



Journal of Global Economics & Sustainable Development (JGESD)

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 2 (2025)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

From Data to Action: Advancing Youth Skills Development and Employment in Africa through Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

Walwambe Peter^{1*}

Article Information

Received: July 20, 2025

Accepted: November 18, 2025

Published: December 30, 2025

Keywords

Africa, Evidence-Informed Decision-Making, Skills Development, Labour Markets, Youth Employment, Youth Policy

ABSTRACT

Africa's rapidly growing youth population presents both a significant development opportunity and a pressing policy challenge. While governments and development partners have invested extensively in youth skills development and employment initiatives, outcomes remain uneven, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. This paper examines the role of evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) in shaping effective youth employment policies and programs, with a focus on understanding how evidence is generated, utilized, and institutionalized within youth development systems. Using a qualitative research design, the study examines policy and strategy documents, secondary literature, and field observations from youth-focused projects in Uganda. The study investigates patterns in evidence creation, stakeholder involvement, and institutional capability for evidence use. The findings reveal persistent fragmentation in evidence ecosystems, limited participation of young people in knowledge generation, misalignment between skill development initiatives and labour market demands, and weak institutional mechanisms for integrating evidence into policy and programmatic decisions. At the same time, emerging methods such as youth innovation hubs, digital data platforms, and participatory approaches show promise for improving evidence-based decision-making. The study concludes that advancing youth employment outcomes in Africa requires moving beyond isolated interventions toward more coherent, inclusive, and institutionalized approaches to evidence use. Strengthening analytical capacity, embedding youth participation, and aligning skills development with labour market intelligence are critical to improving the relevance and sustainability of youth-focused policies. The paper contributes to ongoing debates on youth development and governance by highlighting practical entry points for strengthening evidence-informed policymaking in low- and middle-income contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Africa's demographic structure presents both a strategic opportunity and a developmental challenge. With over 60% of its population below the age of 25, the continent possesses the youngest population globally (UN DESA, 2023). This demographic advantage, often described as a "youth dividend," has the potential to accelerate economic growth, innovation, and social transformation. However, in many African countries, this potential remains largely unrealized due to persistently high levels of youth unemployment, underemployment, and informality, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite substantial investments by governments, development partners, and non-governmental organizations in youth employment and skills development programs, outcomes have often fallen short of expectations. Structural constraints such as weak labour markets, skills mismatches, limited private sector absorption capacity, and fragile institutional systems continue to undermine impact. A growing body of evidence suggests that one of the most critical yet under-addressed challenges is the limited use of systematic, context-sensitive evidence in policy formulation, program design, and implementation (Nyhan Jones *et al.*, 2022).

Evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) refers to

the deliberate and systematic use of the best available data, research, and experiential knowledge to guide policy and programmatic choices. In the context of youth employment, EIDM encompasses labour market intelligence, tracer studies, administrative data, community feedback, and participatory research involving young people themselves. When effectively applied, EIDM enhances policy relevance, improves resource allocation, and strengthens accountability mechanisms. However, across much of Africa, the adoption of EIDM remains uneven and constrained by institutional fragmentation, limited analytical capacity, and weak linkages between evidence producers and decision-makers (Onyango & Green, 2021).

Furthermore, youth are usually portrayed as passive beneficiaries rather than active participants in evidence generation. This exclusion decreases initiatives' contextual relevance while weakening ownership, sustainability, and impact. At the same time, emerging innovations such as youth-led research efforts, digital data platforms, and community-based monitoring systems show considerable promise for closing these gaps if properly supported and scaled.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how evidence-informed decision-making can be strengthened to enhance

¹ Institute for Distance Learning and Post Graduate Studies, Frontier University, Somalia

* Corresponding author's e-mail: hipeterwa@gmail.com

youth skills development and employment outcomes in Africa. Drawing on policy analysis, secondary literature, and field-based insights from youth-focused initiatives in Uganda, the study explores existing gaps, enabling factors, and practical pathways for institutionalizing evidence use in youth programming. By doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on how African countries can translate demographic potential into inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design to examine how evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) is applied within youth skills development and employment interventions in Africa. A qualitative approach was selected to allow for an in-depth exploration of policy processes, institutional practices, and contextual dynamics that shape the generation and use of evidence in youth programming (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Sources

This study draws on multiple qualitative data sources to ensure analytical depth and triangulation. First, a systematic document review was conducted of approximately 35 policy and strategy documents, including continental, regional, and national frameworks relevant to youth employment and skills development. These comprised the African Union's *Agenda 2063*, the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, Uganda's *National Youth Policy*, and the *National Employment Strategy*, alongside related sectoral implementation frameworks.

Second, the study reviewed approximately 40 secondary sources, including peer-reviewed literature and evaluation reports produced by development agencies and research institutions working on youth employment in Sub-Saharan Africa (Filmer & Fox, 2014; Fox & Kaul, 2018; ILO, 2020; World Bank, 2018).

