

How can we tackle youth employment challenges? Revisiting the evidence base for soft skills in Africa

Introduction

A recent headline '[The future of work won't be about college degrees, it will be about job skills](#)' highlighted one of the employment challenges in Africa, the skills mismatch. The skills mismatch is the failure of education and training programmes to adequately equip youthⁱ for the labour market. And the skills mismatch is often argued to be one of the reasons for the high unemployment rates in Africa. The [Africa Competitiveness Report 2017](#) singles out education gaps as an important barrier to private sector development in sectors that require new and dynamic skills sets. The [World Economic Forum 2016](#) highlights the existence of skills shortages, especially in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). In addition to cognitive skills, the [World Development Report 2019](#) recognises the importance of socio-behavioural skills such as teamwork, adaptability and self-efficacy for labour market participation and [emphasizes](#) that many current and future jobs will require a combination of technological know-how and soft skills. Because employers consider soft skills important in enhancing outcomes in the workplace through reduction in absenteeism and maintenance of cordial relationships with stakeholders, they have incorporated these skills in job recruitment and selection criteriaⁱⁱ. This implies that lack of soft skills can prevent job seekers from obtaining employment or limit their ability to exploit available and potential opportunities. Consequently, government, civil society, the private sector and other actors have initiated reforms in education systems to develop cognitive and soft skills. This article summarizes some of the evidence on the impact of soft skills interventions and highlights priority areas for policies and programmes.

What are softs skills?

Skills fall into various categories, as [conceptualized by different organisations](#). The term 'soft skills', which are generally contrasted with 'hard', technical or cognitive skills, encompasses non-cognitive skills, transferable skills, life skills, socio-emotional skills, behavioural/socio-behavioural skills, employability skills, workforce readiness skills, 21st Century skills, human advantage skills and personal skills. A report by the [Youth Employment Funders Group \(YEFG\)](#) describes soft skills as a mix of skills (both non-cognitive and cognitive), attributes, behaviours, personal qualities and mindsets that individuals apply to be successful across different situations in work and life. Furthermore, an [assessment](#) of the key soft skills for cross-sectoral youth outcomes identified self-control, higher order thinking, and positive self-conception as the top three core soft skills.

Overview of evidence on soft skills

The available evidence broadly focuses on: the importance of soft skills for the performance of entrepreneurs (assessed by comparing the performance of entrepreneurs with and without soft skills in terms of business performance), the impact of soft skills training on employment-business

outcomes (without directly addressing whether or not soft skills training leads to increased soft skills scores, and the appropriate strategies for the transfer soft skills. This evidence on these aspects, from systematic reviews as well as single studies, is synthesized below.

The importance of soft skills for the performance of entrepreneurs

Two studies funded under the NWO-WOTRO Research for Inclusive Development in Sub-Saharan Africa (RIDSSA) programme, whose findings have been disseminated by INCLUDE, are relevant in this regard. The first study, [IT sector in Kenya](#), looked at the growth of small IT firms in the informal sector. From this project, the soft skills which were associated with enterprise growth were learning to cope with business failures by reflecting on one's role in the failure, development of and tapping into business networks (beyond family ties), a growth mindset to adapt to unexpected changes, and support of new ideas. The second study, [Empowering Uganda female entrepreneurs](#), explored strategies to change the mindset of entrepreneurs by enhancing innovative entrepreneurship. The soft skills that were associated with innovative entrepreneurship were motivational resources, such as personal initiative, business confidence and opportunity recognition, and business and social networks. It also appears that some of the entrepreneurs who were trained and accessed information from resource centres had lower quality complaints from customers, generated new business ideas, accessed new markets and had increased confidence.

Impact of soft skills training on employment and business outcomes

A [systematic review by the Campbell Collaboration](#) in 2017 looked at programmes initiated to improve the labour market outcomes of youth in low, middle and high-income countries. From the review, entrepreneurship promotion and skills training were found to have positive effects on employment and earnings, although the effects of employment services and subsidized employment were generally small and non-significant. Furthermore, the estimated programme effects were bigger in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) than in high-income countries, and in programmes that targeted disadvantaged youth. The review considered the relationship between soft skills and labour market outcomes, but did not find any link. In addition, several studies conducted in Africa show positive outcomes of soft skills training. A study on the [outcomes of mentorship and coaching of students in key soft and employment skills](#) in a Kenyan university found that youths with soft skills were more competitive in pursuing employment opportunities than those without. Consequently, the study recommended incorporation of employability programmes (including integration of social entrepreneurship) into the Kenyan educational curriculum at the secondary and tertiary levels. In Burundi, a study assessed the [role of training and tailored coaching of regular cash transfer recipients](#) in the Concern Worldwide Graduation Model Programme (*Terintambwe*). The findings revealed that training and coaching led to, and catalysed, positive changes, and complemented cash and material support in achieving positive change. [An innovative entrepreneurial training programme in Togo](#) found that personal initiative training led to a boost in profits for microentrepreneurs and was particularly effective for female entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs who took the personal initiative training introduced more innovative products into their business, they also borrowed more money and employed more workers. In another study in Rwanda, the evaluation of the [Akazi Kanoze program](#) found that transferable and life skills training (savings groups, financial literacy skills, entrepreneurship training and professional development) strengthened employment outcomes and work readiness. Furthermore, in Kenya's [Employment Training Program](#), mentoring and coaching on key soft and employment skills, including information gap opportunities, was found to reduce youth unemployment. Evaluation of [BRAC's Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents \(ELA\)](#), which created a new training module for social and emotional skills (SES) and tools for measuring intra and inter-personal skills, found a strong impact of the

