

## 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.

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### 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.

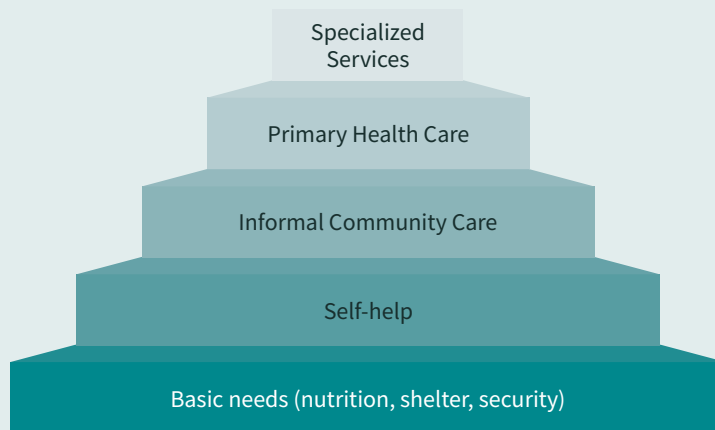
Malawian youth across the focus group samples highlighted the positive role that receiving emotional support from family, friends, and community played throughout their L2E journeys. Mothers were the most frequently cited source of support, followed closely by other family members such as siblings, aunts, 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,<sup>1</sup> 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.

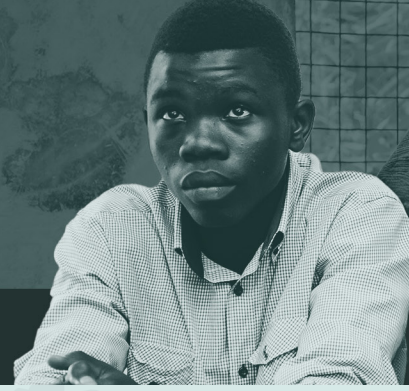






## Efforts to support Malawian youth well-being and their learning to earning journeys should:

- ✓ 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



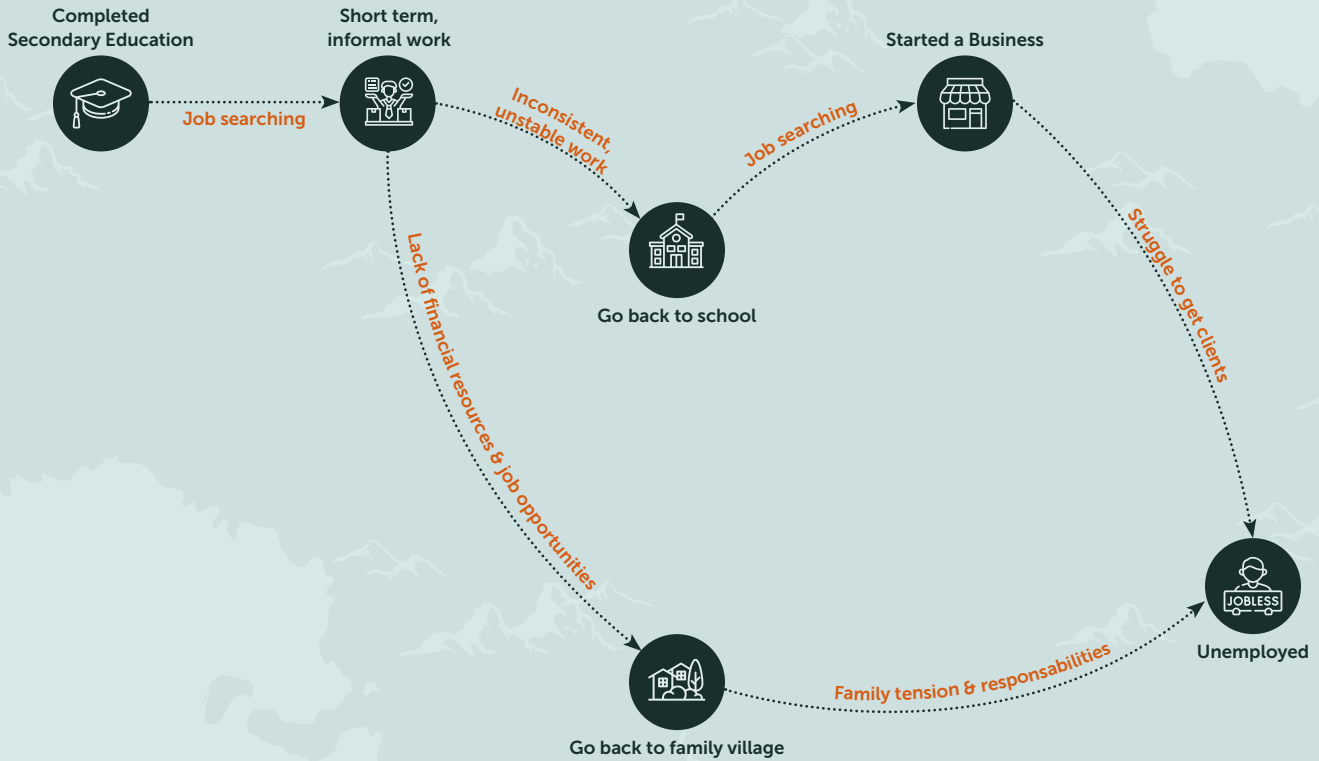
“Doing ganyu [increases my wellbeing] since it helps me earn something, however, there is never ending stress since these are temporary opportunities which are unpredictable, and sometimes I get it and sometimes I don't. So stress is a part of my life.”

