

## What and when is a job decent according to youth in Africa?

On the 8th of October 2020, Francis Arinaitwe, youth leader and a board member of Restless Development Uganda, launched the webinar series on **‘What and when is a job decent to you?’** This series was organised in cooperation with the [INCLUDE Platform](#), and constitutes the voices of youth across 9 African countries - **Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia**. It seeks to dissect the official [ILO](#) definition of decent work and reflect on how it resonates with participants’ own interpretation of the concept.

One might question the extent to which a universal definition of a decent job is reflective of local and diverse realities. In most cases, the voices of youth in Africa are insufficiently heard, and they are rarely involved in implementing and shaping the policies that affect them. At INCLUDE, we believe that it is crucial to place youth at the centre of discussions concerning their future, since they alone have the professionalism, expertise and leadership to speak for themselves. Thus, the objective of this webinar series is to bring effective and meaningful youth participation to the debate on decent work. In doing this, we intend to enhance the voices of traditionally marginalised and vulnerable groups in the labour market, such as young women, young informal workers, young disable people, etc.

With this in mind, each webinar explored a discussion centred around the following questions:

1. What does a ‘decent job’ mean to you?
2. Is a ‘decent job’ only possible in the formal sector?
3. Is a ‘decent job’ different for men and women?
4. How has COVID-19 affected the decent job narrative?
5. What could be done to make more jobs decent?

This synthesis collates the information from the webinar series, reviews the lessons learned, and provides recommendations for promoting decent jobs through evidence-based policy. We present the varying perspectives on decent employment in Africa, some of which deviate from the normal discourse surrounding this topic. It begins by addressing each question and outlining the prominent similarities and discrepancies between countries and social groups. It concludes with the key insights and policy recommendations discerned from the webinar series.

## 1. How does the official ILO definition of a decent job resonate with youth across Africa?

The participants highlighted the importance of allowing individuals to determine what is a decent job, especially since it is not always aligned with the [official ILO definition](#) of decent work. For a lot of the participants, the decency of a job depends on receiving a fair income (the financial freedom to sustain yourself and your loved ones) and having passion for the work one does. With that being said, salary alone is not sufficient for one to describe a job as decent. Job security, dignity, social protection and a healthy work environment are equally important. Particular emphasis was placed on the element of security, especially in the informal sector. With safety comes the space for employees to voice their needs and concerns, as well as to take risks, be creative and share their ideas. As such, employees' personal and professional development should also be considered when evaluating the decency of a job.

Some notable responses emerged to this question:

- Youth in [Nigeria](#) stressed the importance of employee's mental health. According to them, a decent job should have in place protocols that prevent any abuse inflicted on employees which may compromise their mental health. Employees should also be given the space to disclose any mental health issues they may have and be provided with the necessary support.
- Youth in [Malawi](#) stated that a decent job should provide space for disabled individuals and ensure their safety. Malawi's job market fails to give disabled youth the space and opportunities to find decent employment as they are discriminated against. This is evident in both the formal and informal sector and in all aspects of employment including recruitment, salary and promotions.
- Youth in [Tunisia](#) are often coerced into signing contracts that offer little or no decency in order to survive and provide for their families. The participants highlighted how the 'surviving state' has become the new norm in Tunisia, as youth have given up on their decent job aspirations.

The webinars confirmed that the ILO definition of decent work does capture the main elements which youth across Africa are seeking in a job, however, consensus was that this definition is highly disconnected from reality, since these criteria are seldom completely satisfied. In other words, efforts to define crucial components of decent work have not been translated into decent job creation. Participants recognised the work being done to improve both the quantity and quality of jobs, but highlighted that such work remains fragmented and ad-hoc (as reflected in the rampant underemployment and poor working conditions) and stressed the urgency of addressing this.

### Box 1. Heterogeneity within decent work definitions

It was evident from all 9 webinars that significant heterogeneity exists when thinking around decent work. Cultural, ethnic and religious differences play a vital role in the perceived definition of decent jobs, and this plays out across socioeconomic groups and spatial territories. These factors inadvertently impact policy, as they imply that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective in meeting the aspirations of all youth. For example, [Nigeria](#) has an estimated 250 ethnic groups who have various belief systems and cultures determining the type and quality of jobs that they find decent. This creates complex gaps in decent work which span gender, locational and religious divides. The webinar discussions highlighted these hidden nuances of the discourse surrounding decent jobs.

## 2. Is a decent job only possible in the formal sector?

It is most probable that the informal sector is, and will continue to be, the main engine for job creation and economic growth across most countries in Africa. It is this sector that accommodates most of the continent's youth – either because they are unable to find work in their field of study or interest, or as a career choice (e.g. to be self-employed). Nearly all the countries in this webinar series challenged the perception that decency only lies in 'white collar' jobs. But despite the plethora of opportunities offered by the informal sector, a job in this sector comes with higher levels of vulnerability.

It became clear in the webinars that Africa's formal and informal sectors contain different aspects of decent work. Participants highlighted the security that comes with the formal sector, however, they recognised that this does not necessarily translate to decency (particularly equality and freedom). Jobs in this sector are too few and in industries which do not match young people's skills. Contrastingly, participants felt that the informal sector allows more space for young people to be innovative and create more decent job opportunities for themselves; but they also felt that the unregulated nature of the informal sector makes any effort towards decency arduous and somewhat futile, given more room for mistreatment, exploitation and poor working conditions. For this reason, they called into question the extent to which the informal sector can provide decent jobs for youth. With that being said, the informal sector, despite its ills, provides marginalised groups such as queer, disabled and rural youth the space to earn a living.

This question attracted the most discrepancy/debate:

- For **Kenyan** youth, both the formal and informal sectors fail to provide decent job opportunities. In the end, participants lent more towards the formal sector, as there is a higher chance of finding a job that is 'somewhat decent' in this sector, whereas informality for them is a trap, mainly because it fails to provide good working conditions and social protection for its employees.
- **Malawian** and **Tunisian** youth had similar experiences. In Malawi, a lot of youth deviate from the informal sector due to unpleasant past experiences with ambiguous employment status and limited protection under the law. In Tunisia, youth site stable employment, including medium or long-term contracts with social security benefits, among the main career aspirations. Unfortunately, the informal sector fails to provide either of these. It is dominated by corruption which generates seasonal and temporary contracts, as well as day-labor arrangements.
- Youth in **Tanzania** pointed out the danger of looking at the definition of a decent job with a formal lens and how this may exclude the informal sector. It is easy to observe decency in the formal sector as it is more regulated. This exaggerates the decent job narrative in this sector and places too much emphasis on formalising the informal sector, which may discourage young people from entrepreneurship.
- For **Rwandan** youth, it is possible anywhere to find a decent income and dignity together. As the principles behind decency are equally relevant to everybody, the distinction between formal and informal work is, therefore, not the most relevant, and there is no need to objectively state which sector is more decent or has more scope for decency. The focus should be on promoting decency in both sectors.

### 3. Is 'decent job' different for men and women?

Although there are certain attributes which make a job decent for most youth in Africa, the webinars highlighted additional factors which young women seek. For example, most women highlighted the importance of having basic rights such as maternity leave, fair income and protection against workplace violence. Unlike their male counterparts, women struggle to find a decent job that guarantees their safety. This impacts the sort of employment women often seek, and can [limit their participation](#) in the labour market as well as their labour market outcomes. Many women have broken out as entrepreneurs in order to guarantee job security and earn a fair pay while doing something that dignifies them. According to **Kenyan** participants, young women are therefore overrepresented within the informal sector. Nearly all countries expressed concerns regarding the persistent gender pay gap and the risk of exploitation that is rife in the labour market.

There were some unique responses to this question:

- Male participants in [Zambia](#) pointed out the negative impacts they experience due to the government putting in place deliberate policies that encourage equality in the workplace. Most employees are now making a conscious effort to hire more women and adhere to the female empowerment movement in order to close employment gaps. The male participants felt that this encourages positive discrimination.
- The majority of rural women in [Tanzania](#) are subsistence farmers who face poverty due to the seasonal nature of agricultural work. A significant number of young females from rural areas have additional occupations which tend to be unpaid. Because of their limited access to and control over resources, young women from rural areas find it difficult to translate their labour into earnings that could ultimately lift them out of poverty.
- Youth in [Nigeria](#) explained that a decent job can be limited by not only cultural stereotypes of women but also religious beliefs that don't advocate for women in the workplace. For example, women seeking jobs in the northern parts of Nigeria are obliged to cover up at work and adhere to the Islamic laws. Because of this young women and girls in the northern parts of Nigeria lag behind those in the south when it comes to finding decent jobs.

## Box 2. Societal norms and female participation in the labour market

As well as the absence of safety and protection, other factors like social propriety and familial concerns confine many women to their homes and limit their participation in the labour market. Norms and expectations dictate what is considered to be a 'female' or 'male' occupation (for instance, the [Rwandan](#) participants emphasised how hospitality and tourism are seen as 'female sectors', while mining is regarded as a 'male sector') and how ambitious a young woman should be. These underlying social norms perpetuate unfounded stereotypes that women are subjected to in both the formal and informal sector. These stereotypes contribute to the inadequacy of education among young women, which further widens the gender gap within the workforce, and to the marginalisation of women's voices in the debate around decent work. It is crucial to incorporate the voices of all women in discussions concerning their future in order to move away from damaging stereotypes which cause barriers to decent work.

#### 4. How has COVID-19 affected the narrative of decent jobs?

Like the rest of the world, Africa's labour laws and job market neither envisaged nor prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the pandemic created unprecedented turmoil within employment across Africa; the economic shock has reduced working hours and income whilst increasing layoffs. Due to the lack of regulation and social protection, the informal sector, and in particular the youth concentrated within it, bore the brunt of this shock, with millions losing their jobs and livelihoods. That being said, participants recognised that the formal sector was not immune to the effects of the pandemic. Most workers in this sector also experienced a huge decline in hours and wages, and a lot of youth found themselves leaving their decent jobs to take unsatisfactory positions in order to survive. For example, the Kenya participants spoke of the teachers taking drastic measures such as selling food on the side of the road to make a living. Young women in particular have been adversely impacted. Survival and finding 'any job' has become the priority, thus pushing the decent job narrative out of the picture.

A few interesting angles were given to this question:

- Whilst the pandemic brought an unparalleled shock to the labor market of **Nigeria**, it has also introduced new jobs. Despite the pandemic devastating the Nigerian economy and putting young people in precarious situations, it still produced ample opportunities for innovation and creativity. The desperation that came with the pandemic crisis sparked creativity as those who lost their job had to invent new ways of generating income.
- Youth in **Tanzania** observed the different impacts of COVID-19 along gender lines. The weaker position of women in the labour market has been exaggerated during the pandemic, as women have become even more vulnerable to lay-offs and precarious working conditions. Women were obligated to take on more responsibilities in the household, as they assumed the roles of nurturers, nurses, teachers and housekeepers. Gender-based violence has also intensified during the pandemic, thus adding to women's vulnerable state and capacity to work.

## 5. What could be done to make jobs more decent?

Participants were asked to provide recommendations for improving employment policies to make jobs more decent for youth in their countries. The recommendations below illustrate direct views on what they believe is necessary to promote progressive change within the confines of decent jobs.

- 1. Raise awareness amongst young people of their labour rights to prevent exploitation.** Empower youth by letting them share their opinions, experiences and aspirations. Subsequently, facilitate more discussions which include/centre around youth perspective on decent work (including inter-generational dialogue) to gauge how the notion of decent work changes across space and time.
- 2. Put in place a framework that provides an incentive scheme to encourage employers to comply with the parameters of decent work** as set by ILO, with a carefully designed and enforced monitoring system overseen by dedicated institutions or the government. Where such a framework and monitoring system already exists (e.g. for contract and wage law), this could be expanded to include criteria of decent work.
- 3. Protect young people working in the informal sector by expanding social protection**, particularly social assistance, social insurance, and services for mistreatment (e.g. violence). This is particularly important for young women who are concentrated in this sector and face disproportionate levels of abuse and exploitation. Supporting the transition to formality within the informal sector could ultimately encourage more young people to seek formal employment.
- 4. In addition, open more doors in the formal sector.** This means creating more jobs, in the right sectors, which are inclusive to all groups of youth, match young people's skill sets, and provide opportunities for personal and professional growth.
- 5. Remove barriers to entrepreneurship** (e.g. securing capital from financial institutions, gaining knowledge and skills to start and operate a business), particularly for young female entrepreneurs and those in rural areas. Help young entrepreneurs actualise their ambitions. Youth-led enterprises often recruit their peers, thus further fostering a cycle of decent employment and development.
- 6. To overcome the feminisation of poverty, it is crucial to address the challenges they face within education and advocate for better policies** to increase the number of young girls receiving adequate education. Additionally, there is a need

for **stronger enforcement of non-discrimination policies** that enforce equal and fair pay. This could diminish the precarity women face and position them well for future crises.

- 7. Work with organisations championing for youth with disabilities and mental health struggles** to understand their specific needs and work towards eliminating/penalising discrimination in order to make the workplace accessible to marginalised groups. Forming dialogues and workshops between governments, employers, and organisations working with disability, mental health, violence, could help to learn how to manage these issues within the workplace and set new labour market policies to ensure these issues are central within employment processes.

### Box 3. Reflections from INCLUDE on the webinar series

The feelings expressed during this webinar series corroborate findings on what the majority of youth in Africa are experiencing in today's labour market. Youth voices are being increasingly centralised within policy debates, and we are beginning to understand how different groups of young people face very different problems in meeting their goals (for example, youth in rural Africa, or young women entering the workforce). It is now an important task for policymakers to shift from engaging in dialogue on this topic towards concrete action that creates high-quality jobs in the right sectors for growth and development, and that provides on-the-job learning and the right skill sets, to ensure that the aspirations of all youth are met now and in the future.



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