

Appendix D: Country Spotlight Report: Kenya

KENYA

YOUTH WELL-BEING, LEARNING TO EARNING

Country Spotlight

From April to June 2023, IREX supported four youth researchers in consulting with 39 youth from diverse backgrounds around Kenya 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 Kenyan participants and context and associated recommendations geared toward the international development community and youth-led and youth-serving programs and organizations.

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39 Youth Focus Group Participants


Gender:

19 females, 20 males


Job Status:

11 unemployed, 9 short-term/temporarily employed, 8 informal/business owners; 4 long-term/formal contract employed, 7 multiple income sources


Age:

Nineteen 18- to 25-year-olds, twenty 26- to 35-year-olds


Education:

2 technical and vocational training graduates, 29 bachelor’s graduates, 7 diploma holders, 1 certificate holder


Geography:

14 urban, 12 rural, 13 peri-urban


Languages Spoken:

19 English speakers, 20 English and Swahili speakers

Supportive relationships play a key role in maintaining youth well-being during their L2E journeys.

In Kenya, youth expressed that family, friends, and community members play a large role in supporting their well-being and L2E journeys. Regarding family, the most referenced members were mothers, with parents in general and siblings also being recognized as key pillars of support. About friends, a 28-year-old Kenyan female youth mentioned that her “best friend helped me overcome depression and anxiety” related to unemployment. A 24-year-old male youth added, “I have hope, self-confidence, and a community that supports me,” which was crucial in navigating and overcoming challenges. In fact, youth primarily sought out emotional support from friends, family, and community members, greatly valuing opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings freely and having the receiver actively listen and provide words of affirmation. The youth noted that these acts were incredibly helpful as they navigated challenging employment processes.

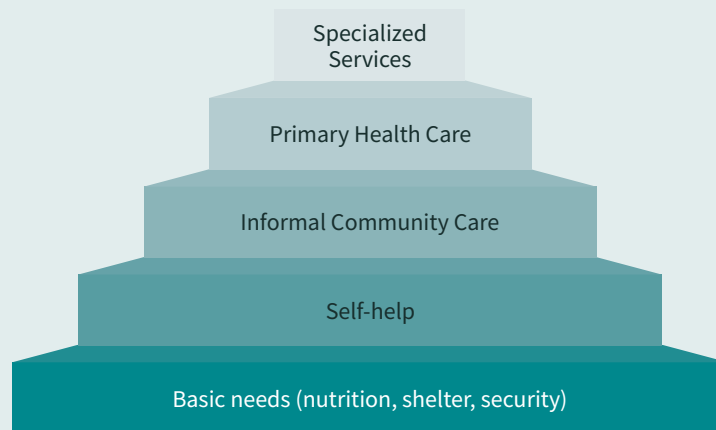
Youth also valued career-related advice from friends and family, but to a much lesser degree—signaling that having space to be heard and supported may be often more helpful to their L2E journeys than anything more directly related to employment.

Given that many of these supports fit within the “informal community care” category on the pyramid of mental health and psychosocial support,¹ employment programming needs to consider how to leverage these pre-established networks to best support youth well-being and employment opportunities and success.

The Kenyan labor market is flooded, limiting youth employment opportunities.

The L2E journey presents formidable challenges for youth in Kenya, particularly due to the great number of annual graduates entering the job market. This “labor market flooding” as many youth participants referred to it, results in many youth never hearing back when submitting CVs and subsequently feeling hopeless about securing gainful work. As a 26-year-old male youth shared, “The labor market in Kenya is oversaturated [with job seekers], leaving few available job opportunities, forcing many to accept positions unrelated to their studies or passions solely to make ends meet.” This sentiment resonated widely among the Kenyan youth consulted, intensified by their aspirations for independence and self-sufficiency clashing with the experience of having to rely on their families for financial support and/or moving home after graduation.

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.

