



Youth at Work Learning Series

# Scaling Up Youth Employment Programs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Report of the breakout session organized in partnership with Making Cents International (MCI) for the 2020 Global Youth Economic Opportunities (GYEO) Summit closing event

Co-Sponsors: MSI, World Learning, The World Bank, USAID, and Rice University

[scalingcommunityofpractice.com](https://scalingcommunityofpractice.com)

October 29, 2020



# Introduction

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**YOUTH AT WORK** is an initiative launched in late 2019 through a collaboration among the Global Community of Practice on Scaling Development Outcomes, MSI, World Learning, the World Bank, USAID, and the Organization and Workforce Lab (OWL) at Rice University, along with representatives from over two dozen organizations promoting youth employment. The Youth At Work initiative, now joined with the Youth Workforce working group of the [Scaling Up Community of Practice](#), seeks to engage a group of practitioners, youth leaders, policy experts, government officials and strategic thinkers in continuing dialogue and a series of thought-leadership events to **share knowledge, best practices, and lessons-learned on scaling up youth employment programs globally**. Enriching the discussion in this manner serves to enhance the learning agenda on scaling up youth employment programs globally, ultimately to achieve better youth employment outcomes at scale.

The first Youth At Work thought-leadership conference, held in October 2019, discussed the role of the private sector, host governments, and non-governmental institutions in scaling up youth employment programs. A fourth cross-cutting theme on data and evidence was also covered at length during that event. This is a hyperlink to a report summarizing the event: [Youth At Work Learning Series #1](#).

Youth At Work intended to host several follow-up learning events in 2020 to discuss these four themes in greater depth. However, given the significant immediate impact of COVID-19 on youth unemployment globally, the sponsors decided to hold a **virtual event in October 2020, focusing on scalable or at-scale interventions that aim to bolster demand for youth labor, improve youth access to upskilling and employment, and protect youth livelihoods during the COVID-19 pandemic**. The event was held in partnership with Making Cents International as part of their [2020 Global Youth Economic Opportunities Summit](#) on October 29, 2020 and drew on survey responses from the original Youth At Work participating organizations to identify four examples of large-scale responses to youth unemployment during the pandemic. This document summarizes the breakout session event and high-level takeaways from 49 session participants.

## II. COVID-19 and the Growing Youth Employment Crisis

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**THE CONTEXT.** The magnitude of global youth unemployment since the beginning of the pandemic has become more alarming than ever before, with almost 64 million youth now unemployed globally, according to International Labor Organization (ILO) reports. Due to the global economic lockdowns, the youth unemployment rate is especially alarming in African and MENA countries, reaching up to 50-60% among youth between 15 and 25 years of age. One in six young people who were employed before COVID-19 are now unemployed, while those still employed have seen their working hours fall by 23%, with speculation that these losses will get even worse before they get better. We know youth and those working in the informal sector are the most vulnerable, as they are the ones most likely to become unemployed during any health or economic shock. Achieving youth employment at scale stands to be the next big challenge for maintaining the stability and prosperity of low and middle-income countries. ILO statistics also show that youth training and education programs have been massively disrupted since the beginning of COVID-19, with 50% of learners reporting delays in finishing their courses, and 10% doubting they will even be able to complete them.

**WORKING TOWARD SOLUTIONS.** These trends have created a sense of urgency among donors, governments, and implementing organizations to design and deliver rapid youth employment programs with strategies for scaling in the COVID-19 era embedded early on at the design stage. Many governments and other actors are turning to policy solutions to address—on a large scale—the declining demand for youth employment, including private sector incentive schemes, cash for work programs, social protection interventions, and other solutions to meet such serious youth unemployment challenges. Governments are partnering with the private sector and other actors to launch interventions to bolster demand for youth labor, to protect youth access to employment, and protect youth livelihoods, and to supply services that immediately assist youth during the pandemic, including social protections and training service delivery.

However, many challenges remain. Scalable solutions that are being experimented with around the world may not be well known, hindering exchange of experience and refinement of interventions. Governments and donors are struggling to reach a wider number of marginalized youth who, among many other issues, are often operating in informal sectors due to weak digital banking infrastructures in most emerging markets. Distance learning and e-service delivery systems are offering some of the access and scaling solutions required for providing timely and effective training and social protections to youth; however, these solutions are hampered by limited and unequal internet connectivity. More global learning is needed around the solutions that are most effective at reaching large numbers of youth to protect their current livelihoods and increase their chances for decent work in the future.

