



EDUCATION THINKPIECE SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

From foundational learning to future readiness: a call to action to tackle the youth crisis in Africa

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Summary

In this African Union Year of Education, we celebrate the success to date of the foundational learning campaign, and advocate here for a new coalition of actors to similarly rally around a complementary concept of future readiness to tackle the crisis of youth unemployment. We highlight the potential of a future readiness campaign to better define the problem, demonstrate its systemic nature, and call for multi-sectoral system-wide solutions. This would start with secondary schools, and link to colleges, skills providers, employers, and all levels of government. We highlight the need for immediate action to help address youth employment with a focus on gender, disability, the green economy and civic engagement.

As an organisation with a deep understanding of youth employability, and over 30 years of experience working in Africa, we urge action now.



Introduction: from foundational learning to future readiness

The African Union (AU) Year of Education (2024) is stimulating important discussions about the stark reality of educational underachievement in Africa, and galvanising political will around the urgent and critical need for action. The innovative foundational learning coalition¹ championed up to presidential level (for example in Ghana and Zambia) has gained particular traction, and mobilising around this key theme is a major win in this important year for African children. With 90% of children in the region unable to read or do mathematics by the age of ten, solving the foundational learning (FL) crisis is of paramount importance.

However, the theme for the AU Year of Education – educate an African fit for the 21st century – is intended to promote inclusive, lifelong, quality and relevant learning.² Therefore, whilst FL is indeed essential, it isn't enough. Alongside the learning crisis in African primary schools, there is a youth employment crisis of huge proportions. Youth unemployment in Africa is the highest of any region globally – over 30% in some countries³ and even higher for young women and those with disabilities. According to the **African Development Bank**, 10–12 million young people enter the workforce each year, yet only three million formal jobs are created. Recent youth unrest, for example in Kenya and Nigeria, highlights the stark need for governments to solve this problem.

Secondary schools are key to supporting young people to gain the skills, knowledge and awareness necessary for successfully gaining employment or building sustainable livelihoods.⁴ But, just as primary schools are failing to provide adequate FL, secondary schools are failing to perform the critical task of preparing young people for their future. We cannot wait for gains from improved FL to percolate into secondary school. Moreover, the skills and knowledge needed for youth employability build upon, but are not the same as, FL. Urgent action is needed to better prepare young people at secondary school, and strengthen the wider systems that support youth employability.

How can we bring about positive action? As the FL coalition demonstrates, coalescing around a strong concept with a clear call-to-action can be powerful. Currently, there is no single unifying concept that concerns preparing and enabling African youth to successfully transition into employment and livelihoods. We would advocate that one is needed. The term **future readiness**⁵ encapsulates the concept and is gaining traction. It means supporting young people – including women and people living with a disability – to gain the skills, knowledge, awareness and, crucially, the opportunity to engage with and thrive in dignified employment.

¹ Comprising FCDO, UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, the World Bank and the Gates Foundation

² See full information [here](#).

³ In [South Africa](#) above 50% (c. 5 million youth); in [Kenya](#) 17% (c. 3 million) with the informal economy employing the majority of youth

⁴ We focus on secondary school here as the prime vehicle for delivering future readiness whilst recognising large numbers of adolescents are out of school, who also need the same level of support secondary can provide, and in the hope as FL delivers gains then more pupils will attend secondary.

