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Evidence Brief

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Aligning TVET and Skills Systems with Labour-Market Demand for Inclusive Youth Employment

Key messages

- **Expanded training has not produced employment.** All eight countries have widened access to secondary and tertiary education without matching gains in labour-market relevance. Only about 10% of Ghana's university graduates were in work immediately after national service, and 22.4% of Ghanaian youth, 18.4% of Ugandan youth aged 15 to 35 and 33.2% of Senegalese youth aged 15 to 24 were outside work and education.[1]
- **"Skills mismatch" describes four different problems.** The study separates curriculum misalignment, competency misalignment, barriers to entering the labour market and insufficient demand for labour. Treating them as one misdirects public resources and places responsibility for joblessness on young people who have met every requirement set for them.[2]
- **Reforming training supply is necessary but not sufficient.** Rwanda's employer-led system, with about 80% of curricula employer-initiated, still shows higher vulnerable employment among TVET participants (39.6 against 28.2%). South African learnerships move 86% of completers into secure work, but entry is small and 60% of placements sit in three provinces.[3]
- **Weak governance undermines delivery.** Kenya's roughly 2,600 vocational training centres offer the same narrow trades with no institution mandated to prevent duplication, its Work-Based Learning Policy went unsigned for over a year, and stigma, patronage and occupational segregation by sex recur across the eight countries.[4]
- **Every expansion of supply needs a demand-side design and an absorption mechanism.** Sector-skills councils with binding employer participation, work-based learning co-financed against retention, aligned occupational classifications and outcome tracking give public money a route to results.[5]



Source: Ivaria

> Countries across the region have introduced competency-based curricula, expanded vocational training opportunities, strengthened qualifications systems, and invested in apprenticeship and work-based learning programmes.

Introduction

Across Africa, investment in education and skills development has expanded considerably, yet the transition from learning to decent work remains challenging for many young people. Growing enrolment in secondary, tertiary, and vocational education has not consistently translated into improved employment outcomes,[6] raising concerns about whether current skills systems are adequately aligned with labour-market needs and economic opportunities.

This evidence brief draws on findings from a political economy study of youth employment in eight African countries, namely Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda. It examines how Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and broader skills development systems can better support productive, inclusive, and dignified employment

for young people. The brief highlights key evidence on skills mismatches, labour-market transitions, governance challenges, and employer engagement, and outlines policy actions needed to strengthen the link between training and employment outcomes across the continent.

Background and Rationale

African governments have made substantial commitments to education, skills development, and youth employment. Continental frameworks such as the African Youth Charter and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) 2026-2035, alongside a range of national TVET reforms, emphasize the importance of building skills systems that can support economic transformation and improve employment outcomes.[6] Countries across the region have introduced competency-based curricula, expanded vocational training opportunities, strengthened qualifications systems, and invested in apprenticeship and work-based learning programmes.

Despite these efforts, the transition from education to employment remains uncertain for many young people. Expanding access to training has not consistently translated into improved labour-market outcomes. In some countries, training systems struggle to deliver skills that employers demand; in others, the challenge lies in limited job creation and weak labour demand. More commonly, both constraints operate simultaneously. Evidence from the eight-country study suggests that skills systems are often expected to solve what are in reality broader labour-market challenges.

The study also highlights significant gaps in labour-market intelligence and skills monitoring. While countries such as Rwanda and South Africa have developed systems for tracking graduate outcomes, many others lack reliable tracer studies, skills inventories, and information on employer demand. Consequently, policymakers frequently make investment decisions without sufficient evidence on what skills are needed, which programmes work, and whether training ultimately leads to productive employment.

Against this backdrop, the central policy challenge is not simply how to expand TVET, but how to ensure that investments in skills development translate into decent work, higher productivity, and inclusive economic opportunities for young people.

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Source: Iwaria

Evidence Base: Rethinking the Skills and Employment Challenge

The evidence from the eight-country study points to a fundamental disconnect between education and employment systems. While governments have expanded access to secondary, tertiary, and technical education over the past two decades, labour-market outcomes have not improved at the same pace. Youth unemployment, underemployment, vulnerable work, and inactivity remain persistent across many contexts, raising questions about whether current investments in skills development are adequately aligned with the realities of African labour markets.