programme in multiple settings, including a 48% rise in income generation among all girls in villages with ELA clubs in Uganda. There are also gaps in the evidence on the impact of transferable skills. The 3ie [evidence gap map on youth and transferable skills](#) and a scoping paper on [the state of evidence on the impact of transferable skills programming on youth in LMICs](#) show several gaps in the effectiveness of the skills courses inserted in formal education settings. [The scoping paper shows that](#) there is growing evidence for standalone transferable skills courses and stand-alone technical vocational education and training (TVET) programmes that intentionally incorporate transferable skills elements, as well as on the effectiveness of interventions to build transferable skills using alternative learning pathways, such as community centres or civil society groups and peer-to-peer learning. These papers show that there are no studies on transferable skills at policy and institutional levels (educational, private sector or political), there is limited evidence on interventions aimed at increasing the teaching of transferable skills in formal education institutions, and there is hardly any evidence on the cost effectiveness and general effectiveness of interventions to increase transferable skills among youth in LMICs.

Appropriate strategies for the transfer soft skills

On this aspect, studies look at appropriate strategies for transferring soft skills. One study looked [at the scaling of transferable skills in secondary and vocational education in Africa](#) with case studies from Kenya, Rwanda and Nigeria. The study covers three countries that reformed their secondary and TVET education systems and brought transferable skills training into the formal system, which it then scaled up. It shows that scaling up had several challenges including adapting training models for use at scale, because this requires flexibility to suit new environments without losing the key components of the programme, as well as resource constraints and lack of assessment tools for measuring transferable skills. Overall, the scaling of transferable skills programmes is driven by enabling policies, evidence of the impact on youth employment, strong political champions, wide stakeholder engagement, the decentralization of authority for education, and flexible funding.

Despite an increasing focus on soft skills and some evidence that soft skills and entrepreneurship training and coaching has positive effects under some conditions, soft skills interventions are weak, because they do not target [underemployment](#) or prevent [replacement effects](#).

Implications for research, policy and practice

Drawing on the evidence, this section presents some implication for research, policy and practices:

- *Soft skills are essential due to changes in the nature of work:* However, some questions as to their development remain unanswered due to lack of sufficient evidence. Unanswered questions relate to: the multiple terms used, which make measurement difficult, lack of a commonly-agreed core skills set, the role of soft skills in generating better labour outcomes, the cost-effectiveness of programmes, the implications for countries in different contexts, and the link with technical skills sets. Overall, there is a need for more evidence. To contribute to this, INCLUDE has partnered with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and ILO on a three-year programme 'Boosting Decent Employment for Africa's Youth', under the auspices of [Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth](#), to generate new evidence on how [soft skills development and work-based learning may boost economic opportunities for youth](#).
- *Soft skills are only part of the solution.* The labour market requires a combination of technical and soft skills, as shown in INCLUDE's [synthesis report on Boosting productive employment in Africa: what works and why](#). In addition, although skills development is crucial, it only addresses the labour supply component of the labour market. Expansion of the labour market

is necessary to absorb those who join the labour market to prevent replacement effects and underemployment. Therefore, skills development should not be studied in isolation from the structure of the economy and its transformation (or lack of it), but should take a more integrated approach.

- *Recognition of the diversity of target groups in training and coaching for entrepreneurship development programmes.* Target groups are different in terms of gender, geographical location (urban, rural, peri-urban), household roles, and livelihood activities, among other things, which influences the appropriateness of interventions, the challenges that they experience, and the likelihood of success. For example, in rural areas, simple skills such as operating a mobile phone and raising general literacy may be useful to entrepreneurs.
- *Combination of essential skill sets.* Programmes should incorporate a combination of skills required to succeed in a given sector, including supporting people to embrace new ideas and the provision of an environment in which new ideas can flourish.
- *Multi stakeholder approach in skills development.* An inclusive strategy involving key stakeholders (education institutions, government, students, employers, professional bodies, civil society) is key to enhance shared understanding of the nature of skills, required skill sets, how to measure and develop them, and appropriate interventions.

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Source link:

ⁱ Youth are defined as 15–24 year olds, according to the [UN Secretariat, UNESCO and ILO](#), and 15–35 year olds according to the [African Youth Charter](#).

ⁱⁱ Youth Employment Funders Group. (2018). *What works in soft skills development for youth employment? A donors' perspective*. <https://mastercardfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/soft-skills-youth-employment-accessible2.pdf>