Third, the analysis draws on field-based observations. These were informed by the author's engagement in donor-funded youth livelihood and skills development programmes, consistent with approaches used in applied development research (Bamberger, Vaessen, & Raimondo, 2016). These engagements involved direct participation in program design, monitoring and evaluation activities, stakeholder consultations, and capacity-building initiatives targeting young people, local governments, and implementing partners. Such experiential insights enabled a grounded understanding of how evidence is generated, interpreted, and applied in real-world program environments, complementing the documentary analysis. Together, these data sources provided a robust basis for triangulation and supported a contextualized examination of evidence-informed decision-making in youth skills development and employment programming.

Analytical Approach

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke

(2006). This involved systematic familiarization with the data, identification of recurring patterns, and organization of findings into analytically meaningful themes related to evidence generation, utilization, and institutional capacity. Particular attention was given to:

- (i) The availability and accessibility of data;
- (ii) Stakeholder participation in evidence production;
- (iii) Alignment between skills development initiatives and labour market needs; and
- (iv) Institutional mechanisms supporting or constraining evidence-informed decision-making.

Triangulation across policy documents, secondary literature, and field-based observations enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The analysis prioritized depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization, consistent with qualitative research standards.

Ethical Considerations

The study relied exclusively on publicly available documents and anonymized experiential insights drawn from professional practice. No primary data were collected from human subjects. Ethical integrity was maintained through accurate representation of sources, avoidance of misinterpretation, and adherence to principles of academic honesty and responsible scholarship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and Analysis

The analysis identified five interrelated themes that shape the effectiveness of youth skills development and employment interventions in Africa. These themes emerged from a synthesis of policy documents, secondary literature, and field-based observations drawn from youth-focused initiatives in Eastern Uganda.

Fragmented Evidence Ecosystems

A review of legislative frameworks and program documentation suggests a fragmented evidence landscape for adolescent employment efforts. Multiple actors such as government ministries, development partners, and civil society organizations produce data relevant to skill development and labour market results, but it is rarely linked into a coherent framework. In numerous cases, analyzed policy documents referred to old or inadequate datasets, which limited their usefulness for strategic planning. Field observations revealed that implementing agencies frequently collect monitoring data exclusively for reporting purposes, leaving little room for cross-institutional learning or long-term knowledge retention.

Limited Youth Participation in Evidence Generation

The review indicates that young people are seldom engaged as active contributors to research and evaluation processes. Most evidence on youth employment is produced about young people rather than with them. This pattern was evident in both policy documentation and program-level practices, where consultation tended

to be episodic and largely extractive. Where participatory approaches were employed such as youth-led assessments or feedback forums, data were more contextually grounded and responsive to local labour market realities, though such practices remained limited in scale and institutional support.

Misalignment between Skills Development and Labour Market Needs

Across the reviewed sources, a persistent gap emerged between the skills emphasized in training programs and the competencies demanded by evolving labour markets. Many initiatives continue to prioritize traditional vocational pathways, while underemphasizing digital skills, entrepreneurship, and emerging green sectors. Field observations further revealed limited engagement between training providers and employers, contributing to weak labour market signaling and reduced employment outcomes for graduates. This misalignment underscores the need for more dynamic labour market intelligence systems to inform program design.

Emerging Enablers of Evidence-Informed Practice

Despite these constraints, the analysis identified several promising developments. Youth innovation hubs, university-based research centers, and digitally enabled platforms are increasingly facilitating participatory data collection, experimentation, and peer learning. In some cases, these spaces have enabled young people to generate localized evidence, test solutions, and engage policymakers more directly. Although often operating at small scale, such initiatives demonstrate the potential of bottom-up approaches to strengthen evidence use when adequately supported.

Weak Institutionalization of Evidence Use

Finally, the findings indicate that while many national policies acknowledge the importance of data and research, few establish clear mechanisms for embedding evidence into routine planning, budgeting, and monitoring processes. Limited technical capacity, high staff turnover, and weak accountability structures constrain the consistent application of evidence in decision-making. Consequently, evidence-informed practices often depend on individual initiative rather than being embedded within institutional systems.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight persistent structural and institutional challenges that continue to constrain the effectiveness of youth skills development and employment initiatives in Africa. While substantial investments have been made in youth-focused programming, the evidence suggests that weak integration of evidence into policy formulation and implementation remains a central barrier to achieving sustainable employment outcomes. A key insight from the analysis is the fragmented nature of evidence ecosystems within the youth employment

landscape. Data relevant to skills development, labour demand, and program performance are often generated by multiple actors operating in silos, limiting their collective utility for strategic decision-making. This fragmentation reflects broader governance challenges, where coordination mechanisms and shared accountability frameworks remain underdeveloped. As a result, policy decisions are frequently informed by incomplete or outdated information, reducing their responsiveness to dynamic labour market conditions.

The findings also underscore the limited participation of young people in the generation and interpretation of evidence. While youth are frequently positioned as beneficiaries of employment initiatives, they are rarely engaged as co-producers of knowledge. This exclusion diminishes the contextual relevance of data and undermines local ownership of policy interventions. Emerging participatory approaches such as youth-led research, digital feedback tools, and community-based monitoring demonstrate significant potential to address this gap, yet they remain insufficiently institutionalized within formal policy processes.