Importantly, the study finds that the widely used concept of a "skills mismatch" often oversimplifies the problem. In practice, four distinct challenges emerge. First, curricula may be poorly aligned with labour-market needs, leaving graduates with qualifications that do not reflect current industry requirements. Second, young people may complete training without acquiring practical competencies valued by employers. Third, barriers such as weak professional networks, limited access to information, and unequal opportunities may prevent qualified graduates from securing employment. Finally, economies may simply fail to generate enough quality jobs to absorb the growing number of educated youth. These challenges require different policy responses, yet they are frequently treated as a single issue.

- **The Missing Link Between Training and Work**: The transition from education into employment remains one of the weakest points in the skills ecosystem. Across several countries, a growing number of young people possess qualifications yet remain unemployed, inactive, or trapped in low-productivity work. In Ghana, more than one-fifth of young people are not in employment, education, or training, while similar trends persist in Uganda and Senegal.[7] Rwanda's experience further illustrates that education alone does not guarantee labour-market success. Young people leaving upper secondary education often face particularly weak employment prospects, highlighting a critical transition gap between schooling and work.[8]

  For many young people, qualifications have become necessary but no longer sufficient. Across the study countries, employers increasingly demand practical experience alongside formal credentials. As a result, young people find themselves caught in a cycle where work experience is required to secure employment, but employment is needed to gain experience. Without stronger pathways linking learning to work, many graduates struggle to translate education into economic opportunities.

- **Fragmented Governance Weakens Performance**: The study also finds that institutional fragmentation continues to undermine the effectiveness of skills systems. Responsibilities for curriculum development, quality assurance, labour-market intelligence, certification, and employment services are often dispersed across multiple agencies with overlapping mandates and limited coordination.

  Kenya provides a striking example. Despite operating approximately 2,600 vocational training centres, programme offerings remain concentrated in a narrow range of traditional trades, with little systematic consideration of local economic opportunities.[9] Similar coordination challenges are evident in Senegal and Ghana, where multiple institutions share responsibility for skills development and employment promotion. In practice, fragmented governance often leads to duplication, inefficiencies, and delayed implementation of reforms that could improve labour-market outcomes.

  These challenges are reinforced by accountability systems that reward enrolment and graduation rather than employment outcomes. Consequently, institutions face strong incentives to increase participation while paying far less attention to whether training actually improves livelihoods.

- **Employers Remain on the Margins of Skills Systems**: A recurring finding across all eight countries is the limited role employers play in shaping training systems. Many firms report that graduates require substantial additional training before they can perform effectively in the workplace. Employers frequently possess valuable information about current and future skills needs, yet mechanisms for systematically incorporating this knowledge into training design remain weak.

  Where stronger employer partnerships exist, outcomes appear more promising. Rwanda's dual-training model, for example, begins with labour-market analysis and incorporates extensive workplace learning. Localised curriculum development initiatives in Kenya similarly demonstrate how stronger collaboration between training institutions and industry can improve the relevance of skills provision. These experiences suggest that employer engagement should be viewed not as an optional addition but as a core component of effective skills systems.

- **Inclusion Remains Uneven**: Skills systems continue to reproduce broader social and economic inequalities. Women remain disproportionately concentrated in lower-paying vocational pathways such as tailoring,

catering, and hairdressing, while participation in higher-growth sectors remains limited. Persons with disabilities, refugees, and rural youth often face additional barriers in accessing quality training and employment opportunities.

At the same time, several promising examples demonstrate that these patterns are not inevitable. Targeted interventions such as Kenya's Ajira Digital inclusion programmes and Ghana's disability-inclusive training initiatives illustrate how more equitable pathways can be created when inclusion is intentionally embedded in programme design.