# III. Marshalling Experts and Experience to Scale Up Youth Employment

On October 29, 2020, in this COVID-19 era, the Youth at Work organizers joined together again, partnering with Making Cents International and the [2020 Global Youth Economic Opportunities Summit](#) to organize a virtual session highlighting examples of successful policy-level COVID responses, large-scale, or scalable youth employment programs responding to COVID impacts.

The goal of this learning event was to bring together foundations, implementing partners, INGOs, government representatives, the private sector, youth leaders, and donors—those who are working in the youth employment sector—to discuss how youth employment programs are pivoting and adjusting their business models to access unemployed youth at scale. The evidence regarding what works in scaling up youth programs during COVID-19 is limited, due to the unique and critical nature of the global pandemic, such that experts in our community need to combine their collective insights and experiences, along with their current understanding of the evolving pandemic situation, to forge strong, sustainable, adaptable, and scalable youth employment pathways. Thus, the goal for this virtual event was to increase awareness of existing COVID-19 relevant and scalable youth employment solutions and support initial learning efforts around the refinement and scaling up of these solutions.

The Youth At Work team identified some of the pressing questions to be discussed around youth employment solutions at scale during the pandemic, including:

- **Identifying, refining, and sharing current solutions**
  - How have **governments, private sector, and civil society responses** to the youth employment challenge changed since COVID-19? What examples exist of effective large-scale or clearly scalable solutions to youth unemployment in the current context?
  - What have we learned during COVID-19 about **what works in distance learning and e-service delivery** and how can we **ensure countries have technology-at-scale capabilities** to pivot toward using IT platforms that realign youth skills to meet the demands of the workforce?
  - What are the unique **barriers** to scaling up such promising youth workforce development and youth employment models given the shock of COVID-19 to local systems? What aspects of these successful programs allowed them to be **scalable** during COVID-19?
  - How can we **share and publicize** existing large-scale and scalable youth employment solutions so that they become better known to other governments, donors, and implementing organizations?
- **What works in public-private partnerships to deliver youth employment at scale during COVID-19**
  - What models of effective **public-private partnerships** work well during COVID-19 to launch youth employment programs to scale?

- What models exist that have helped private sector actors **survive and overcome current challenges** in order to be able to keep employing youth and ensure safe conditions?
  - What **incentives** have proven compelling for private sector actors in this COVID-19 era?
  - How can **public sector actors learn from private sector** responses and strategies?
- **Focusing on the most vulnerable youth**
    - How do scalable solutions to youth unemployment in the COVID-19 era vary between **rural vs. urban** areas? Is it different between male vs. female youth? Are there other notable differences due to **culture and context**?
    - How do we identify, understand, and intervene with the **most vulnerable youth** when it comes to unemployment? How do governments and donors reach youth at scale who are operating in the informal employment sectors?
    - How do service providers **promote these programs** to youth, especially marginalized youth in the rural areas with limited resources?
    - Are violent extremist organizations, human trafficking groups, gangs, and organized crime organizations exploiting COVID-19 by offering livelihood opportunities to attract unemployed youth? How urgent is it for donors / governments / INGOs to respond to violent and extremist threats through large scale youth employment programs?
  - **Measuring results and unintended consequences**
    - What **indicators** can be used to provide reliable and informative evidence that large-scale youth employment interventions are effective, efficient, and scalable during COVID-19?
    - How should we be using data to track issues of inclusion, exclusion, and **differential** effects?
    - How do we use research and evidence to **change policies**? Are governments more open to include youth employment as a priority due to COVID-19?
    - How can we use data to help alert us to **unintended consequences**? For example, some worry that urgent assistance programs (social protection and safety net programs) may create unintended dependency and negatively impact employment rates. Others worry that digital training and service delivery systems may create more inequality given uneven Internet access and the digital divide. What other unintended consequences do you think these scalable programs may have? How can we track the unintended consequences we cannot predict?

