

(EM)POWERING THE FUTURE

OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH IN A JUST TRANSITION IN AFRICA

This policy brief shares the policy and programming pathways emerging from the project ‘A Green and Just Future for Youth in Africa’, a collaborative research programme between the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and INCLUDE. Presenting the latest insights from research and practice, this project aims to strengthen the evidence base on LCT in Africa by looking at the African energy sector and its complexities in order to understand where opportunities for youth employment are most pronounced and what systemic barriers need to be addressed to create an enabling environment for youth to thrive and drive a truly just transition in Africa.



Policy makers

Drive equity in affordable energy supply. At present, access to energy in Africa is starkly unequal, both in terms of affordability and supply. This has knock-on effects for micro-, small and medium enterprises, particularly in informal settlements and rural areas; for young people’s digital inclusion and access to information; and for women whose caregiving burden is often amplified by energy poverty. A just low carbon transition should therefore

not only focus on greener energy and employment; but should also ensure more equitable and sustainable access to energy, especially for marginalised groups and communities.

Support public employment programmes. To address the current limited scale of direct jobs in the renewable energy sector, public employment programmes can create work in potentially high-absorbing, low-carbon sectors like the care sector or circular waste economy. Public employment programmes can as such offer young people critical experience and entry into the labour

market, while also strengthening infrastructure and social services in local communities. To being piecemeal, public employment programmes must also build transferable skills and exploitable networks. Promising public-private partnerships (PPPs) are emerging to link young people to quality green jobs at scale and should be expanded to facilitate labour market absorption of the growing youth workforce.

Expanded social protection. Comprehensive social protection measures should be set up to help alleviate the financial and psychosocial costs of the job search. These could include cash transfers to support job-seeking, improved access to affordable transport, or programmatic interventions like mentorship and psychological services. Extending social protection to young job-seekers, especially those most marginalised, can prevent young people from giving up the search for work and thereby reduce the number of youth who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) in Africa.

Support the informal economy. In many African countries, the informal sector has produced steadily, and significantly higher growth in employment in recent years than the formal economy, particularly for youth. With the right support and investment, especially for micro, small and medium-size enterprises operating in the informal sector, Africa can stimulate vibrant local economies, powered by locally-owned and maintained renewable energy hubs. This will be especially important for youth and women who are disproportionately represented in the informal economy.

Enforce local ownership. If regulation does not enforce a substantive commitment to local ownership, and skilling

programmes that target local youth, patterns of exclusion and dispossession will be reinforced in the low-carbon transition. As the case studies have shown; without regulation to curtail big industry and policy to support and incentivise micro-enterprises, there is a high risk that the renewable energy sector will be monopolised by a small group of elites and repeat the mistakes and inequities common in traditional fossil fuel-based economies.

Encourage equitable representation and meaningful participation. Low representation of women and youth in decision-making across Africa has led to male-dominated and non-youth specific conversations around the LCT. Although there is a positive trend in enabling youth to participate in the climate discourse, the effectiveness and influence of these approaches appears to be limited and there is a high risk of tokenism of youth engagement. In addition, the credibility of these efforts can be put into question as they typically do not include a representative cohort of youth in terms of identity markers. Taking youth heterogeneity into account in policy engagement will be key in ensuring that policy frameworks and interventions are based on contextualised social realities.

Building coalitions and strategic partnerships. To ensure the LCT will be Africa-centred, there is a need for strong domestic, continental and international partnerships which requires a careful balancing act for African governments between investment and exploitation. Addressing competing interests by employing inclusive development and justice as the main policy frames will be crucial in preventing another scramble for Africa's resources.

Higher education and training institutions

Bridging the skills mismatch. TVETs are foreseen to play a critical role in realising a just transition for youth. Currently however, very few African TVET institutions regularly conduct national skills forecasts and these forecasts rarely pay explicit attention to the new skills required in a green economy. To equip youth with the right skills for the future of work, it is essential that TVET and other training institutes develop curricula that match the standards and requirements of the new, green labour market. Partnerships with the green energy sector, and wider low-carbon industry will in this regard be key in supporting a pipeline of youth to meet the emerging needs of employers.