Better Training Alone Will Not Solve the Employment Crisis

Perhaps the most important lesson from the study is that stronger skills systems do not automatically translate into better employment outcomes. Rwanda and South Africa provide two important examples. Rwanda has implemented substantial TVET reforms and established stronger employer engagement mechanisms, yet many TVET graduates continue to enter vulnerable forms of employment because the formal economy remains too small to absorb them. South Africa's learnership programmes have demonstrated strong employment outcomes among participants, but their scale remains insufficient relative to the size of the youth population seeking work.[10]

These experiences demonstrate that improving training supply is only part of the solution. Skills investments must be accompanied by measures that stimulate labour demand, support enterprise growth, expand work-based learning opportunities, and facilitate transitions into productive employment. Without these complementary interventions, even high-quality training systems will struggle to deliver meaningful employment gains.

Emerging Demands Require More Responsive Systems

The nature of work is changing rapidly. Digitalisation, technological innovation, climate adaptation, regional integration, and evolving production systems are creating new demand for skills across African economies. Yet many countries continue to face deficits in foundational competencies, digital skills, labour-market intelligence, and workforce planning.

Preparing young people for these transitions will require more responsive and adaptive systems capable of anticipating changing labour-market needs. This includes strengthening data systems, investing in forward-looking skills planning, and ensuring that digital, entrepreneurial, and green skills complement rather than replace foundational literacy, numeracy, and technical competencies.



What the Evidence Tells Us

The evidence suggests that Africa's youth employment challenge is not principally a training problem. It is a systems challenge.

- weak links between education and work,
- fragmented institutions,
- limited employer engagement,
- persistent inequalities,
- inadequate labour-market demand, and
- weak accountability mechanisms all contribute to poor employment outcomes.

Addressing these constraints requires moving beyond a narrow focus on training provision towards a broader agenda that connects skills development with economic transformation, job creation, and labour-market inclusion.

Table 1 draws these findings together, showing for each country the principal diagnosis, the instruments in place and the most promising reform entry point.

Table 1. TVET and skills: diagnosis and reform entry points by country [11]

Country	Principal diagnosis	Instruments[12]	Reform entry point
Kenya	Duplicated trades across about 2,600 VTCs; KesCO not aligned to ISCO; fragmented mandates	National Skills Development Policy 2023; Work-Based Learning Policy 2024; Skills for Labour Mobility Strategy 2024–2029	Resolve the Work-Based Learning Policy deadlock; activate LIMRA; cap duplication at 30% of VTCs per county
Rwanda	Reformed system, weak absorption; upper-secondary bottleneck	NESS 2024–2029; NQF 2023; RPL Operational Manual 2023	Pair training with an absorption mechanism
South Africa	Strong learnership outcomes, small scale, concentrated provinces	Skills Development Act 1998; White Paper on Post-School Education and Training 2013	National Skills Fund Pay-for-Performance; entry-level pathways
Ghana	Dated curricula, uneven industry links, 10% of graduates employed after service	CTVET framework; National Apprenticeship Programme	Industry skills bodies refresh curricula; recognise master-craftsperson apprenticeships
Senegal	Overlapping agencies; weak coordination; rising NEET share	3FPT; ANPEJ; ENESI survey	3FPT with ENESI as labour-market intelligence
Uganda; Ethiopia; Nigeria	Credential paradox and stigma (Uganda); weak practical training (Ethiopia); employer disconnect (Nigeria)	Skilling Uganda Strategy; TVET Strategy (Ethiopia); National Skills Qualification Framework (Nigeria)	Employer-led curriculum review; quality assurance of private providers

Continental and Regional Policy Frameworks

Table 2 sets out the continental and regional instruments against which these national gaps can be addressed.

Table 2. Continental and regional instruments relevant to TVET and skills[13]

Instrument	Operative provisions	Relevance to the evidence
African Youth Charter	Arts. 13 and 15: education and skills development; sustainable livelihoods and youth employment.	Normative basis for national commitments; weak on reporting against outcomes.
Agenda 2063 and Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan	Goal 4: transformed economies and jobs; Goal 18: engaged and empowered youth.	First continental report records 32% overall progress and 16% on the jobs goal.
Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2026–2035	Strategic Area 4, Objective 10: TVET and labour-market links; cross-reference to a separate AU TVET strategy.	Continental frame for demand-driven design; national transposition is the gap.
African Continental Qualifications Framework	Supports transparency and recognition of qualifications (named only; provisions not reviewed here).	Relevant to KesCO–ISCO alignment, RPL and portability of credentials.
AU Free Movement Protocol (2018)	Free movement of persons, residence and establishment.	Credential recognition is a precondition for labour mobility.

