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## **Boosting youth employment in Africa: what works and why?**

Summary of the conference hosted by INCLUDE and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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## Boosting youth employment in Africa: what works and why?

In Africa, agriculture is in the spotlight again. This is because, in the short term, most employment opportunities for youth are to be found in this sector. However, although agriculture is high on the agenda, much work remains to be done to create enough decent and rewarding employment for youth.

This strong message emerged at the conference [Boosting youth employment in Africa: what works and why?](#), hosted by INCLUDE and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague on 30 May 2017. The 140 experts from governments, the private sector, NGOs and knowledge institutes in Europe and Africa who attended the conference agreed that industrialization is not the answer and that the opportunities offered by ICT services, although promising, cannot keep up with the rapid population growth. No, it is agriculture that offers the most promise. But there is no single way to boost youth employment: a country-specific diagnosis and approach are needed, as well as continuous knowledge sharing on what works and why, including what works, why and *for whom*, as different groups of youth have different ambitions and needs. A full report of the conference can be read [here](#).

### Fulfilling dreams; finding jobs

“The best way to fulfil your dreams is to find a job”, stressed Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, **Lilianne Ploumen**, at the start of the conference. However, the figures are quite challenging: Sub-Saharan Africa creates 3 million formal jobs a year, whereas 18 million are needed to absorb new labour market entries. Six out of ten Africans are under 25 years and six out of ten live in rural areas, where poverty is often the worst. Almost a third are unemployed or ‘discouraged’. **Ginette Nzau Muteta**, African Development Bank (AfDB) [Jobs for Youth](#) Coordinator, warned that if nothing is done, this could reach 50%.

People without a formal job often have mixed livelihoods and, in rural areas, agriculture is key. But the picture of low-skilled people engaging in subsistence farming is gradually changing: many young African graduates are choosing a career in agriculture, using their technical skills to push the sector to a higher level. There are many examples of lawyers, marketers and engineers switching to agriculture. It makes the sector “cool and sexy”, as one participant put it. [It is estimated that by 2020 a third of all new jobs in Africa will be in agriculture.](#)

### Agriculture 2.0

Young Africans, who are generally better educated than their parents, are modernizing the ways of cultivating and herding. With smartphones, they are able to check market prices, predict weather changes and determine the best time to sow and harvest. Digital farming, or ‘Agriculture 2.0’, goes hand-in-hand with attempts to gain civic power through platforms, networks and cooperatives, fuelled by higher self-esteem.

From the point of view of food security, which is a major global concern, Minister Ploumen said that the shift to agriculture should be applauded. But she thinks that a lot more can be done to make agricultural work more attractive and rewarding. In this, the high Internet density of Sub-Saharan Africa can be helpful. “Every village should have an ICT professional”, she said, “and it should be a girl”. She also called upon the private sector to help rural Africa move forward. Off-farm labour, like agro-processing, can be an additional engine for employment.

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<sup>1</sup> Report by [Wereld in Woorden, Global Research & Reporting](#)

## Unfulfilled ICT promises

However, ICT is not a panacea. One of the problems, pointed out during the conference, is that farmers like to receive information through ICT, but are reluctant to gather and share data among themselves. This one-sided use of ICT limits its benefits. Exchange networks to share solutions between farmers could overcome this problem. Predictions that ICT would create millions of jobs in new service sectors like business process outsourcing (BPO) [have not yet come true](#). Only 100,000 African professionals (40,000 of which are Kenyans) have entered this global growth sector. New programmes on impact sourcing (socially responsible outsourcing) are trying to tackle this problem – and seem promising.

At the same time, it should be realized that these business opportunities in Agriculture 2.0 and ICT are not accessible to all youth. In addressing the youth employment challenge it is important to distinguish between different groups of youth, their capacities, opportunities and needs.

## Listening to young people

The 21st century young African is emphatically looking for civic space. “Listen to young people!”, urged one of the invited youth participants in the room full of adults. “Work directly with us, without intermediaries”, another added. These remarks indicate that young Africans value information and transparency more than money. High on their list of priorities is access to the Internet and social networks, the creation of digital platforms for entrepreneurs, and more accessible government services.

