can raise priorities, be heard by decision-makers and society, participate in their communities' civic life, and mobilize and organize for action. These spaces can be local, global, or virtual, and youth can express their voice as individuals or as part of a network or social movement. In addition to contributing to better decision-making and outcomes, opportunities to express their opinions give youth confidence and experience engaging others and influencing choices.

IREX puts gender and social inclusion at the forefront of its approach to ensure that all people have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. Too many youth are economically and socially excluded from opportunities. IREX sees gender equality and social inclusion as not only a fundamental aspect of human rights and social justice but also as a precondition to improving overall social development and ultimately economic development.



RESPONSIVE INSTITUTIONS

National and subnational governments, private-sector companies, civic institutions, and other organizations such as educational institutions, civic associations, and trade unions control resources and policies that affect youth lives. IREX helps institutions become more responsive to and supportive of youth.



Ensuring youth access to institutions and decision-making: Institutions that engage future leaders and entrepreneurs in traditionally adult-centric leadership structures ensure meaningful youth participation and input. This participation and input strengthen institutions as they create policies, business strategies, and products that are relevant for their constituents and customers



Developing laws, policies, products, and services that address youth needs: Youth input can help shape how institutions create legal frameworks and youth-friendly policies and services. Such input can have a range of positive societal outcomes such as young entrepreneurs' access to seed capital, election laws that prevent exploitation of young voters, and health services that are financially and physically accessible to youth. Ensuring that policies and practices that affect youth are *youth-friendly* (that they account for youth needs and youth participation) and inclusive (that they consider the rights and contributions of all youth, across social groups) will create more responsive institutions that provide the right services to young people.



Encouraging relevant learning at education institutions: Quality, relevant teaching and learning at secondary and postsecondary education institutions is fundamental to scaling skill-building to broad youth populations. Education institutions are often either bureaucracies that are slow to adapt to the rapidly changing world of work or organizations that favor certain groups at the expense of others. Changing them requires a nuanced understanding of their incentives and disincentives and steady support for champions of reform. Teachers who build 21st-century skills, curricula that account for the skills needed in the world of today and the future, and services that offer better access to realistic steps toward future careers and civic engagement will help ensure that youth can build productive pathways to adulthood.

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