Country-Level Policy Exemplars

Within this setting, a few national systems already show how the gaps can be closed; Table 3 presents the most transferable.

Table 3. Country-level exemplars and their adaptability[14]

Country and instrument	Design features and results	Adaptability
Rwanda: dual training; NQF 2023; RPL Operational Manual 2023	Curriculum starts from labour-market analysis (about 80% employer-initiated); eight months in the workplace against two in class; RPL certifies tile fixers, welders and plasterers.	Highly transferable architecture, but needs demand-side conditions because formal employment did not rise.
South Africa: learnerships; National Skills Fund Pay-for-Performance; SAYouth.mobi	86% of learnership completers move into secure work; the Fund disburses only once young people secure work.	Pay-for-Performance and pathway platforms adaptable; scale and provincial concentration are the limits.
Kenya: Turkana cobblestone and leather curricula; Career Guidance Framework 2023; Ajira Digital tracks	Locally grounded curricula developed with ILO support; career guidance officers in 47 counties; tracks for women, persons with disabilities and refugees.	Curriculum co-development and inclusion tracks adaptable in Ghana and Uganda.
Ghana: CTVET; Make Fashion Inclusive	Regulatory architecture with industry skills bodies; 50% of places reserved for persons with disabilities.	Statutory recognition of informal master-craftsperson apprenticeships is the reform step.
Senegal: 3FPT; ENESI	Vocational training fund and a national employment and informal-sector survey.	Model for linking a training levy to labour-market data; coordination is the constraint.

Institutions and Programmes to Highlight

Such systems work only if institutions with clear mandates deliver them; Table 4 identifies those the Dialogue should engage.

Table 4. Institutions and programmes to highlight at the Dialogue[15]

Institution or programme	Role in the policy chain
AU Commission; ILO	Continental policy frame, qualifications recognition and reporting.
Kenya: TVETA; TVET-CDACC; NITA; HELB; LIMRA; National Employment Authority; Ministry of Labour	Quality assurance, curriculum approval, attachment, loan allocation, labour-market information and career guidance.
Rwanda: Rwanda TVET Board; MIFOTRA; NISR; Employment Service Centres and Yego Centres	Dual-training delivery, RPL, outcomes tracking and employment services.
South Africa: SETAs; National Skills Fund; Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator; Presidential Youth Employment Initiative	Levy-funded training, outcome-based financing and pathway management.
Ghana: CTVET; Ministry of Youth Development and Empowerment. Senegal: Ministry of Vocational Training; 3FPT; ANPEJ; ANSD	TVET regulation, apprenticeship curricula, training finance, employment services and statistics.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing on the evidence, frameworks, exemplars and institutions above, the following recommendations are directed at the actors named in Table 4.

- **Demand-Driven Design:** Establish sector-skills councils with binding employer participation, mandatory annual labour-market intelligence and curriculum-revision triggers tied to employer feedback. Kenya should activate LIMRA as a national skills inventory with quarterly updates and public access, Ghana should anchor design in CTVET with industry skills bodies, and Senegal in 3FPT using ENESI as its intelligence backbone.

  Lead: labour and education ministries jointly.

- **Work-Based Learning at Scale:** Make apprenticeships, internships and dual placements the norm, with public co-financing tied to employer participation and retention, and formal recognition of informal master-craftsperson apprenticeships. Kenya should resolve the Work-Based Learning Policy deadlock through the Office of the Prime Cabinet Secretary within one quarter.

  Lead: labour ministries and sector bodies.

- **Pair Supply with Absorption:** No substantial expansion of training should be commissioned without a specified absorption mechanism: apprenticeship pipelines into registered firms, employer co-financing tied to retention rather than initial placement, and outcome tracking by employment type, adapting South Africa's Pay-for-Performance model.

  Lead: education, labour and trade and industry ministries.

