

# Youth Economic Empowerment

Plan's vision for putting young men and women in productive training and decent work



**Plan**

# Introduction

The world is experiencing an unprecedented “youth bulge.” People under 25 currently represent about half of the world’s population - in some developing countries the figure is 60% - and over the next decade, more than one billion children will transition through adolescence into adulthood. Before the economic and financial crisis, many young people were already locked out of the benefits of globalization, experiencing underemployment in casual labour in the informal sector or hazardous and abusive work. Now the youth employment crisis has reached intolerable dimensions evidenced by higher unemployment, lower quality jobs and rising marginalization of youth. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has warned of a potential ‘lost generation’ made up of young people isolated from the world of work altogether. Yet, by implementing sound, decent work policies, countries can take advantage of the youth bulge and translate it into a dividend that promises better economic and social outcomes for young people.

Plan International UK has invested in youth economic empowerment (YEE) programming to meet these challenges. With a substantial portfolio of interventions and strategic partnerships Plan’s reach into the communities and established Youth Economic Empowerment Pathway (see Figure no. 1) offer a clear understanding of the risks associated with poverty, exclusion and youth not productively engaged in decent work, and a solid learning foundation on which to build policy and programme recommendations for decision makers and policy influencers. This approach is particularly relevant to the Sustainable Development Goal 8 to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” skills (see box on Decent Work) and mean of implementation 8b, “develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment” by 2020.

## What Decent Work is about

Decent work refers to all forms of productive activity, whether it takes place in the formal or non-formal sector. The concept sums up the aspirations of young people’s working lives – their aspirations for opportunity and income; rights, voice and recognition; family stability; personal development; and fairness and gender equality.

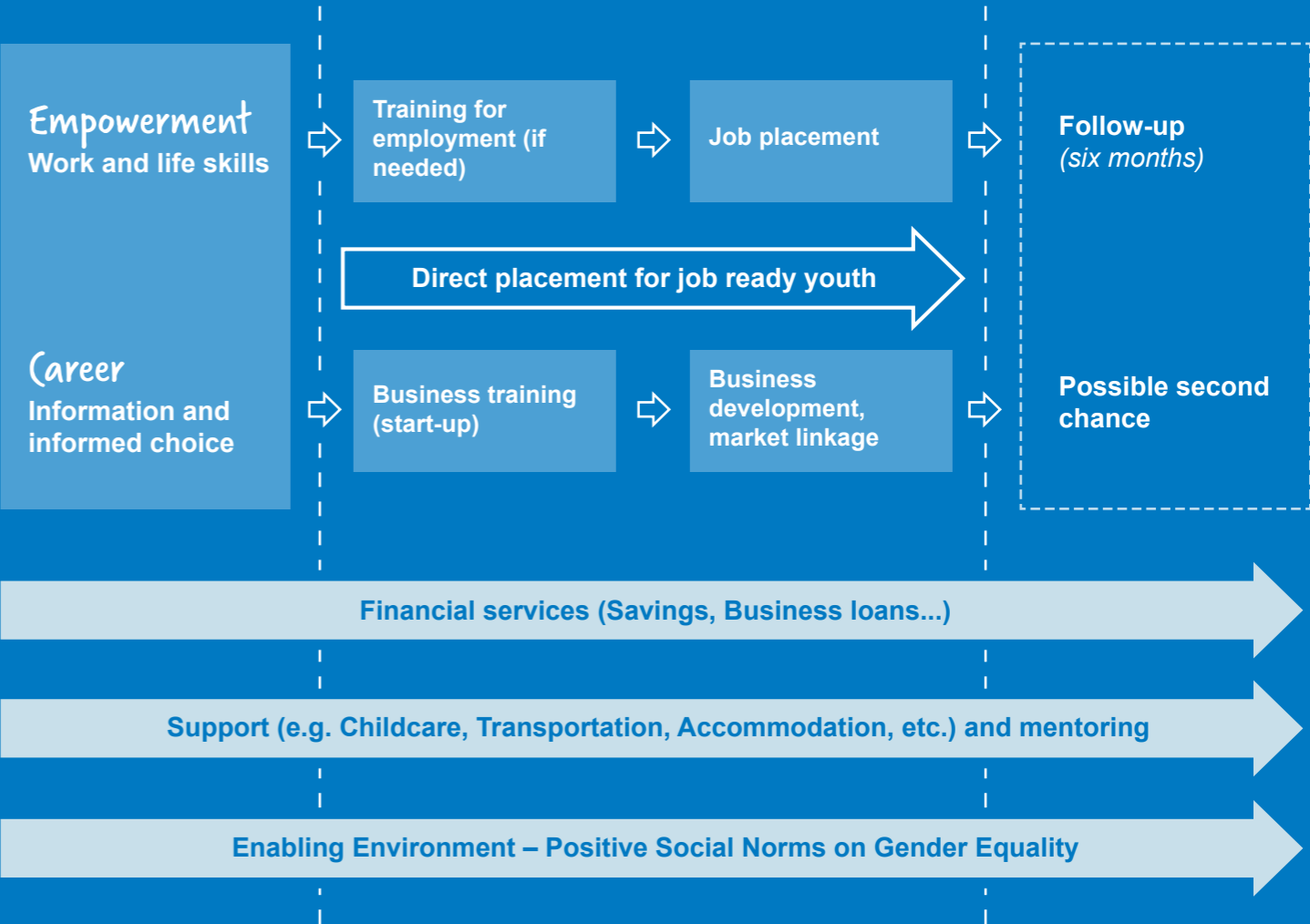
(Source: ILO)

The YEE Pathway fosters strategic alliances with government, private sector and civil society within a country to enable youth to access a range of services and support including:

- core work and life skills
- career counselling, mentorship and coaching
- demand-driven vocational and entrepreneurship training
- access to financial services and financial assistance
- job placement and monitoring of working conditions
- advocacy for more enabling work and business environments integrating behavioural change.

As such, the YEE Pathway is the ultimate reflection of Plan’s commitment to enabling young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) in their journey towards quality jobs, starting from the choice of skill training, through to their durable integration into the labour market.

Figure 1: Plan’s Youth Economic Empowerment (YEE) pathway



## Strategic Recommendations For Youth Economic Empowerment

Plan believes the following six policy and programme areas should be prioritised to enable youth economic empowerment:

### 1. Promote policy coherence in support of good practices

**Why?** Youth employment, and access to skills and jobs, cannot happen in isolation from supportive development policies. This is highlighted by targets 8.2 and 8.3 of the Agenda for Sustainable Development which calls on governments to “achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors” and to “promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services”.

**How?** It is important to empower youth and programme partners to advocate for the right economic and financial strategies. It is also necessary to encourage coherent education and training frameworks that align with labour market demand. Furthermore, policies and regulations must acknowledge the specific needs of marginalised groups and keep the emphasis on human and labour rights protection including through the provision of safety nets/social protection, especially in informal economies. Finally, good practices resulting from a youth employment programmatic intervention should be institutionalised into government-supported or market-based systems to facilitate sustainable replication or ‘scaling-up’.

### 2. Embed foundational and life skills in all education and training strategies.

**Why?** At any age, possessing solid basic skills in numeracy and literacy is fundamental to the acquisition of further vocational skills training. Especially with out-of-school youth, it is crucial to provide foundational skills in ‘bridge programmes’, combined with life skill interventions to renew youth’s taste for learning. Education based on life skills (see box on Life-Skill based Education-LSE) can build youth’s core work and citizenship competencies, resulting in many positive outcomes. LSE empowers young people to become responsible workers, active citizens and agents of change in policy-making and social dialogue, ultimately supporting students in their transition towards independent and productive adulthood.

**How?** The delivery of foundational skill trainings should be provided in all types of formal and informal education and training schemes including second-chance education, technical and vocational training, apprenticeship frameworks and enterprise development training. For adolescent girls (aged 10-19) and young women, life skills delivered in secured, collaborative and learning exchange spaces (life skill clubs, savings groups) can build confidence, advocacy and leadership skills. LSE thus becomes a crucial tool for ‘safe empowerment’ as well as prevention and response to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG).



### What a comprehensive life skill based education (LSE) is about

LSE, like entrepreneurship training, is about developing among youth – including the dropped-out and out-of-school – a “spirit for” and set of social attitudes applicable to their future employability and governance capabilities. In this process, teachers and instructors should no longer be “knowledge imparters” but rather “learning facilitators”, bringing youth to develop their core work and citizenship skills including their: i) self-confidence; teamwork; critical thinking, communication, negotiation, problem-solving and conflict resolution aptitudes; time and money management capabilities; ii) informational literacy, political consciousness, knowledge of legal and policy frameworks and understanding of a number of concrete social pervasive issues such as youth rights at work, sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality, etc.

(Source: Plan UK)

### 3. Ensure vocational and technical training schemes are demand- and competency-based, accountable to youth, and do not perpetuate gender-segregated occupational roles.

**Why?** It is crucial to refine young people’s knowledge of the competencies needed for each vacancy or professional category. This would help correct the infamous ‘skill mismatch’ (where youth’s possessed skills do not address employers’ requirements) and establish solid competency standards in trainings. Students and trainees assessed against clearer standards in turn get more recognisable, attractive certifications. Looking at standard setting in curricula

also gives an opportunity to reflect on unequal gender roles, seen in women being excluded from certain types of trainings considered as “male” and mostly engaged in traditional –often saturated– training options resulting in gender-stereotyped work.

**How?** First, market scans and basic value chain analysis tools should be used to develop employment initiatives in order to create demand-driven vocational skill training curricula. Employment assessments identify where job opportunities for youth lay within sectors and companies and avoid increasing labour competition among beneficiaries or market saturation for specific products.

Second, where possible, competency standards set for training curricula should be aligned with nationally or locally existing ones. This is to ensure the latter are recognised and “marketable” in the eyes of employers, and enhance the credibility of the certification provided to youth upon graduation. Ultimately, such a process is designed to facilitate youth’s insertion in the world of work. However, using (quality) standards is not always an option; it could be because they are non-existent or outdated, or because the intervention takes place in rural, remote areas disconnected from the central governance level. In this case, it is recommended to put in place consultation mechanisms among education and training partners, relevant employers organisations and youth/worker representatives (as well as local authorities where possible) in order to discuss, define and establish the competency standards needed per training level and professional category.

In this process, allowing youth’s –particularly young women’s– voice to be heard gives them a chance to participate in sector and workforce developments, increase their commitment to specific careers and shape new social norms around gender-appropriate roles and women’s access to employment.

### 4. Cultivate participatory Income Generating Activities (IGAs) and entrepreneurial pathways for youth with a focus on women and girl empowerment through business.

**Why?** Youth employability programmes need to acknowledge the scarcity of wage work opportunities in many countries and equip youth with the mindset and skills needed to become self-employed rather than ‘wait for a job’. Besides, for young people –particularly women– access to finance is the most challenging and essential aspect of starting a business.

**How?** Experience shows that by filling in the learning and competency gaps through gender-sensitive entrepreneurship trainings and providing the right combination of cash and in-kind support, especially with regards to business development services, it is possible to turn youth’s subsistence livelihoods into viable income-generating activities (IGAs). Plan therefore favours a youth entrepreneurship programmatic approach integrating the following good practices:

- Relying on savings rather than credit for funding e.g. via low-risk savings groups;
- Resorting to safe and informed borrowing from financial institutions using reasonable interest rates and providing relevant financial education and bank literacy training to youth applicants. These are essential safeguards in the proper implementation of target 8.10 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (“Strengthen the capacity of domestic financial institutions to encourage and expand access to banking, insurance and financial services for all”);
- Building on sustainable multi stakeholder partnerships that generate effective synergies, cost-efficiency and value for money – particularly through connecting youth start-ups to core business concerns;
- Stressing environmental, social and governance

standards including international labour norms related to working conditions in accordance with target 8.8. of the 2030 Agenda (“Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers”);

- Requiring active youth involvement and participation in the governance structure of IGA groups;
- Mainstreaming knowledge of gender equality and women rights to give women and girls an opportunity to use their enhanced economic status to influence wider changes in social and gender norms (with the necessary risk mitigation measures to avoid backlashes on adolescent girls and young women beneficiaries in the form of increased male and community violence).





**5. Enable poorest and most marginalised youth to take advantage of education, training and employability initiatives by combining them with safety nets/social protection.**

**Why?** For many vulnerable youth, graduation out of poverty requires to address preliminary, most pressing concerns such as food security, illness and childcare costs. For them to be able to take part in employability programmes, more encompassing safety nets/social protection mechanisms should therefore be put in place that cover both the direct and indirect costs of training through the provision of income security and give access to essential services. This way, youth can continue to meet their basic needs in the short-term while acquiring new skills necessary for the longer term. Specifically, given the predominance of women and girls among the world's poorest (70%) and their heavy involvement in unpaid family and domestic work (child and elderly care), social protection is inherently gender-sensitive and has a role to play in women's poverty alleviation, socio professional inclusion and economic empowerment. Although more evidence is needed about the nexus between social protection and gender equality, one can also spot the natural connection between social protection systems and responses to VAWG, since for instance welfare

services can serve to rehabilitate the most vulnerable, including victims of gender-based violence.

**How?** As a simple example, cash transfers can generate both an effective incentive for businesses to hire young apprentices or waged employees and an additional protection for young workers – for example when the allowance covers a portion of the worker's costs for employers in the form of wage subsidies or support to social security contributions. Second, where it exists and in order to ensure sustainability, beneficiaries from both the formal and informal economies should be assisted to register for and connect with existing government social protection schemes; for some youth, this requires having access to late birth registration services and/or being issued proper ID cards. In this way, young workers may still benefit from relevant resources based on their new need/employment levels until they graduate out of poverty sustainably. Finally, social protection measures should also engage youth themselves in basic services design and delivery to best reflect youth's interrelated needs, guarantee equity and fairness among potential beneficiaries, promote inclusiveness, and ensure that young peoples with special needs are not prevented from enrolling in skill development programmes.



## 6. Provide context-relevant career counselling, mentorship and coaching to accompany youth's safe transition to the world of work.

**Why?** Offering context-specific career guidance, mentoring and coaching services to youth throughout an employability programme and beyond is crucial to realistically and successfully orient youth. Vocational counselling and professional support also need to be aligned with youth's aspirations/capabilities as well as actual skills demand, in order to generate durable decent work outcomes for young men and women. The provision of adequate labour market information and advice and regular coaching is an imperative for harmonious adolescent development towards balanced adulthood (particularly for young women who need to balance additional choices around their productive vs. reproductive future).



It is also an imperative for young people's safe transition to the world of work into decent employment opportunities at the right age, increasing protection of disenfranchised youth against possible labour offences, abuse and exploitation. In itself, career counselling can therefore become an effective response to target 8.7 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to "take effective and immediate measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the elimination and prohibition of the worst forms of child labour".

**How?** First, the delivery of career-related information and assistance can be organised in schools, TVET centres, job fairs as well as in informal, community-based and on-the-job training settings. Second, young people themselves should be encouraged to take part actively, both as direct beneficiaries (e.g. in writing up career plans, self-assessment forms, resumes) and facilitators (e.g. through peer-to-peer support, alumni networks and role models). This guarantees 'youth-led' approaches to guiding youth in employability interventions and simultaneously ensures that adult practitioners' conceptions and assumptions about youth, particularly job-seekers, are challenged. Third, professional coaching and job mentoring can be an opportunity for families and communities—as teachers, trainers and employers themselves—to demonstrate commitment to their sons' and daughters' progress and empowerment through sharing experiences and relevant work advice. In particular, the role of private sector actors—subject to a process of due diligence—is crucial. Companies are best positioned to fill in the skill and vacancy information gaps, provide insightful career advice, as well as traineeship, re-training and upskilling opportunities related to their core business needs.

## About Plan

Plan is a global children's charity. We work with children in the world's poorest countries to help them build a better future.

For over 75 years, we have been taking action and standing up for every child's right to fulfil their potential by:

- giving children a healthy start in life, including access to safe drinking water
- securing the education of girls and boys
- working with communities to prepare for and survive disasters
- inspiring children to take a lead in decisions that affect their lives
- enabling families to earn a living and plan for their children's future

Plan is independent, with no religious, political or government affiliation.



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## Where we work

Bangladesh, Benin, Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Dominican Republic, East Timor, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Laos, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor Leste, Togo, Uganda, Vietnam, Zambia, Zimbabwe

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