To begin gathering input on these questions, and especially to advance the top priority of identifying the large-scale and scalable solutions that already exist, Youth At Work launched a short survey seeking wide input on examples of interventions that aim at bolstering demand for youth labor, improving youth access to upskilling and employment, and protecting youth livelihoods. “Large-scale/scalable” was defined as programs that can reach large general populations of youth and young adults, beyond just meeting delimited project targets. Respondents were encouraged to give examples from their own organizations, government policies and initiatives, or initiatives that are civil society or private sector driven. From these survey results, four examples were selected to be featured in the virtual event.

## IV. Featured Examples and Speakers

Larry Cooley, President Emeritus of MSI and co-curator of the Global Community of Practice on Scaling Development Outcomes, introduced the event, highlighting four reasons why it has been difficult to scale up solutions to the problem of youth employment, even before the pandemic:

1. Governments and NGOs are **limited in what they can do from the supply side**. Young people need opportunities as well as skills. Training alone can't create those opportunities; it can only prepare young people to take advantage of them. Youth employment needs to have “two hands clapping” in terms of stakeholder coordination.
2. There is **no obvious locus of leadership** in government or in society. It's a problem of **collective action**: individual employers won't pay for benefits they can't capture; governments are reluctant to partner with or subsidize specific businesses; and this leads to everyone hoping for a free ride and thinking it's someone else's job.
3. **Lack of major breakthroughs** that reduce unit costs or dramatically increase effectiveness in youth employment solutions.
4. The **long payback period** leads to hyperbolic discounting—therefore, youth employment always seems like a problem that can be pushed down the line.

COVID-19 has compounded and drawn particular attention to the youth employment issue. It has also added some new elements and created some new opportunities. First, there have been changes in delivery of programs, with increased availability and acceptability of virtual solutions. Second, there are permanent changes in the nature of work, including remote and flexible modalities for some occupations that are unlikely to revert to the status quo even once the pandemic ends. Third, there is a sense of urgency and imperative of scale—leading to the willingness and the priority to innovate. The event's four featured speakers highlighted promising approaches to addressing the challenges and taking advantage of these opportunities

### **ELIZABETH VANCE, PROGRAM DIRECTOR, SYSTEMS CHANGE FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, IYF:**

IYF's model to improve youth access to relevant upskilling opportunities works in existing school systems, and increases access for young people already enrolled in professional training programs to relevant upskilling opportunities. Currently operating in 12 Mexican states, IYF works at the scale of its public-school system partners, reaching about 45,000 young people annually. Further, direct and remote programming and changed educational policy and practices scales up their impact to nearly 1.8 million youth benefiting annually from improved curricular alignment practices and career orientation. IYF's COVID-19 adaptations included conducting a rapid assessment of teacher practices and needs, rolling out a digital teacher training so that teachers would have basic online learning skills to close out the spring semester, developing distance learning didactic materials (such as this [“first person shooter” video game to teach students warehousing skills](#)), and re-writing existing curricula to provide clear instructions for how to deliver curricula via zero-rated social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and WhatsApp).

**ROB URQUHART, LEAD FOR KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH AT HARAMBEE YOUTH EMPLOYMENT**

**ACCELERATOR:** Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, South Africa has implemented multiple initiatives and partnerships with government programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include the Youth Brigades helping with COVID response, support to the President's Youth Employment Intervention and National Youth Service system roll-out, partnership with the South African government's Unemployment Insurance Fund to scale up capacity to respond to applications and disburse aid to 2 million workers, strategic input on South Africa's return-to-work strategies, and prioritizing accurate information reach to 3 million youth during the pandemic.

**JIM WINKLER, VICE PRESIDENT AND SENIOR DIRECTOR OF THE ECONOMIC GROWTH DIVISION,**

**CREATIVE ASSOCIATES INTERNATIONAL:** Through the USAID-funded West Africa Trade & Investment Hub, Creative is working with over 600 companies registered on an online digital platform for co-investment grants through public-private partnerships to create jobs and sustain livelihoods and economic opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Trade Hub has curated a pipeline of 180 companies through concept notes, applications and co-creation processes to design projects that will generate an estimated \$1 billion in private investment and create over 300,000 new jobs, including more than an estimated 200,000 for youth, and over \$450 million in exports. This blended finance approach is designed to scale up employment and activate economic activity during the pandemic.