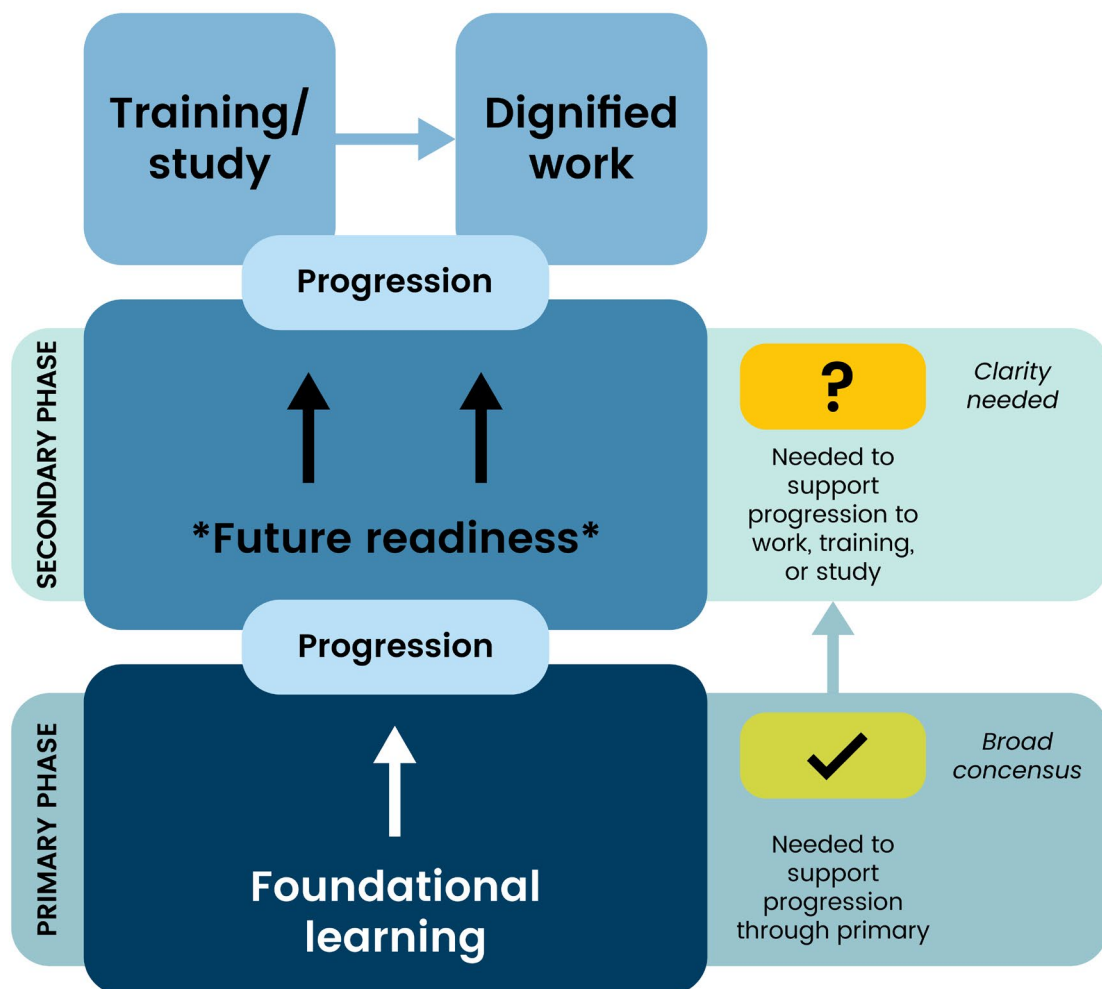
⁵ This term was used in Education Development Trust's recent UNICEF funded youth employability programme in Jordan, and similar terms are used in the skills space (e.g. Future of Work)



Future readiness as a galvanising concept could help coalesce governments, funding agencies, delivery partners and employers to address the youth employment crisis, including the critical equity dimension. It could provide a vehicle to better define what young people need to succeed in a difficult and challenging job market, and help build a stronger evidence base of what works to achieve it. It could highlight the particular need for cross-sectoral solutions and, as a result, unlock further funds – including alternative finance – to tackle it. A future readiness movement would not work in competition with the FL movement, but learn from and complement it, with a new coalition of stakeholders.

In this article, we explore what future readiness could mean, what might be needed to achieve it, and call upon key stakeholders to mobilise in unity to address it.

Diagram 1: the need for future readiness to build on foundational learning



The youth crisis: a multi-dimensional system challenge

Arguably, young people in Africa face the biggest challenge of their lives at the point when they are least equipped to deal with it. When they transition from primary or secondary school, they enter an environment where formal jobs are in short supply, and they are often locked out of opportunities for up-skilling and entrepreneurship due to a lack of funding. The information to support them with making smart choices for their careers or livelihoods is weak, of poor quality or not available, and often schools have not developed 21st century skills to support them to navigate this complex landscape. No wonder the average length of time to reach employment is measured in years not months,⁶ and in that time many drop off the path to dignified employment due to economic and social pressures.