- **Inclusion, Guidance and Stigma:** Integrate soft skills, financial literacy and digital literacy into all programmes, extend career guidance to rural areas such as Ghana's northern regions and Senegal's Kédougou, Tambacounda, Matam and Kolda, run campaigns against TVET stigma, and limit duplication so that no more than 30% of centres in a county offer the same courses.

  Lead: TVET regulators and labour ministries.

- **Classification and Recognition:** Align KesCO, and Ghana's and Senegal's classifications, with ISCO as a precondition for bilateral labour agreements and credible recognition of qualifications abroad.

  Lead: national statistics offices and labour ministries.

- **Outcome Tracking and Accountability:** Move from measuring how many people are trained to measuring what happens afterwards, through five-year tracer studies of programme beneficiaries and national skills inventories, starting with Kenya (LIMRA, NEA and TVETA linked to the census cycle), Ghana (GSS and CTVET) and Senegal (ANSD and 3FPT), so that public funding follows results.

  Lead: statistics offices, regulators and audit institutions.

- **Skills for a Changing Economy:** Build digital, entrepreneurial and green-economy competencies on a base of foundational literacy and numeracy, and pair digital-skills pipelines such as Sénégal Numérique 2025 with monitoring of the conversion from completion to employment.

  Lead: education, labour and ICT ministries.

Political Economy of Reform

The barriers to reform are not primarily technical. Most countries already possess strategies, policy frameworks, and reform proposals capable of improving the performance of TVET systems. The greater challenge lies in aligning incentives, institutions, and political interests to support implementation.

Across many countries, education systems are incentivised to demonstrate increased enrolment, training completion, and certification rates rather than employment outcomes. This creates strong political incentives to expand access while placing far less emphasis on whether graduates secure productive work. TVET also tends to attract less political attention and public investment than higher education, despite its potential contribution to labour-market inclusion.

Experience from Kenya illustrates how institutional fragmentation can delay reform even when evidence and financing are available. The prolonged delay in adopting the Work-Based Learning Policy demonstrates how overlapping mandates and competing interests can slow implementation. In South Africa, progress depends on building consensus among government, employers, and organised labour around reforms that expand employment opportunities while maintaining worker protections.

At the same time, reform coalitions extend beyond government. Civil-society organisations, youth groups, research institutions, audit agencies, and independent policy bodies can play a critical role in strengthening oversight, demanding accountability, and ensuring that skills programmes remain focused on employment outcomes rather than programme expansion alone. Sustainable reform will therefore require both technical solutions and political coalitions capable of supporting their implementation.

Monitoring, Accountability and Evidence Gaps

A recurring lesson from the study is that governments often measure what is easiest to count rather than what matters most. Training enrolments, certifications, and graduation rates are routinely reported, yet far less attention is paid to what happens after young people leave training programmes. As a result, policymakers frequently lack the information needed to assess whether skills investments are generating meaningful employment outcomes.

A stronger accountability framework should focus on outcomes rather than inputs. Key indicators should include the extent of employer involvement in curriculum design, employment outcomes among graduates, transitions into formal and informal work, participation in work-based learning, enrolment in higher-return occupational pathways, and the responsiveness of curriculum-review processes. All indicators should be tracked by sex, age, disability status, and geographic location to ensure that progress is inclusive.

Significant evidence gaps remain across the continent. Many countries lack comprehensive tracer studies, national skills inventories, and reliable information on current and future labour-market demand. Better evidence is particularly needed on job quality, labour-market outcomes for vulnerable groups, the performance of apprenticeship and work-based learning models, and the employment impacts of emerging digital and green-economy skills programmes.

Closing these evidence gaps is essential for improving policy effectiveness. More importantly, it will help governments distinguish whether poor youth employment outcomes stem from deficiencies in training systems, barriers to labour-market entry, weak labour demand, or a combination of these factors. Only then can public investments be directed towards the reforms most likely to generate jobs, improve productivity, and expand opportunities for young people.

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is one of a series of thematic evidence briefs drawn from the cross-country political economy analysis of youth employment conducted by the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) and the CAP Youth Empowerment Institute (CAP YEI), in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation, in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda.