

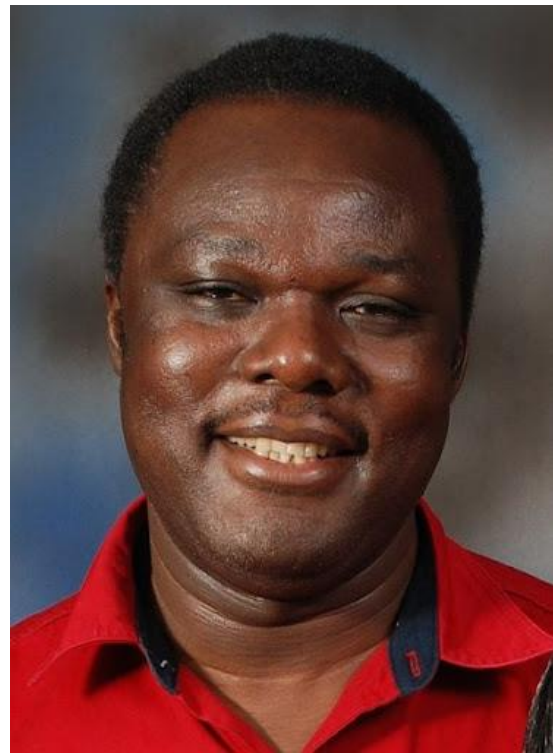


## Promoting Youth Employment and Skills Acquisition for Enhanced Continental Growth



Africa is uniquely endowed with human and natural resources that have the potential to yield inclusive growth and eradicate poverty in the region, enabling Africans across the continent to live healthier and more prosperous lives. The current population of Africa stands at 1.3 billion, and this has been projected to nearly double in size by 2050 (AfDB, 2020). The continent has the world's youngest population which is growing rapidly with almost 60% of its population under the age of 25 years (Penar, 2021).

Even though young people are understandably Africa's most important source of human capital and a driver of development, a report by the International Labour Organization on the Global Employment Trends for the Youth in Africa indicates that majority of this population segment is unemployed or under-employed (ILO, 2020). The youth in Africa are confronted with multiple challenges key among them the visibly inadequate decent jobs despite the recent strong growth performance of many African countries (AfDB, 2020).



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This situation exposes the continent to possibilities of exacerbated instability if policy makers do not get their decisions right. The expected youth bulge in Africa presents both an opportunity to reap the demographic dividend and an imminent time bomb and threat to social cohesion as well as massive migration in search of opportunities if appropriate policies are not implemented to harness the dividend (ILO, 2020).

## Covid -19 and Aggravated job losses

The COVID-19 pandemic currently in its second year has disrupted livelihoods worldwide through the dual channels of heightened health risks and interruption of economic activities. The pandemic and its associated containment measures has adversely impacted both formal and informal sectors rendering many people jobless in a continent where unemployment rates are high. On the flip side, the pandemic has introduced a unique moment to rethink employment, education, welfare and trade, while focusing on equitable, competency-based, and lifelong learning opportunities. Continuous and deliberate capacity building and skills training that could prepare Africa's youthful population for sustained employment opportunities is paramount in order to build resilience, growth, and competitiveness of both individuals and institutions for long-term social and economic development. Further, the pandemic underscores the urgent need for action that will promote remote learning at scale that can mitigate the immediate impact on learning. It also highlights the need to implement progressive and pervasive structural reforms to ensure inclusive and flexible learning for all learners now and in the future. This will promote continuity and equity in learning and increase higher education institutions' resilience to handle crisis in the medium to long term. Beyond the education system, there remains a gap in industry-aligned skills training to prepare young people for employment opportunities. The Covid -19 crisis has brought to the fore that a majority of the youth are vulnerably employed in the seemingly unstable informal sector and the continent thus needs to be very deliberate about creating employment opportunities and enhancing employability of the youth.

## Recognising & Integrating Skills and Qualifications for Labour Mobility and enhanced employability

A skilled and flexible workforce is recognized as key to economic development. The clarion call in Agenda 2063 - the Africa's blueprint and master plan for transforming Africa into a global powerhouse of the future is to prioritise inclusive social and economic development, continental and regional integration, democratic governance and peace and security amongst other issues aimed at repositioning Africa as a dominant player in the global arena. The First ten-year Implementation Plan of Agenda 2063 foresaw development of a Continental Educational Qualification Framework and a common educational qualification system being put in place by 2023. Fast forward, development of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) is currently on course. ACQF is a policy instrument that is aimed at contributing to the wider objective of continental integration, mobility of people with portable skills and recognised qualifications, transparency and quality of qualifications of all levels and sub-sectors of education and training and supporting lifelong learning. The ACQF is also fully in line with objectives defined by the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25), notably establishment of the continental qualifications framework and cooperating with



national and regional qualifications frameworks. The ACQF development activities are part of the AU-EU Skills for Youth Employability Programme and the Skills Initiative for Africa.

Agreements on mutual recognition and transparency of skills and qualifications have thus become an important policy area aimed at addressing the problem of skills shortages and unemployment.

Today, there is an accelerating trend towards development and implementation of national, regional and continental qualifications frameworks as an instrument to improve comparability of qualifications and harmonisation of education and training systems across the African continent as is the case in Europe, Australia and the Asia-Pacific regions. Currently, forty-one African countries are at various stages of development and implementation of their respective National Qualifications Frameworks (Castel-Branco, et al., 2020).

Further to this is the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which is a key flagship of African integration. The protocol underscores recognition and harmonization of education as an imperative to facilitate free movement of people across the continent. This is also underpinned in the Protocol to the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community. To date, several countries and regions have subsequently embarked on the development of national and regional qualifications frameworks which embodies the promises of increased regional mobility and integration into international labour market schemes.

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a potential mechanism to promote lifelong learning and enhanced employability and occupational mobility. Enhancing youth employability requires improvement of both quantity and quality of higher education. Specifically, it requires developing a demand driven education system that is in-synch with employers' needs and building capacity to embrace Science, Technology and Innovation. With the fourth Industrial Revolution in full swing and the rate at which technology is advancing, it is critical that Africa builds a sufficient, educated and skilled workforce to be able to drive its development agenda in the right direction.

## Accelerated digital transformation as an opportunity for enhancing Youth Employability

The Covid-19 crisis has shown that digital technology is increasingly important to every economy, having the potential to positively impact labour demand, supply and intermediation if properly applied. Even before the crisis, an estimated 230 million digital jobs were projected to be created in Africa by 2030, but to fill them would also require some 650 million more training opportunities to be created. Online retailing and the digital trade in services were already on the rise in Africa before the crisis. These global and regional developments could result in increased opportunities for young





Africans to innovate, engage in e-commerce or work in digital jobs servicing both intra-African and overseas markets.

## Conclusion

Africa needs to leverage the bulging youth segment and create opportunities for better labour mobility across the continent. In order to reap the demographic dividend, there is need for concerted efforts to ensure that the right supportive policies, including those fostering relevance of education, training and job creation are in place so as to translate the youth bulge opportunity into concrete economic growth.

Secondly, African higher education institutions and policy makers must ensure that learners acquire requisite skills to compete, innovate, and respond to complex social, environmental, and economic situations. Recognition of prior learning should be strengthened especially for the vulnerable and marginalized groups who may not have the advantage of going through the formal education systems. Ultimately, the returns from both formal and informal education should bring about high productivity outcomes in the labour market, thus reduce unemployment rates in the continent.

Lastly, the role of universities in catalyzing sustainable and inclusive development in the continent cannot be overemphasized. There is need for universities to continually utilize their unique position as knowledge generators and in building the required human capital – especially the youth, that will contribute to positioning Africa in the global arena as envisioned in Agenda 2063.

### **About the Author:**

*Dr. Mukhwana is the Director General of Kenya National Qualifications Authority. He has worked as a Professor in Soil Science at several Kenyan Universities and has been a Deputy Chief Executive Officer at the Commission for University Education in Kenya. He currently serves as the founding CEO of the Kenya National Qualifications Authority where he has been involved extensively in reforming the TVET sector in Kenya and establishment of the Kenya National Qualifications Framework. He is an experienced Team Leader and Manager with a demonstrated history of working in the Agriculture and Higher Education Sectors in Africa. He serves as a Member of the Board of Directors of RUFORUM, representing non-university Actors. He holds a BSc and an MSc in Veterinary Medicine, both from the University of Nairobi in Kenya and a PhD in Soil Science from the University of Wyoming in the USA.*

This is our tenth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of the RUFORUM Seventh Africa Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Triennial Conference Digests. More information about the conference is available at <https://www.ruforum.org/Triennial2021/>. Join the Conversation on Social Media using our Official hashtag #AfricaHEWeek2021





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