Youth employment could be considered a 'wicked' problem, in that it is multifaceted, and a combination of stakeholders working in harmony is required to tackle and solve it. Whilst the wider macro-economic context clearly drives unemployment, there are future readiness solutions that equip young people to better navigate it, whilst also supporting improvements in the wider economy.⁷ Schools obviously play a key role, but so do colleges, skills providers, universities, employers and, crucially, governments – not just the basic education ministry, but also the ministries of tertiary education, business, labour market development, finance and local government. All government departments must be involved if future readiness is to be achieved.

Defining future readiness

To mirror the success of the FL movement, a clear definition of exactly what young people need to acquire to be considered future ready is potentially the starting point. Against this, we can robustly generate evidence about what is being achieved, and gain clarity on what does (or doesn't) work.

So, what could being future ready mean? Numerous skills frameworks exist, mostly coalescing around the 21st century skills⁸ considered necessary to enable young people to be job-market ready. But being future ready may mean more than this. To be able to thrive, young people need knowledge and awareness of relevant and available career pathways, technical skills for such pathways, business skills for entrepreneurship, and an environment that provides some of the building blocks to allow them to successfully take their first steps on job or livelihood pathways. That means opportunities for training or skilling, access to small-scale investment, and entry points to formal jobs, such as apprenticeships. Without all of these, we cannot assume young people – especially those from marginalised areas, girls, or those with disabilities – can be considered future ready. The importance of the wider environment perhaps differentiates future readiness from FL, in that there are factors extrinsic to the young person that need to be in place in order for future readiness to be achieved.

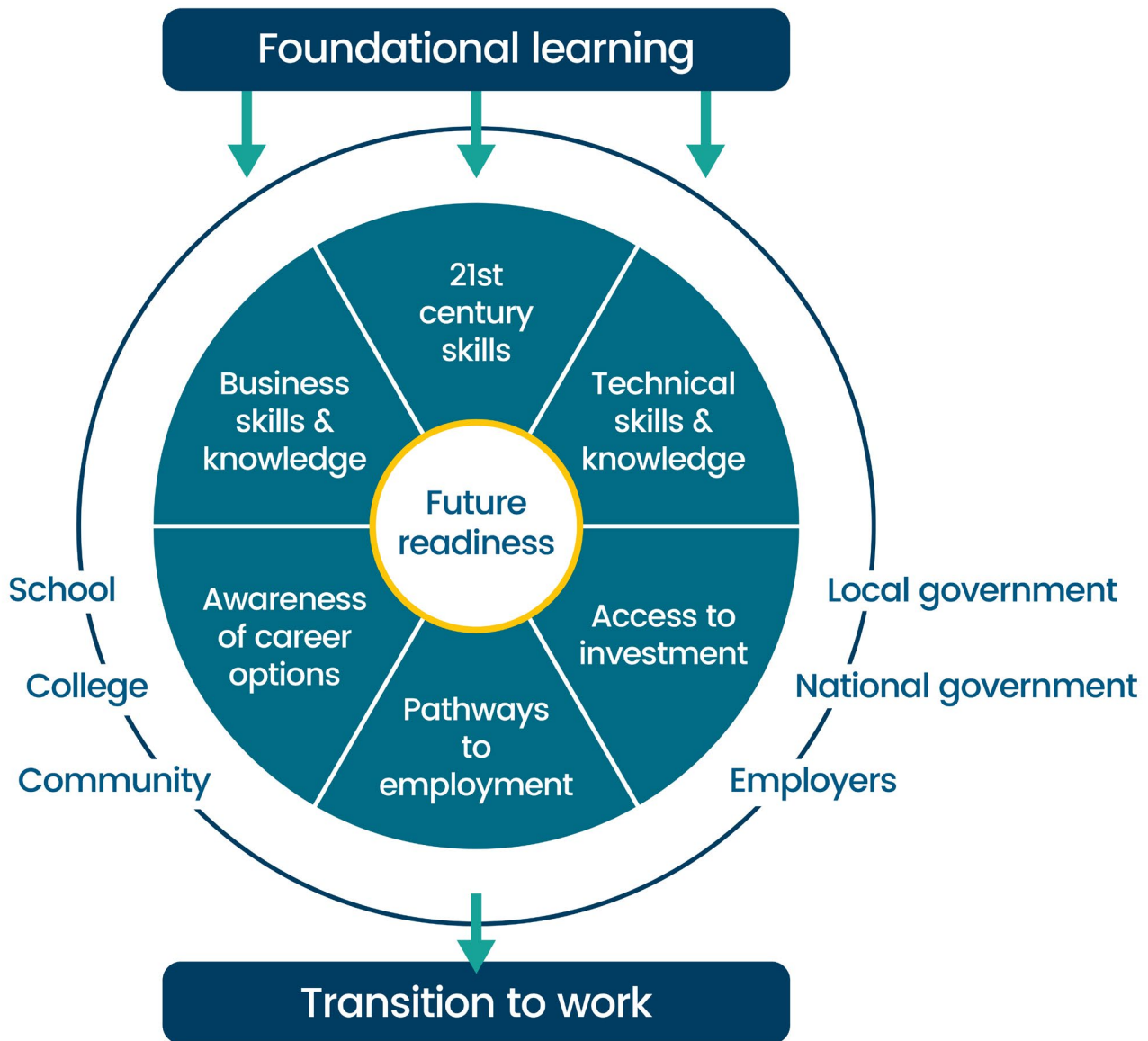
⁶ Average time to find the first job for young people (aged 15–29) in low and middle-income countries is 17 months and to find their first decent employment was 53 months, Manacorda, M., Rosati, F. C., Ranzani, M. and Dachille, G. (2017) 'Pathways from school to work in the developing world', IZA Journal of Labor & Development, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 1.