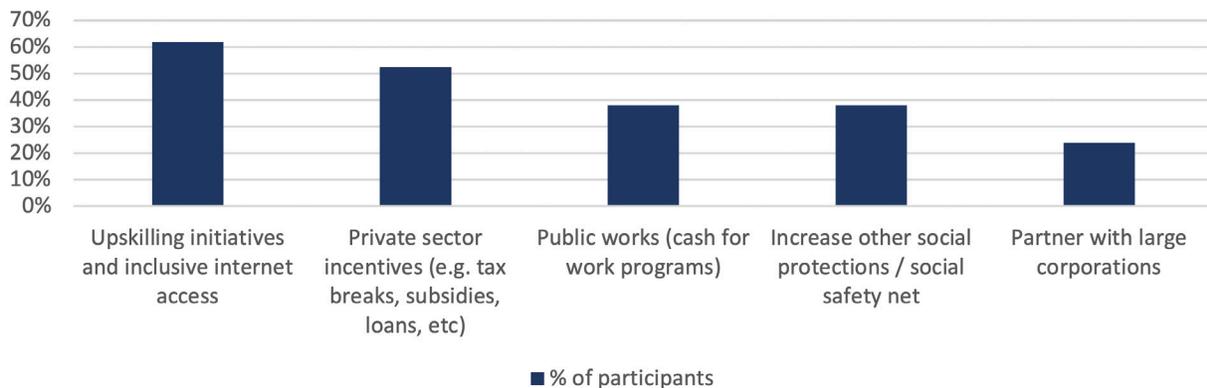
**LINSEY JACO, CHIEF OF PARTY, USAID EMPLEANDO FUTUROS PROJECT IN HONDURAS (BANYAN**

**GLOBAL):** The USAID Empleando Futuros project in Honduras is a \$19.87M Workforce Development project implemented by Banyan Global. Despite difficult and ever-changing conditions in Honduras, the project has achieved a 74% job insertion rate working with at-risk youth from the country's most violent and vulnerable communities. During COVID-19, the project is helping businesses stay open, and helping youth have the health & safety trainings companies are now requiring, by offering COVID-19 relevant biosecurity trainings that have reached over 250,000 people through 9 business platforms.

## V. Participant Contributions

Fifty of the event participants contributed their views on the strategies most likely to lead to successful scaling of youth workforce programming during the pandemic. Selecting one or more response from multiple options, 62% chose “upskilling initiatives and inclusive internet access” as the most likely to make a difference to youth during this time, while 52% chose “private sector incentives (e.g. tax breaks, subsidies, and loans)”. Others pointed to the potential for public works (cash for work) programs and increasing other social protections. Partnering with large corporations alone was the least-selected response, with only 24% seeing this as likely to be a successful strategy.

Which strategy is most likely to lead to successful scaling of youth workforce programming during the pandemic?



Participants also joined breakout discussions focusing on the event’s four analytical themes.

**BREAKOUT 1: IDENTIFYING, REFINING, AND SHARING CURRENT SOLUTIONS**—These participants chose to focus their discussions on large-scale education and training solutions during the pandemic, and remarked on two take-home points about scaling these interventions:

1. The broad level of industry-focused learning (transportation and logistics, English for hospitality) is scalable across countries and jobs, representing an opportunity for large-scale upskilling and reskilling during the pandemic. In these areas, some learning content is freely available, while others can be negotiated by contract. Flexible technology is an essential element of learning systems at scale—allowing access via social media, mobile, laptop, and desktop. Seamless ability to move and learn across platforms is essential.
2. Implementing technology for learning doesn’t happen effectively unless you work within – and understand the history of – formal and informal mechanisms and coalitions on both the ‘supply’ side (educators) and the ‘demand’ sides (organizations). This helps to frame the problem statement and goals of the work most appropriately. A group working together in these efforts can keep a running record of the incentive structures of the supply/demand sides, to keep track of and share this ‘intelligence.’

## **BREAKOUT 2: WHAT WORKS IN PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS TO DELIVER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AT SCALE DURING COVID-19**

– These participants focused on lessons learned from public-private collaborations to protect or increase youth employment, as well as lessons the public sector can learn from private sector strategies.

