

Youth Well-being Pilot Profile

CALI Advances Youth Well-Being Across Kenya in Partnership with Local Kenyan Mental Health Organization

Background

Youth employment continues to be one of the most inextricable challenges to global economic, social, and environmental development. The transition from school into work has become increasingly long and challenging, exacting a negative emotional toll for youth, aged 18-35, during defining life stages. Young peoples disrupted and/or prolonged transitions into the workforce, coupled with periods of unemployment, have been identified as impediments to acquiring the skills and experiences crucial for supporting lifelong employability, fostering social and economic opportunities, and promoting overall well-being. Youth navigating the learning to earning (L2E) journey voice that they are worried, sad, frustrated, ashamed, lost, angry, defeated, and hopeless, which in clinical terms points to poor well-being—possibly depression or anxiety—or worse yet, suicidal ideation or more serious clinical diagnoses. Youth experiencing decreased well-being are more likely to face barriers to accessing decent work and to demonstrate stunted workforce productivity.

To address this ongoing challenge, IREX first conducted youth-led research in Malawi, Kenya, and Ukraine, culminating in the report, "Youth Well-being Along Their Learning to Earning Journey." Building on this foundation, new phases of implementation and impact assessment are now in progress to further disseminate insights, knowledge, and resources.

Pilot and Partnership

IREX and Basic Needs Basic Rights Kenya (BNBR)—an NGO specializing in person-centered and rights-based mental health initiatives—have partnered to enhance youth well-being in Kenya. This collaboration was sparked by Judah Njoroge, an IREX Community Solutions Program alumni, and BNBR's Youth Engagement Officer, who reached out to IREX with an initial plan to improve mental health for youth across the country. The teams shared and adapted organizational resources to create the "Strengthening Youth Mental Health and Well-being across the Learning to Earning Journey" workshop.



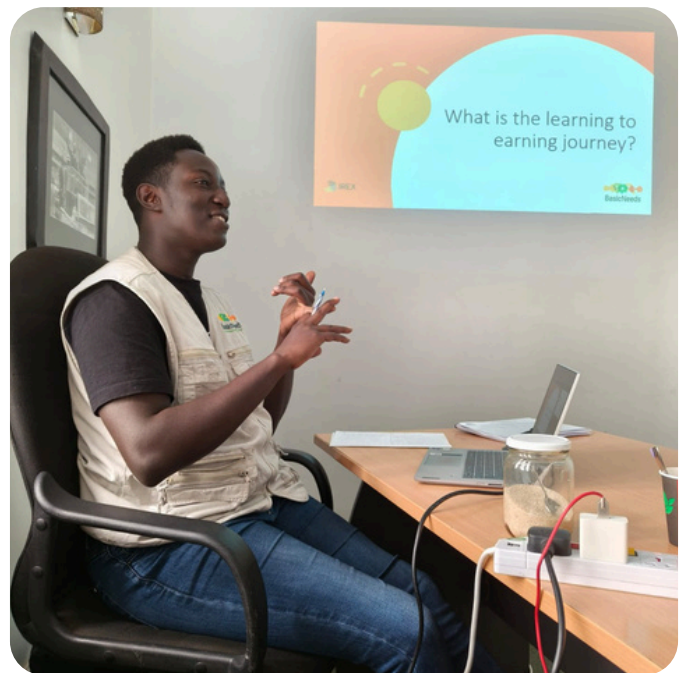
Methodology

The "Strengthening Youth Mental Health and Well-being across the Learning to Earning Journey" workshop has six main objectives geared towards Kenyan youth (ages 18-35):

1. Define mental health, mental illness and well-being
2. Describe their personal state of well-being to others
3. Increase confidence and ease in engaging in conversation about well-being thereby reducing stigma and common misconceptions
4. Explain the interconnection between youth well-being and L2E journey
5. Identify factors that negatively and positively influence their well-being along their L2E journey
6. Apply new strategies to support their well-being along the L2E journey

To measure the impact of the workshops, IREX developed a customized Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) protocol including a pre- and post-workshop survey, and participant handouts that accompanied activities that were collected for data purposes.

IREX's technical team provided on-site support to the BNBR team, assisting in collecting evidence on workshop outcomes and conducting individual interviews with select participants to gather feedback for improving the workshop and its tools. Six workshops were implemented across three Kenya counties (Nairobi, Bungoma, and Kilifi).



Basic Needs Basic Rights's Kenyan Youth Engagement Officer, Judah Njoroge

Workshop Outcomes



Youth participants learn about the importance of mental health in the “Strengthening Youth Mental Health and Well-being across the Learning to Earning Journey” workshop

Youth attendees exhibited high levels of engagement and enthusiasm towards the workshop. IREX and BNBR were deeply moved by the positive feedback from participants, who described the workshops as a “beautiful, fun, and informative experience” that made them “feel seen and less alone on their journey.” One participant even shared that it is “more than just a session, but an investment in our future.” This was made possible by a curriculum specifically adapted to the Kenyan context which emphasizes creating safe and brave spaces where youth participants feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences and engaging in meaningful dialogue about their mental health challenges.

Outcome #1: Increased youth understanding of their learning-to-earning journey

Through participating in the workshop youth gained clarity in visualizing their unique learning-to-earning journeys. They came to appreciate the complexity of their paths and how they often diverge from societal expectations. This newfound perspective helped them recognize significant milestones they had previously overlooked as achievements. During the activity where participants illustrated their own L2E journeys and mapped out the factors that positively and negatively influenced them at each stage, they were encouraged to challenge false narratives and celebrate the diverse, authentic paths young people take toward employment.

This process helped them recognize that every journey—complex, challenging, dynamic, unique, and fluid—is valid. As one participant shared, “Everyone’s L2E journey is different, and we must tell our stories to empower ourselves. It’s okay for our journey to look different from what we’ve been taught to believe.” Another young participant reflected on a powerful realization: “earning doesn’t have to be confined to traditional employment after graduation.” She initially believed, like many, that financial success could only be achieved by securing a job with a regular salary.

Outcome #2: Increased youth confidence and ease in engaging in conversation about well-being, mental health, and mental illness

By the end of the workshop, the youth demonstrated greater confidence and understanding when discussing topics related to well-being, mental illness, and mental health. They found accessible and effective ways to engage with their peers on these subjects, gained clarity on the differences between these concepts, and were able to express their own state of well-being. A crucial part of the workshop was challenging common misconceptions and addressing the stigma surrounding mental health, which remains prevalent in Kenya. A female youth participant shared “The training really broadened my knowledge of the scope of mental health. I like to refer to the workshop as a session of self-love since it gave me time to reflect on my life all while gaining important life skills like how to identify signs of mental illness and effectively communicate with other in the community about mental health.”

Another participant reflected, “Mental health correlates with most of my day-to-day activities. Being able to express them does not make me weak but rather stronger and gives way for healing and getting better day by day as mental healing is not about the destination but the journey.” It was also important for participants to reflect on the interconnection of their well-being challenges and how it has impacted their L2E journeys. One participant shared that workshop gave her the chance to connect the dots between her struggles and achievements, emphasizing the importance of mental health support and realistic expectations for transitions in life.

Outcome #3: Youth identify and apply well-being strategies to support them in their learning-to-earning journey

Participants established well-being networks and gained access to resources and strategies essential for maintaining mental health during the transition from school to work. Activities included identifying well-being support systems within their communities, mapping out accessible resources, and developing a personal resilience plan with self-care strategies. These activities recognize that young people already possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to support their well-being and resilience as they navigate complex learning-to-earning journeys.

One participant shared his approach to managing his mental health has been deeply influenced by the support he found in his community and among his peers. After struggling with childhood trauma and emotional difficulties, he found a lifeline in the Fancy Stories Network (FSN), a community where he could connect with others who shared similar experiences. He shared his poetry and writing with his peers as form of self-expression which became essential to his mental health journey. These conversations offered him validation and comfort, reinforcing that he was not alone in his struggles. By openly communicating his mental health challenges and engaging in community activities, he built a reliable support network. This combination of peer support, creative expression, and community involvement has been crucial in his journey toward healing and resilience, enabling him to manage his mental well-being while inspiring others to do the same.

His story is just one of many that show how young people recognize their peers as their greatest allies. By tapping into and strengthening local community care networks, they are finding timely and relevant support, which ultimately enriches their well-being, employment prospects, and overall success.



Youth celebrating after completing the workshop

Next Steps

CALI's School to Work team is dedicated to advocating for youth and expanding the reach of this curriculum to empower even more young people on their journey from learning to earning. If you are interested in exploring a partnership opportunity, like the one with BNBR, contact Maxie Gluckman at mgluckman@irex.org