⁷ E.g. through fewer skills shortages, more entrepreneurship and formal employment and as a result, more tax revenue for investment

⁸ E.g. McKinsey's [56 job-ready skills](#), SFIA's [global digital framework](#) or Brookings [Global Citizenship skills](#); the multiplicity of these itself illustrates part of the challenge



Diagram 2: the potential components of being future ready



More work is needed to firm up the definition of future readiness, but from it could be derived metrics similar in their simplicity and boldness to those now universally understood in FL (for example, being able to read a simple text by age ten), as important policy hooks. Given the multiplicity of skills frameworks, something simpler could help build a movement around developing future readiness more deliberately and universally.

Producing future readiness: a system problem

Schools are the starting point for developing future readiness. Why are they not producing young people at secondary level with the key elements outlined above? There are many factors involved: secondary schools are traditionally academic and exam focused, and pupils are often not provided with curriculum options tailored towards more vocational sectors; the curriculum is often developed without consideration of labour market information, employment needs (such as green jobs) or employer consultation; careers guidance is weak, and where it exists, often not driven by labour market information; schools rarely have links with employers to inspire and motivate pupils to pursue more diverse careers; gender norms are pervasive and this often limits the number of girls taking science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects; and a lack of access considerations for young people with disabilities, alongside strong cultural barriers, leads to limited options for this neglected group.

However, as outlined earlier, this is a multifaceted system challenge so action is required by more than just secondary schools. For example, in order for information about the labour market and national sector development plan to reach schools and young people, it must be curated and channeled by governments. Skills providers and schools must align to support better pathways from school to training. Employers must be engaged from the beginning – to help ensure pathways and skilling are relevant to jobs – and have active links with schools, colleges and universities. Furthermore, governments and other funders must target financial resources, such as seed funds, to support both youth training and entrepreneurship opportunities from the moment the transition from school begins.