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.

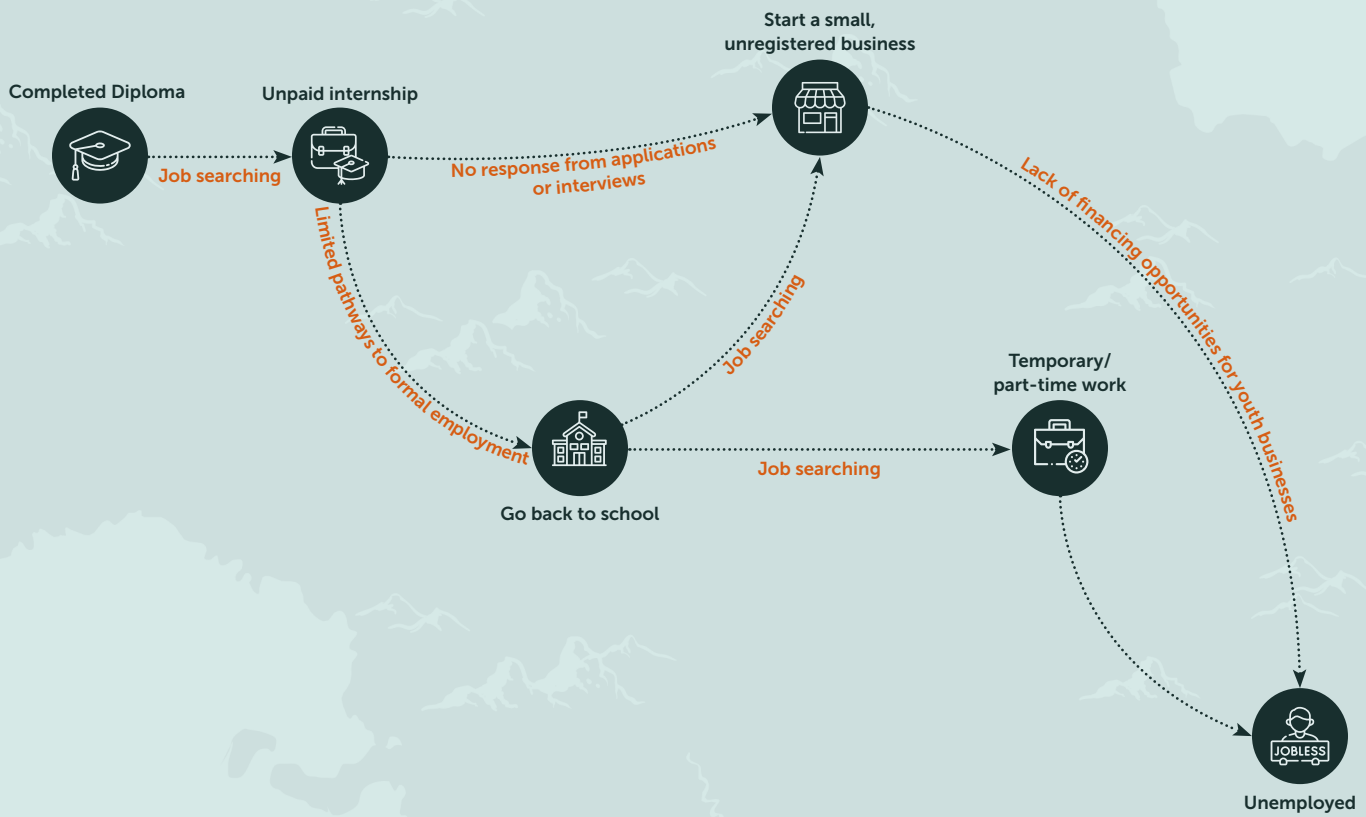
# Malawian Diploma Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys

**“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

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**"I was motivated to search for jobs."**  
MALAWIAN YOUTH
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**"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



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**"A lack of connections and high competition in the job market makes it difficult."**  
MALAWIAN YOUTH
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**"[ 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
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**"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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