Build linkages to employers. While investing in young people's education and skills is important, training programmes for a new green economy must offer certified, transferable skills that create demonstrable experience and career ladders for youth. Workplace-based placement can in this regard offer young people essential links to employers and mentors. Especially for those experiencing a distance to the labour market, mentorship programmes, on-the-job training and network development can help reduce the rate of churn for young people in the labour market, who regularly cycle in and out of disconnected, short-term jobs.

Private sector actors

Create sustainable decent jobs. While creating new, green jobs for young people in Africa, the private sector must assure – rather than assume – that these are quality, decent jobs. Employment initiatives in the green economy are all-too-often piecemeal and short-term and have not translated into sustainable livelihoods. Concerted efforts need to be made to enhance the quality of existing jobs and secure job decency of new green employment.

Recognise young people's circumstances. To curb youth unemployment, employers must find alternative ways of assessing and recognising young people's competencies and experience beyond formal qualifications. Recent research¹⁴⁵ shows the impact of providing an unemployed young person with a documented evaluation of their full skill set: not just their educational qualifications, but also their soft skills, capabilities, experience and learning potential. In light of the costs involved in travelling to work; young people may also need financial support to keep their first quality job.

Supporting green entrepreneurship. To support the growth of the green economy, the private sector can also offer young entrepreneurs (including self-employed youth or micro-enterprises) seed capital and professional networks to help them tackle high barriers to entry.



Civil society organisations

Amplify voices of marginalised communities. Given their embeddedness in local communities, CSOs are well placed to support locally-led climate advocacy and amplify the voices of those that make a difference in their communities. By collaborating with youth networks and grassroots movements, CSOs can influence policy and programming, ensuring that these are connected to local realities and rooted in social accountability, rather than supporting a tokenistic participation of youth in these processes. In this role, CSOs become knowledge brokers, mobilising knowledge for climate action and actively engaging in shaping decision-making, governance,

cultural, and political contexts of a just transition in Africa.

Supporting gender-responsive interventions.

To support a gender just transition, LCT policies and programmes should focus on providing access to finance, land, affordable childcare and social services, as strategies to boost and sustain women's labour participation. CSO's can in this regard play a crucial role in advancing women's economic and political empowerment by elevating their message on important policy fora and facilitating engagement with key system players. In addition, integrating an ecofeminist perspective into discussions about just transition pathways is a way to promote gender awareness in the LCT.



Recommendations for future research

A knowledge agenda that contextualises and addresses questions around intergenerational and gender justice in low carbon transitions in Africa will be key to provide the foundation for inclusive LCT policies and programmes. This policy brief aims to support this conversation and the development of an inclusive research agenda that is grounded in the realities of those part and parcel of a low carbon transition in Africa.

Localisation of climate research

The first potential avenue of future exploration is in the localisation of LCT research to promote the development of just transition pathways that are based on different structures within industries, workforce composition, social and dynamic political economy factors. Most studies on LCT take place at a national or continental level, however, what became evident in the research, is that there is a strong spatial dimension to the low carbon transition and the related challenges youth face. Youth living in rural communities that are far removed from urban centres have radically different experiences than youth living in major cities. In addition, while there is increasing consideration for youth dimensions in energy and climate policy, the implementation of these policies at a local community level is mostly lacking.

Contextualisation through case study research into the implications of the LCT on local communities is as such an important avenue for research as this enables a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that are experienced at different levels. Bringing these insights subsequently together by connecting the 'local' with the 'global' in a way that builds mutuality through both South-South and South-North exchange and multi-stakeholder dialogues can provide important insights and pathways for change.

Youth heterogeneity and engagement

Quantitative approaches, especially energy models, dominate the LCT literature, with research focusing on resources, energy demands, and production of energy using RE technologies. The social processes that influence the underlying dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of youth and women, so critical to a sustainable energy transition, are still under-researched. Unpacking the interrelated and multidimensional complexities among the category of youth is therefore important to inform policy and programming interventions and effectively foster active youth participation in policies and programmes. To promote a deeper understanding of opportunities for youth in low carbon transitions, research should take the vantage point of youth heterogeneity and intersectionality and pay specific attention to barriers and opportunities for marginalised groups, e.g. NEETS (not in employment, education or training), young women, rural communities, refugees, youth with a disability.