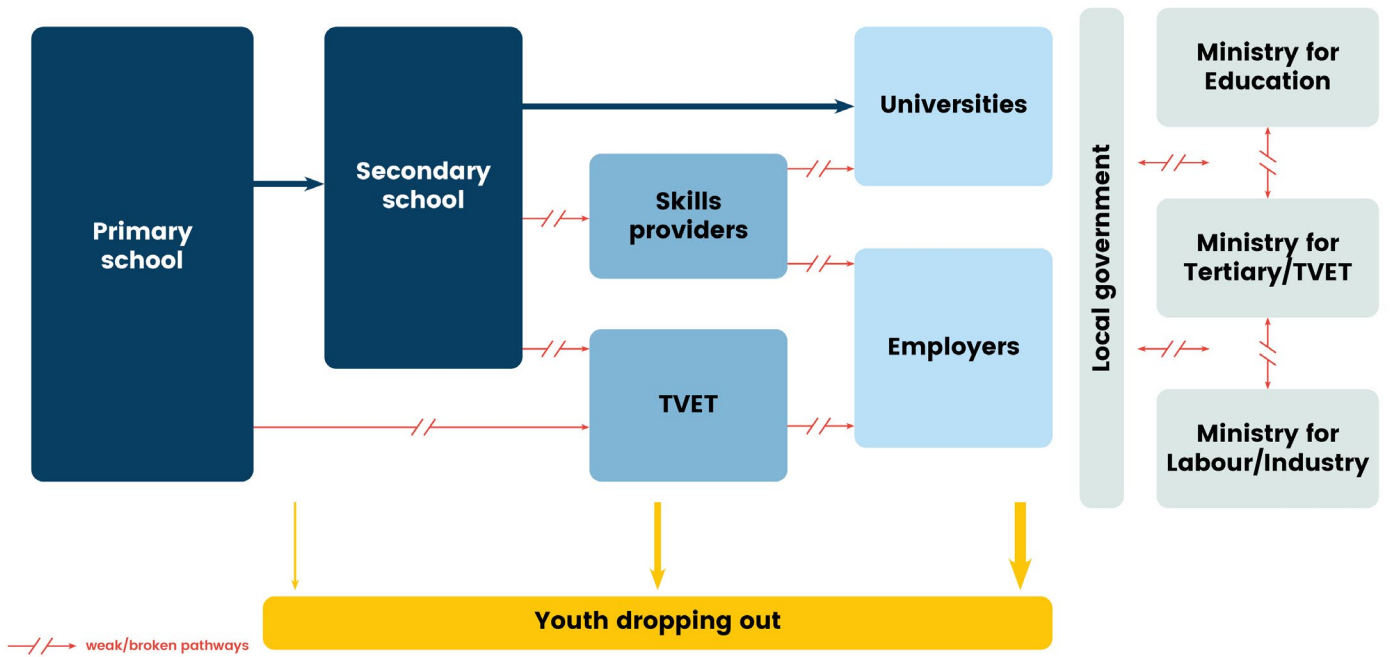
Systems are currently too fragmented to deliver this, with broken pathways between key steps in the chain and misalignment between government ministries, training providers, employers and schools. This results in high school dropout rates – a challenge far more acute for young people in marginalised areas, young women, and those with disability.⁹



⁹ E.g. in Kenya the Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) rate for women aged 15-25 is 20% higher than for men (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021)



Diagram 3: System misalignment driving youth dropout and high unemployment



To develop future readiness, we need a systems approach that rebuilds strong pathways between key actors, with strong oversight and alignment across all levels of government and cross-links with employers.



Opportunities to develop future readiness more effectively

Future readiness is potentially more holistic and systems driven than FL, making it a difficult problem to solve, but there are clear opportunities to develop it more effectively. These include:

- » **Technology:** Most countries in Africa are now investing heavily in digital infrastructure. As connectivity and hardware access improves, even in the last-mile, technology can be cost effective and help provide better information and guidance. It can support connections between remote schools and employers, and schools that are equipped with infrastructure could become centres of youth skilling – for example, developing digital skills for business process outsourcing opportunities (BPO).
- » **Clearer government sector skills plans:** Some governments in the region have invested in mapping, analysing and forecasting key growth sectors, such as agri-business, digital skills, BPO and green jobs. Such plans could be the starting point for any future readiness action plan – creating pathways from school to college, skills providers, university or employment, implemented with local tailoring and enabled using technology.
- » **STEM initiatives:** Many ministries of education are prioritising STEM development in schools, with resources supporting improved equipment, training for teachers, and changes to the curriculum and textbooks to challenge gender norms, boosting the number of girls entering the STEM arena. Better aligning STEM training to government sector skills plans and fostering closer links with employers through such programmes presents a key opportunity.
- » **Alternative finance:** More resources are needed to support young people to become future ready and enter dignified work or livelihoods. Government budgets are increasingly constrained. However, fewer labour market skills shortages, higher rates of employment, more tax income for governments, and higher revenues for employers, make future readiness a strong alternative financing opportunity. Mobilising public-private partnerships in skilling, attracting impact or venture capitalist investment in innovative skilling solutions, and leaning on corporate social responsibility funds could all be opportunities to create more resources to support future readiness across schools and the wider system.
- » **Local government:** In many countries, devolved local governments can play a key role in translating national skills sector policies into their local contexts, building a stronger ecosystem between schools, employers, colleges and skills providers. This should be led by key demand sectors and, where possible, skills sector councils, to guide future readiness pathways.
- » **School system frameworks:** A number of school system frameworks exist (for example, WEFs Education 4.0¹⁰) which – alongside government-wide frameworks (related to, for example, sustainable development goals) – could be tailored to create clearer blueprints and scaffolds for schools and the wider system to deliver future readiness. For example, the creation of careers-focused curriculum projects, enhanced careers guidance, or establishing strong links to employers and colleges could all form part of school-ready frameworks. The development of these frameworks could potentially be guided by local government plans.