1. When we think of leveraging private sector partners’ resources, capital should not only mean money or funding. A lot of different types of private sector capital could be used to scale up and expand youth employment programs such as networking, facilities, knowledge, intellectual property, etc. There is a need to intentionally bridge the gap between the world of development and the commercial world. The private sector thinks of commercial goals on the mid and long term. How do we meet them on their expectations and work with them to make development investment grow through matching and leveraging? We need be on the same page with private sector on the long term and understand their brand-building desire and commercial goals.
2. It is important to focus on increasing the number of available jobs, as part of youth employment solutions at scale. Matching investments in trade, agriculture, and manufacturing, with a particular focus on small and medium enterprises (SMEs), is critical to generate jobs at scale. SMEs and microenterprises are the core drivers of job creation and PPPs should intentionally focus on including them. However, it is important to examine the SME selection process to make sure the resources reach at-risk youth and the informal sector. How can we leverage technology to facilitate access to smaller size firms who are the engine of jobs? Grant mechanisms can also reduce private sector risks in investing in business growth.
3. Other sources of funding: The [Development Finance Corporation](#) is playing a critical role to response to Congress’s desire to leverage local resources and attract a different kind of investment into development funding. They provide equity, debt financing, and technical assistance to the private sector to finance solutions to development challenges.
4. For youth employment problem to be tackled, we need to start thinking beyond the typical “project” mindset; we need to focus on systematic change in the local ecosystem. At the same time, we should overcome difficult regulations and laws by thinking of transaction-based partnership models, focusing on results and specific transactions, rather than tackling “hard-to-change” regulations.

**BREAKOUT 3: FOCUSING ON THE MOST VULNERABLE YOUTH**—Participants in this breakout thought through which youth may be excluded from the examples featured, and identified solutions to better include them in future refinements of these youth employment solutions.

1. One key takeaway for the group was the importance of using diverse media. Multiple channels for delivering information helped enable access for women in Harambee’s network in South Africa and Rwanda, and getting to rural areas in the case of Rwanda. Many innovative means for information transfer are also possible, using the platforms where youth already engage, such as Harambee’s use of Whatsapp chat boxes—in a “choose your own adventure” style game for youth to learn how to start up their own side hustle/biz opportunity.

2. It is possible to work around data constraints (including the cost of internet data access for youth) by timing the programming at times of days when data costs are lower; and having smaller ‘bites’ of information so as to use less data to deliver the information and services.
3. Knowing who is and who is not participating is crucial, but it is not always easy to collect this information. For example, with a tech-enabled information solution like Harambee’s it was more possible to track youth who are hearing impaired, but more difficult to determine which youth users had other physical disabilities. Using multiple channels and [universal design principles](#) can help to ensure that the widest possible range of beneficiaries have access to these services.

**BREAKOUT 4: MEASURING RESULTS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES**—This breakout focused on how the impact of the example youth employment solutions, including their unintended consequences, can be better tracked, and used to improve and refine the solutions shared globally.

1. Participants discussed the Empleando Futuros biosafety trainings as an example of opportunistic scaling, reflecting entrepreneurial or [effectuation thinking](#). As the project sought means to be relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, they found that their newly-developed trainings were highly needed in the landscape and scaled up naturally. By deliberately being very flexible in their partnerships, and becoming more intentional in course design as they scaled, they were able to grow the intervention rapidly and still gather information about its reach and effectiveness.
2. One key takeaway for participants was the importance of “automation” in being able to track data at large scale. Interventions and data collection need to be as automated as possible to allow for scaling up and allow for data tracking. To do this, we need to understand technology companies better and integrate them more into our normal operations so they can contribute their capacities and vision for scale.
3. It is also important to develop an incentive structure—incentives for an organic network of partners to share information back, and incentives to better be able to follow up with participants and attract them back to share their later experiences such as finding work or being able to retain their jobs.
4. Finally, large-scale data systems need to retain at least some open-ended elements. We need to open up our data systems to allow us to find out about unintended consequences of what we do, consequences we can’t even imagine at the outset. This means building in some ways to gather qualitative data even at scale.

In the follow up conversation concluding the event, participants noted the importance of giving feedback to donors on best practices if they want to reach scale with youth employment interventions. To achieve scale, donors need to be less prescriptive, instead setting big-picture targets like a 5:1 leverage ratio, or a certain scale to reach – and letting the implementer be creative and innovative in showing how they can do this. It is also important to help funders understand that they cannot always control approval of changes or transformations in project plans – the primary decision maker may be the partner or the context, not the funder, in the end. “The issue,” one participant pointed out, “is what’s possible within a given time and context—the pandemic has made that clear.”