

Breaking the Cycle of Unemployment or Just Filling Gaps?

Catalyst Now: Igniting Systems Change

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Introduction

Youth unemployment in South Africa is a pressing issue with profound social and economic repercussions. Of the country's 60 million population, around 3.6 million youth aged 15–24 are classified as NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training). Unemployment in this age group stands at 60.8% [1]. Across Africa, youth unemployment is further exacerbated by limited job creation, outdated education systems, and inadequate infrastructure, with Africa's youth population projected to reach 830 million by 2050 [2]. These statistics highlight the urgent need for targeted, long-term interventions for youth potential to be fully realised.

Empowering Youth for Long-Term Success

Social enterprises like Youth@Work (Y@W) are addressing these challenges by equipping youth with the skills and support needed for long-term success. This approach disrupts poverty and joblessness by building youth capacity for long-term success. Through targeted



Figure 1 Camilla Ndlovu, a proud farmer and owner of Oak Farm in Limpopo at age 29

interventions, it boosts productivity, reduces social alienation, and mitigates crime risks, fostering cohesive communities.

A shining example is Camilla Ndlovu, who joined the public employment programme in 2021. She was introduced to the Y@W programme's DBE-E3 initiative (an entrepreneurial education initiative within the Department of Basic Education aimed at transforming the futures of young South Africans). After completing the programme, Camilla focused on establishing her social venture in agriculture. She remains in contact with Y@W and says:

I have secured funding for a 29.9-hectare farm in Limpopo, focusing on poultry production and expanding into mixed farming. Committed to youth development and giving back to the community, I aim to host YES programme participants, offering hands-on experience in broiler production, biosecurity, and agricultural value chains.

Youth Placement Model: An Overview



Figure 2 An overview of the Youth@Work Youth Placement Model

The Y@W Youth Placement Model, along with the Youth Employment Services (YES) funding model, offers young South Africans a structured, one-year, fixed-term employment opportunity that goes beyond an internship. Participants are fully employed, receive a minimum wage, and gain valuable professional experience. Through this model, they

develop job-specific and transferable skills, receive mentorship from the Y@W team and supervisors, and build a foundation for long-term career growth and self-sufficiency.

The YES Model: Empowering Youth with Jobs and Skills

The approach centres on the YES funding model, where corporate funding covers youth salaries, enabling SMEs to host young talent without financial strain. This supports SMEs with human resources while aligning with corporate BBBEE objectives, which promote economic participation and business ownership among previously disadvantaged groups in South Africa. Through YES, corporations provide black youth with employment opportunities, skills development, and fair wages, creating pathways to sustainable careers.

Y@W prepares youth for employment, self-employment, or entrepreneurship through an online curriculum. It includes modules from Alison and HP on ICT, business presentations, and financial literacy, as well as soft skills in communication and emotional intelligence. This training supports SDG 4 (Quality Education), promoting lifelong learning and economic inclusion, and equips participants for 12-month placements and long-term career growth.

With only 4 out of every 500 unemployed youth placed in YES, Y@W focuses on high-potential candidates and partnering with host employers offering meaningful work and

Youth Employment Program Cycle: Roles and Impact



Figure 3 Roles and impact within the Youth Employment Program Cycle

career pathways. This approach tackles youth unemployment, supports economic growth, and advances SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Mentorship in Action: Supervisors as Key Stakeholders

Supervisors at host sites are crucial to the programme's success, serving as mentors who provide hands-on training and reinforce the skills learned through online courses. They guide participants through industry-specific tasks and practical problem-solving, helping them gain real-world experience. A notable success story is De-lano Olivier, who says:

I am currently learning more about Solar PV Installations, which has been an exciting and new area for me. I've learned skills I never imagined I would acquire, and I am truly thankful for the opportunity.

His long-term goal is to own a PV installation company.



Figure 4 De-lano Olivier completing a solar installation in Limpopo, South Africa

Supporting Youth Entrepreneurs

Nurturing entrepreneurial talent by collaborating with like-minded organisations is key to driving long-term economic change. In 2024, Y@W partnered with Silulo's Enterprise Development Program to provide financial support to youth-led businesses while participants remain on the YES program. Unlike traditional funding, this partnership directed funds to young entrepreneurs, offering a monthly salary and mentorship through Silulo to help grow their businesses.

Anita Hlazo owner of AfroGrunge Designs says:

The YES programme's monthly salary helped both myself and my business. I reinvested all of it back into the business, which helped me grow my revenue threefold. I was also able to employ the two people I work with. Additionally, I used some of the money to stock up on materials, ensuring I had a constant source of funds to produce more clothes, something I didn't have before. Without YES, I would still be stuck in the financial loop I was in. The past 11 months have really provided a stabilizing boost for me, and I believe that without that consistency, my growth would have been at a far slower rate.



Figure 5 Anita Hlazo from AFROGRUNGE at work sewing and showcasing her designs

This model empowers youth-led businesses to drive local economic growth, with 17% of participants starting their own ventures — well above South Africa's 7% average.

The Real Impact

Since its inception, Y@W has placed over 10,400 young people into work placements, achieving a 49% labour absorption rate — remarkable given South Africa's youth unemployment crisis. The programme's impact is best illustrated through the stories of alumni who have transformed their lives. These stories demonstrate Y@W's holistic approach, preparing youth for immediate roles while fostering self-sufficiency for long-term success.

Key Insights for Future Growth

Several opportunities exist for Y@W's future growth:

1. **Strengthening Supervisor Training:** Supervisors play a crucial role in transferring skills, but not all host sites are equipped for structured mentorship. Additional training and resources will be provided to maximise their impact on youth development.
2. **Scaling Entrepreneurial Support:** The partnership with Silulo has demonstrated the potential for supporting youth-led businesses. Expanding this model will foster more entrepreneurs, driving economic growth in under-resourced areas and creating a self-sustaining network of young business owners across Africa.
3. **Refining Selection Criteria:** Enhancing criteria for selecting both youth and host sites will ensure better alignment with the mission of maximising employability. Partnering with financially stable sites will improve employment outcomes and provide long-term stability for participants.
- 4.

Building a Movement for Youth Employment in Africa — The Vision

Y@W plans to expand across Africa, inspired by Ghana's National Service Authority (NSA), which places skilled graduates in key sectors. By linking such programs with private-sector funding, youth unemployment can be addressed.

As Y@W grows, it aims to reshape youth employment across Africa, bringing together government, businesses, and education to create job opportunities. Sharing its model will help other countries build stable, dignified employment for youth.

By encouraging tailored solutions and collaboration, Y@W offers a roadmap for ending poverty and youth unemployment across the continent.



Figure 6 The Youth@WORK team has the vision of breaking the unemployment cycle across Africa

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Sources:

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