Gender justice

Gender is a critical dimension of the distributional impacts of energy transitions and as this research has shown, women face structural barriers and inequalities that excludes them from the labour market and decision-making processes around LCT in Africa. LCT policies

and programmes that neglect to consider these disparities can inadvertently exclude women from reaping the benefits of a low carbon transition. A deeper understanding of women's specific position in the LCT is needed to support a gender just transition. Moreover, while existing research predominantly focuses on the challenges faced by women, there is also a need for an alternative analytical framework that explores themes of women's empowerment and the potential of women's role as change agents in just low carbon transitions.

Bridging the skills gap

As research shows, there is a skills mismatch between what the labour market requires and the skills that young people have. Research suggests that TVET could play a major role in bridging this gap by 'greening' their curricula and offering future proof training courses. However, systems for identifying, integrating and implementing new green competencies in TVET in Africa are still weak. More research into what types of skills are needed in the low carbon transition and how curricula can be developed that combine more technical, green skills with foundational and

digital skills can help strengthen TVET and other training institutes and equip youth with the skills and knowledge for the future of work.

Entrepreneurship support

While it is widely acknowledged that the private sector, in particular SMEs, has a crucial role to play as a catalyst of technological and social innovation and as a provider of employment, a more detailed understanding is missing about what is needed to incentivise youth-led and youth employment intensive businesses. Understanding how to create an enabling environment for green enterprises to flourish, will be crucial in contributing to the generation of more high-quality jobs for youth during the transition. Moreover, considering the general lack of reliable data and employment statistics, there is a clear need for more research into high job potential sectors for green jobs for youth; such as agriculture, waste recycling, solar industries. Attention to spatial dimensions, in particular the rural-urban divide, will be key as there is an important geographical disparity connected to the low-carbon transition in Africa.



Considering both formal and informal economy dimensions

One of the key insights emerging from this research is that the lines between formality and informality are often far blurrier than imagined, with connections and overlaps between these two sides of the economy more pronounced than often conceptualised in YE programmes and policies. The dominance of waged or salaried work in social policies and political visions of the future leads to an exclusion of unwaged workers, and education programmes which prioritise skills for jobs that might not exist or become less relevant in the future of work.

While formalisation of employment including establishing a living wage, social protection and job security is still a priority, it is increasingly recognised that young workers in the green economy operate on the intersection of formal and informal labour, sometimes combining multiple jobs in both spheres. It is therefore crucial to understand the drivers and consequences of alternative livelihoods at the interface of the formal and informal sector, and how this should be operationalized in policy and practice to promote decent jobs for youth.

Inclusive M&E systems

Oftentimes evaluations of employment programmes and policies fall into the trap of ‘bean counting’; reporting only the number of new jobs created without assessing the quality of those jobs and the possible negative externalities that were caused by an intervention. As this report has shown, a lot of the new jobs that are created in the low carbon transition for local workers are in unskilled roles, on short-term contracts, and only during the construction phase of the project, repeating a pattern of high churn and job precarity in the African labour market, particularly for young people. Also, the informal and ‘blurred’ livelihood strategies of youth are not adequately captured by these methods, presenting a skewed version of reality.

Facilitating a just transition requires a rethinking of how we measure employment success. Indicators that focus on job decency and sustainability are critical to support sustainable livelihoods for young people in the low carbon transition. Moreover, tracking youth-specific outcomes (e.g. absorption, skilling, retention) in the renewable energy sector and wider low-carbon economies and a continuous monitoring of youth specific outcomes will enable a deeper understanding of the effects of transition strategies and identify areas for intervention. Finally,



recognising that youth livelihood strategies are diverse and often take place on the interstices of the formal and informal economy, will enable better assessment of employment generation and allow for more informed policy and programme interventions.

Political economy dynamics

As the evidence synthesis presented in this publication highlights, international political economy dimensions will play a key role in Africa's LCT and include the exploration of new energy sources and mineral extraction. To avoid another 'scramble for Africa', it will be essential to integrate political economy dimensions into LCT research to support a youth-centred African vision on the low carbon transition.

Finally, while the LCT provides opportunities for employment creation, it will also inevitably involve the

destruction of other jobs and rather than a smooth process, this is bound to be disruptive. In the coming years, individuals employed in mining, or energy-intensive heavy industries, along with the communities reliant on these sectors, will experience consequences of the market- and policy-induced transitions. Centring the perspective of local communities in low carbon transition research by unpacking the (potential) negative externalities of the LCT will enable the development of pathways for an inclusive and just transition.

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