The harnessing of these opportunities, the development of a more coherent concept of future readiness, a clearer set of impact metrics, and an aligned systems approach could drive a transformation in how future readiness is delivered.

¹⁰ World Economic Forum, 2020



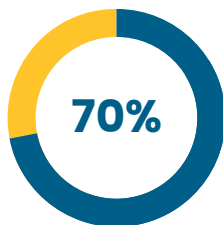
Case study: Kenya

Nearly 70% of Kenya's population of 56 million is under the age of 25 – that is more than 39 million young people. More than 3 million young people (17%) between the ages of 15 and 24 are not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Young women are 20% more likely to be NEET than young men, and numbers are far higher in arid and semi-arid (ASAL) counties. With a population growth rate of nearly 2%, the number of young people in Kenya is fast increasing. Nearly a **million jobs** are needed each year to keep pace with the number of young people transitioning to the job market, but despite economic growth of around 5% per annum, this challenging target remains unreached year-on-year.

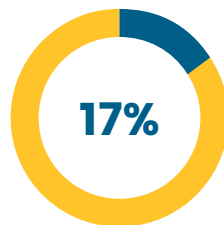
The National Skills Development Policy (**NSDP, 2020**) highlights many of the same structural issues outlined in this article, including weak linkages between education and industry (including course design), poor use of labour market information, and weak careers guidance. Differing responsibilities between national and county government for education (for example, basic education at national level and technical, vocational education and training at county level) may further fragment the system, and present key challenges to the development of future readiness.

However, opportunities abound. For example, a huge investment in the digital superhighway and the green economy (e.g. \$200m in the **World Bank GREEN project**), a national strategy including the establishment of skills councils for key growth sectors (in the NSDP), a youth **skills hub**, and key growth sectors (including agribusiness and creative industries) all present opportunities for employment. Evidence suggests that youth lacking relevant skills remains a **barrier** – but a better alignment of skills development in schools and colleges could boost employment. Furthermore, within education, STEM is being promoted through a regional centre of excellence for schools (**CEMESTEA**).

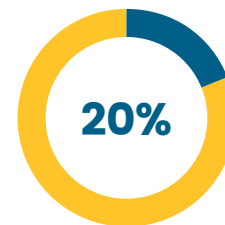
The key issue on these initiatives is alignment between national skills policy, county government, schools, colleges and employers, together with clarity on what skills and knowledge young people need to access these pathways once they are established. We need a definition of future readiness for Kenyan youth, with alignment on how to deliver it.



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Conclusion: building a coalition for future readiness

In this African Union Year of Education, it is essential to highlight the urgent need for action on the future readiness of young people across the region. The political momentum generated by the FL movement is powerful and important, and must be maintained. However, a similar rallying cry is needed to address the youth crisis. A new coalition of stakeholders must come together to better define what is required, build an evidence base of what is, and is not, being achieved, and disseminate evidence-based models of what works to solve it.

The concept of future readiness could be the first step on this path. The second step is to determine how to better deliver it. Delivering it is not just a schools' problem, it is a system-wide one. Hence, whilst funding, resources and sharper technical solutions are needed, most importantly all actors with a stake in youth employment must collaborate and align around a clearer definition and blueprint of how to equitably develop a future ready youth, across the whole continent. That means governments, development partners, delivery organisations such as Education Development Trust (EDT), and employers. Harnessing opportunities such as technology, better planning for pathways, STEM initiatives and alternative financing, the challenge is not insurmountable. Young people across Africa deserve us to rise to this challenge.

In this AU Year of Education, EDT stands ready to work with others to build a new coalition of actors for a future readiness campaign.





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