Misalignment between skills development programs and labour market demand continues to be a critical constraint. Many training initiatives prioritize traditional vocational pathways while underemphasizing emerging sectors such as digital services, green economies, and platform-based work. Weak labour market intelligence systems and limited employer engagement further constrain the ability of training institutions to adapt curricula to evolving economic realities. Strengthening real-time labour market information systems, including the use of digital and data-driven tools, is therefore essential for improving the relevance and effectiveness of skills development efforts. Recent developments in digital public infrastructure and data ecosystems present new opportunities to enhance evidence-informed decision-making. Advances in administrative data systems, digital identification, and interoperable platforms can support more timely, granular, and actionable insights into youth employment trends. However, the effective use of such tools depends not only on technical capacity but also on institutional readiness, data governance frameworks, and political commitment to transparency and learning.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of political economy considerations in shaping how evidence is produced and used. Evidence does not operate in a neutral space; it is mediated by power relations, organizational incentives, and resource constraints. Without deliberate efforts to align incentives, strengthen accountability, and foster a culture of learning within public institutions, evidence-informed approaches risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

Overall, the study reinforces the need for a shift from fragmented, project-based interventions toward integrated and adaptive systems of evidence use. Embedding evidence-informed decision-making within institutional routines, enhancing youth participation, and

leveraging digital innovation are critical to improving the effectiveness and sustainability of youth employment policies across Africa.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how evidence-informed decision-making can strengthen youth skills development and employment outcomes in Africa. The findings demonstrate that while significant policy attention and investment have been directed toward youth employment, the effectiveness of these efforts continues to be constrained by fragmented evidence systems, limited institutional capacity, and weak integration of evidence into decision-making processes. As a result, many interventions fall short of addressing the dynamic and complex realities of contemporary labour markets. The analysis underscores that improving youth employment outcomes requires more than expanding programmatic coverage or introducing new initiatives. Rather, it calls for a systemic shift toward embedding evidence-informed decision-making within the core functions of policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. This includes strengthening mechanisms for data generation, enhancing coordination among key actors, and ensuring that evidence is routinely used to guide adaptive policy responses. Based on the findings, several key recommendations emerge:

Institutionalize Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

Governments should formally integrate evidence-use requirements into youth and employment policy frameworks, including clear guidelines for data collection, analysis, and feedback loops. Dedicated institutional units or coordination mechanisms can support consistency and accountability in evidence use.

Strengthen Analytical and Technical Capacity

Targeted investments are needed to build the capacity of policymakers, implementing agencies, and youth organizations to generate, interpret, and apply evidence. This includes training in data analysis, monitoring and evaluation, and the use of digital tools for decision-making.

Enhance Youth Participation in Knowledge Production

Youth should be engaged as active partners in research, monitoring, and evaluation processes. Participatory and youth-led approaches can improve the relevance, legitimacy, and sustainability of youth employment interventions.

Align Skills Development with Labour Market Dynamics

Stronger linkages between training providers, employers, and labour market information systems are essential to ensure that skills development initiatives respond to

evolving economic opportunities, including those in digital, green, and informal sectors.

Leverage Digital and Data Infrastructure for Adaptive Governance

Investments in digital public infrastructure, interoperable data systems, and real-time labour market intelligence can enhance policy responsiveness and support evidence-based adjustments in rapidly changing contexts. In conclusion, advancing youth employment in Africa requires a shift from fragmented, project-based approaches toward integrated, evidence-driven systems of governance. By strengthening institutional capacity, fostering meaningful youth engagement, and leveraging data for adaptive decision-making, policymakers can create more inclusive, resilient, and effective pathways to employment for Africa's growing youth population.

REFERENCES

- African Union Commission. (2015). *Agenda 2063: The Africa we want*. African Union.
- Bamberger, M., Vaessen, J., & Raimondo, E. (2016). *Dealing with complexity in development evaluation: A practical approach*. SAGE Publications.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Filmer, D., & Fox, L. (2014). *Youth employment in Sub-Saharan Africa*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0107-5>
- Fox, L., & Kaul, U. (2018). *The evidence is in: How should youth employment programs in low-income countries be designed?* World Bank Group.
- Government of Uganda. (2015). *National Youth Policy*. Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development.
- Government of Uganda. (2020). *National Employment Strategy for Uganda*. Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2020). *Global employment trends for youth 2020: Technology and the future of jobs*. ILO.
- Nyhan Jones, V., Ampomah, R., & Boakyee, E. (2022). From policy to practice: The role of evidence in African youth employment strategies. *African Development Policy Review*, 14(1), 56–72.
- Onyango, D., & Green, A. (2021). Bridging the gap: Evidence-informed policymaking in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Evidence & Policy*, 17(3), 323–338. <https://doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16214214594135>
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). (2023). *World population prospects 2023*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/>
- World Bank. (2018). *World Development Report 2018: Learning to realize education's promise*. World Bank.