Although the rural exodus continues, there are young African graduates who go back to their villages and make a difference. They may represent their parish, start their own NGO, join a platform, become member of a cooperative or participate in a think tank. These young people need soft skills, like public speaking, networking and developing self-confidence. Development programmes are paying more and more attention to this, offering soft and life skills training, in addition to (and even instead of) vocational training.

The importance of mentoring and coaching was stressed several times during the conference. **Roy van der Drift** of SNV explained the three stages of the SNV approach: push, match and pull. In the *push* stage youth develop (soft) skills, in the *matching* stage they are linked to markets and in the *pull* stage they are accompanied to employment, even after the programme. However, **Louise Fox**, Chief Economist at USAID, pointed out that, in many cases, basic education is still lacking: lots of young people are not able to read and write properly.

## Entrepreneurship promotion is best

Although not all youth can be entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship promotion programmes [show the best results in creating jobs and income for youth](#), according to the International Labour Organization (ILO). Such programmes have a better track record than skills training in boosting employment. Furthermore, the design, intensity and scale of the programme is also key to success, added **Susana Puerto Gonzales** (ILO Coordinator Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth). **Peter Wobst** of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) pointed out that employment is not dependent on youth employment programmes alone – in many cases it is a side effect of infrastructural and other investments. More attention should be paid to this. We should “Integrate youth employment programmes into structural policies”, advised Lemma Senbet, Executive Director of the African Economic Research Consortium.

**Louise Fox** said that it is crucial to realize that you might not have created real employment, but only moved other people out of their jobs. Most impact research focuses on the programme level, but impacts need to be analysed from a broader perspective. Several speakers stressed the need for country-level diagnostics and better national coordination of activities.

[Ginette Nzau Muteta](#) (AfDB) advocated for an ecosystem approach in which inclusive employment and entrepreneurship, human capital development, and better labour market linkages are all taken into account. For this, three pillars are central: integration, innovation and investment. AfDB is mainstreaming youth employment in every programme – from infrastructure, agriculture and education to macroeconomics. It has developed flagship programmes, focusing on agriculture, industrialization and ICT, in order to create more jobs for young people. “We need to move youth into the value chain”, said Muteta.

## African leaders aren’t scared enough

**Roel van der Veen** of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who moderated the conference, ended by saying that the shift towards agriculture in Africa made him think of the economic boost in Asia during the last century, which it started with huge state investment in poor rural areas. “It looks like Africa is going the same way. The only thing is that African leaders aren’t as scared of the population as Asian leaders were. Change in Africa requires more pressure on governments”, for example, by pushing for the implementation of the African Union [2003 Maputo Declaration](#), in which African governments committed to allocate 10% of their national budget to agricultural development. Referring to the name of a youth-led development agency, he concluded by calling for: “more restless development”.

### The story of Jean Bosco Nzeyimana

A good example of a young job-creating entrepreneur is **Jean Bosco Nzeyimana** (23). Inspired by his own youth in which he spent two hours every day collecting firewood, he started thinking of alternative cooking fuels. Three years ago, he came up with the idea to make fuel briquettes out of collected waste. His company, [Habona](#), currently employs 30 people and provides casual work to another 15. He explained: “In the long run we hope to scale up our production by mechanization of the process. That way we will be able to deliver more quality jobs for skilled people. But right now we are proud to offer uneducated people quantity jobs and along the way teach them basic skills. What we do is new in Rwanda, so we don’t have a ready workforce yet”.

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### Jobs that fuel conflict

The general idea is that jobs bring peace and, vice versa, unemployment fuels conflict. But it is not that easy. **Jos Meesters** of Clingendael emphasized that it is crucial to understand the context of a conflict and especially what lies beneath the surface. Employment interventions in fragile situations are, in his view, inherently political. Who gets the jobs and who doesn’t? How are ‘at risk youth’ defined? How does job creation interact with the conflict context? These are some of the questions that need to be answered. Meesters came up with the example of investing in cattle herding. If keeping cattle is the domain of one ethnic group, investing in cattle herding can fuel conflict. His advice: checklists don’t work; time should be spent on conflict sensitive analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and when necessary adjustments of programmes.