In many ways, this present reality in Kenya reflects the consequences of expanded access to higher education, surpassing the capacity of the stagnant public-employment sector. As a 30-year-old Kenyan man reflected, “Older individuals are not retiring, which limits job prospects for younger generations,” highlighting the need for youth to diversity their skillset to be qualified for online gigs within a growing digital economy. As demonstrated by the launch of the 10-year Information Communication Technology Digital Masterplan 2022–2032, the government of Kenya has taken a proactive shift toward digital infrastructure and transformation across various sectors, giving rise to new employment opportunities and roles for youth. However, this trend has not always been met with positive public sentiment. During the focus group discussions, two youth ages 24 and 25 shared their experiences of starting side hustles immediately after graduation, driven by their urgent need for income. Despite demonstrating creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, they faced stigmatization from peers who viewed this type of informal work unfavorably; this negatively impacted their well-being, resulting in feelings of shame and perpetuating a view that informal work should only be temporary.



Given the rapidly growing youth population in Kenya—projected to reach 85 million by 2050 according to the World Bank’s predictions—creative methods for growing the local job market remain critical. Adequately preparing youth to take up these new jobs and roles, however, may require youth programming to focus attention toward the social and emotional well-being impact this may have on youth job seekers and entrepreneurs.

Poor Kenyan labor market conditions present challenges to youth well-being.

Most youth consulted in Kenya expressed anticipating a straightforward and easy transition from school to work; however, their experiences rarely matched their expectations. The focus group youth participants shared various challenges related to job security and work environments. As articulated by a 32-year-old male focus group participant,



“I completed school, secured a position in a private company, received a lower salary, and now I’m simply exhausted. I consider myself fortunate to have a job and not be constantly searching for employment and a paycheck.”

Various youth shared that the uncertainty inherent within the labor market was “mentally draining,” leaving many at a crossroads, unsure of which career path to pursue. A 26-year-old Kenyan female youth said, “There is a lot of unpredictability with the job search, and it leads to stress and depression.” This shortage of gainful employment—particularly jobs that aligned with their studies—negatively affected youth motivation.

Experiencing toxic work environments also appeared to be a common issue among youth consulted, with many sharing how this adversely affected their well-being. Youth participants expressed that they often faced great difficulty obtaining an internship. Even if they did get an internship, they received meager wages, endured heavy workloads, and experienced poor working conditions. As a 25-year-old female youth reflected, “Working on short contracts, job insecurity, and increased workloads makes one feel easily disposable and uncertain about [your] next month’s income.”

2. Ministry of ICT, Innovation and Youth Affairs. “The Kenya National Digital Master Plan 2022-2032,” 2022. [Kenya Digital Masterplan 2022-2032 Online Version.pdf \(icta.go.ke\)](#).

As these examples show, various factors within the Kenyan labor market have a detrimental effect on youth well-being. While we cannot conclude that this is indicative of pervasive trends, given the limited sample size, it does raise the importance of considering how labor market conditions may influence employment retention and well-being. Youth workforce development programming that seeks to improve these factors may result in positive youth employment and well-being outcomes.

Gender disparities shape Kenyan youth employment experiences.

The present research found that challenges faced by Kenyan youth during their transition from school to work are particularly pronounced for young women—demonstrating enduring gender disparities in employment access and experiences. As a 23-year-old female focus group participant shared, “I’ve witnessed firsthand the formidable hurdles that girls in our community must overcome to pursue education and meaningful careers.” Even for young women who manage to secure gainful employment, numerous barriers in the workplace exist. As one 25-year-old Kenyan participant expressed, “As a woman, I constantly find myself having to prove my worth and facing unfair treatment in comparison to men.” Organizations were also found to explicitly require specific genders for jobs. As a female Kenyan youth shared, “Most employers prefer women for certain jobs like an office assistant, but they will not hire you if you are pregnant or have plans of getting pregnant within the first year of working”—demonstrating gender biases that may shift depending on a youth’s age or marital status.

Women from our focus groups also spoke about specific experiences of gender-based discrimination that influenced their economic opportunities. As one 25-year-old female youth shared,



“What stood out was the aspect of discrimination, especially from male colleagues in our office when I worked as a psychologist. They misaligned my good performance and falsely accused me of inappropriate relationships with clients, which eventually pushed me to resign. Looking at the unexplored path, I was surprised by the career choices made by my peers to advance.”

These types of situations can put youth at a disadvantage, because their skills and experiences are not highly valued in the workplace—which would negatively impact their opportunities for professional growth.



In light of these experiences, youth workforce development interventions that consider gender-sensitive approaches, including mentorship programs and vocational training initiatives tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of young women, may prove beneficial for supporting Kenyan youth employment. Additionally, fostering community awareness and engagement to challenge traditional gender roles may be critical for ensuring sustainable progress toward gender equity and Kenyan youth well-being along their L2E journeys.



Efforts to support Kenyan 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.
- ✓ Develop creative methods for growing the local job market and youth skills including a focus on connectivity to global markets in line with demands for the Industrial Revolution 4.0. These efforts should take into account supports and upskilling that may be needed to ensure youth well-being and protection associated with greater engagement in online spaces.
- ✓ Improve labor market conditions targeting job security and workplace conditions to positively influence youth employment, retention, and well-being outcomes. Various approaches including public policy reform, advocacy, and accountability for the private sector. Youth and stakeholder training related to labor rights for in-person and online work environments may prove helpful for improving and navigating these contextual challenges.
- ✓ 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 workforce and well-being interventions at critical moments during youth's learning to earning journeys.
- ✓ Integrate gender-sensitive approaches including mentorship programs and vocational training initiatives tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of young women. Additionally, foster community awareness and engagement to challenge traditional gender roles to facilitate gender equity within Kenya youth employment.



Kenyan Certificate Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys



“I needed to earn money immediately after graduation so I started a side hustle. Yet society and friends looked down on me for this informal work.”

25-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



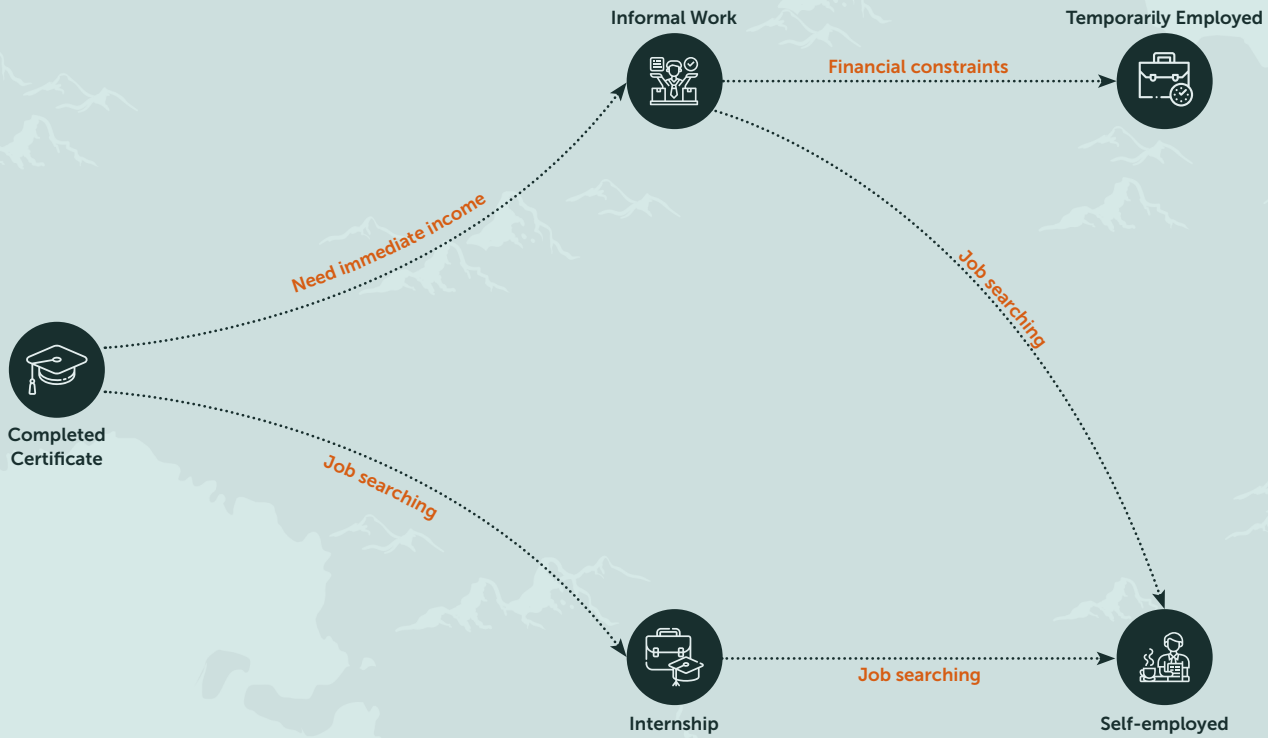
“I am employed and have good coworkers, but am working in something I did not study.”

32-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE



“I was denied a job in the beauty space because of my disability, I was told I could not be able to attend to customer.”

21-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



“I have hope, self-confidence, and a community that supports me.”

24-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE



“It is hard to get even internships and if you do get them, they are mostly unpaid but if they are paid it is low, have heavy workload, and a poor work environment.”

27-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE



“In Kenya it is very challenging to get money for investment in self-employment.”

25-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE

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.



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



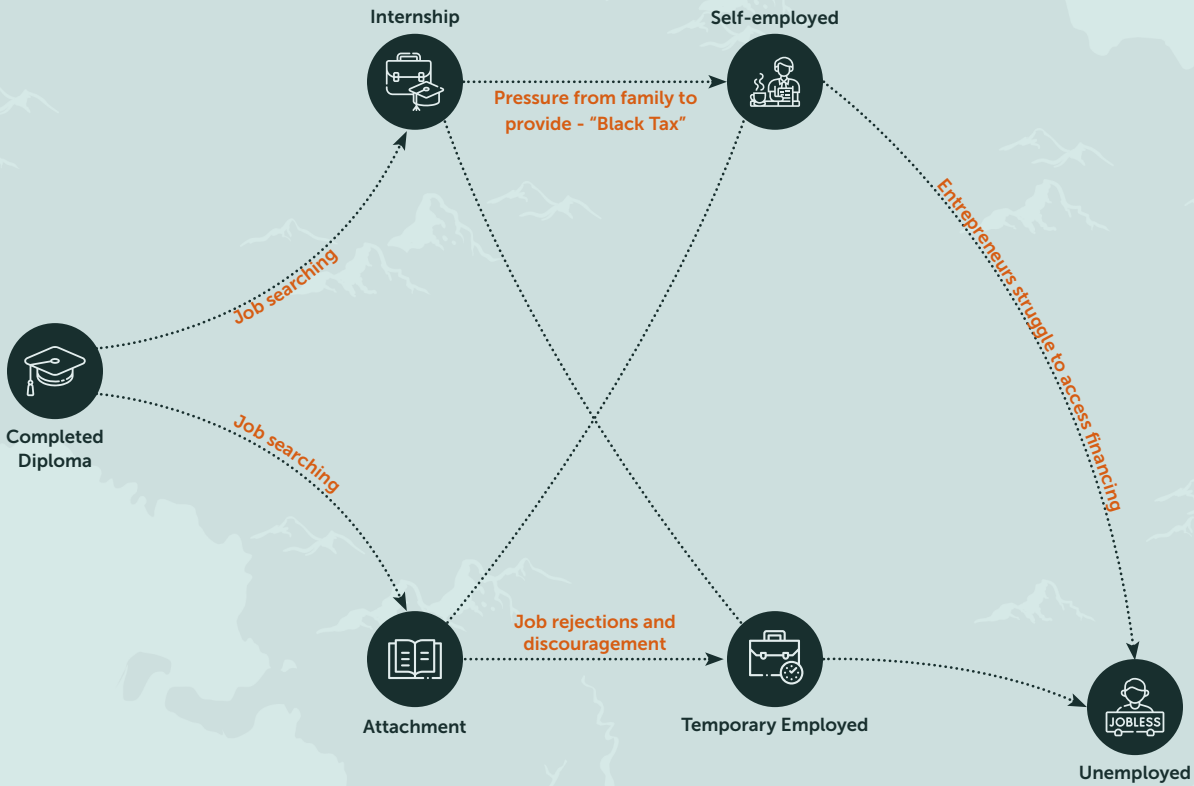
"I started with hope and positive support from family."

28-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



"Mentors on the job market and good colleagues helped me."

32-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE



"I was given a lot of duties and discriminated due to my age, but at least I was gaining new experiences."

23-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



"Working under short contracts, job insecurity, and increased workload makes one easily disposable and uncertain about the next paycheck."

25-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



"Old people are not retiring, which stifles job opportunities for younger people."

27-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE

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Kenyan Bachelor's Degree Holders: Well-Being Along their Learning to Earning Journeys



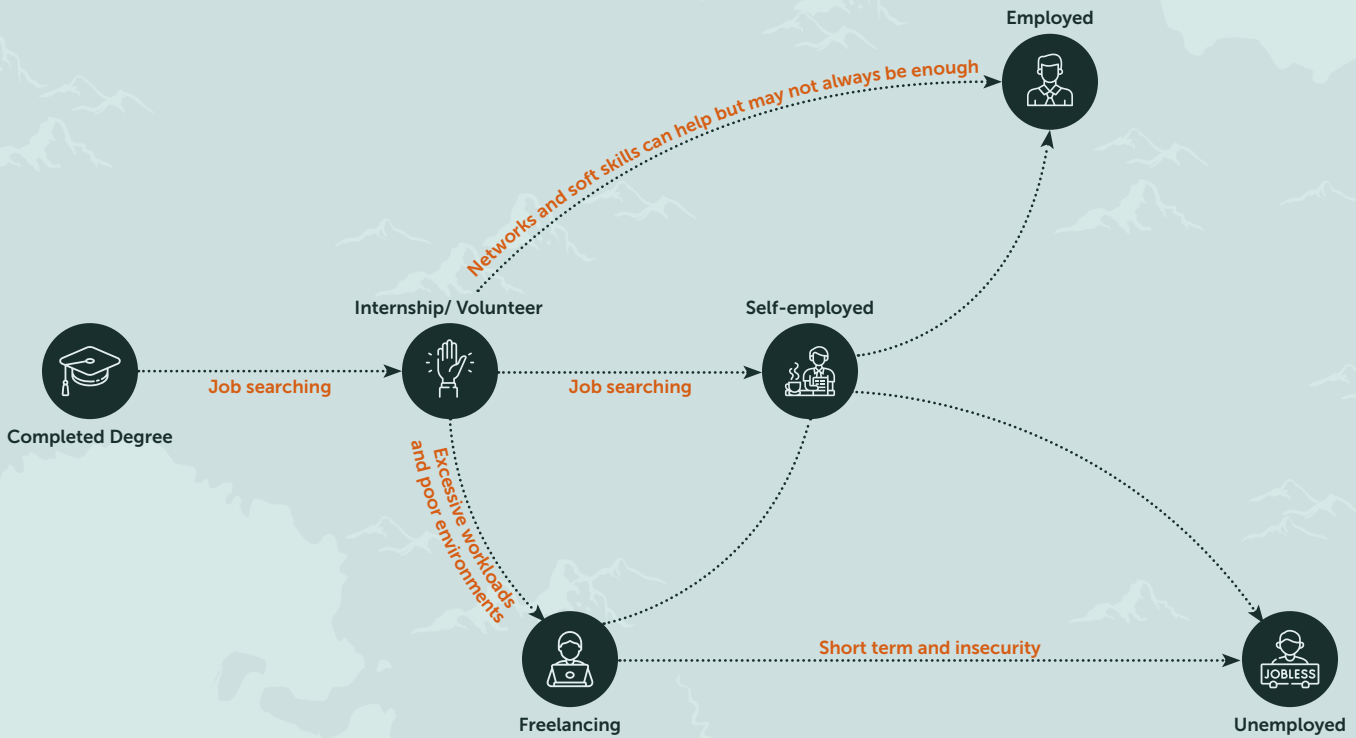
“When I was almost done with school, some of my classmates had already secured jobs and this greatly discouraged me. Therefore, I wasn’t hopeful and didn’t look for work after school instead I was confused and frustrated.”

26-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



“Work is so stressful that I do not have a social life anymore. Job is Monday to Sunday. No time to rest.”

28-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE



“What you study in school doesn’t rhyme with what the job market wants.”

27-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



“I was able to maintain my well-being because I had multiple sources of income including online thrifting.”

24-YEAR-OLD KENYAN FEMALE



“I am grateful to be employed but toxic work environments, poor conditions, and insecurity negatively impact my well-being.”

24-YEAR-OLD KENYAN MALE

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