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The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Youth Employment

TRADE UNIONS AND TRADE IN AFRICA
AFCFTA
LES SYNDICATS ET LE COMMERCE EN AFRIQUE

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THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AfCFTA) AND YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

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List of Abbreviations

AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AU	African Union
EAC	East African Community
ECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICBT	Informal Cross-Border Trade
ICOYACA	Independent Continental Youth Advisory Council on AfCFTA
ITC	International Trade Centre
LRS	Labour Research Service
MSTCDC	MS Training Centre for Development Cooperation
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WAEMU	West African Economic and Monetary Union

Executive summary

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents opportunities to address the labour market challenges facing youth in Africa.

Estimates suggest that the AfCFTA can generate between 13 million and 16 million jobs. This is vital for the continent's youthful population to generate the demographic dividend that can accelerate economic growth, structural transformation, and sustainable development. The employment creation potential of the AfCFTA and the continent's demographic dividend potential offer an opportunity to address the persistent labour market challenges, including high unemployment and underemployment, pervasive informality, and decent work deficits faced by young people.

However, the positive outcomes of demographic dividend and the AfCFTA will not manifest automatically; many young Africans grapple with barriers to productive employment and entrepreneurship. Human capital deficits remain significant, including low levels of educational attainment, limited access to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and inadequate qualifications in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). In addition, structural barriers such as limited access to finance, technology, business development services, infrastructure, markets, and networks constrain the ability of young people and youth-led enterprises to take advantage of opportunities available in intra-African trade.

This brief argues that successfully harnessing the AfCFTA and Africa's demographic dividend will require deliberate interventions aimed at strengthening human capital development, expanding opportunities for decent work, and addressing the structural constraints facing young workers and entrepreneurs. It highlights the important role that trade unions can play in advancing youth-centred trade advocacy and ensuring that the benefits of continental integration contribute to inclusive and equitable development.

“Successfully harnessing the AfCFTA and Africa's demographic dividend will require deliberate interventions.

To this end, the brief makes four key recommendations for consideration by trade unions in Africa:

FOUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRADE UNIONS

1

Integrating youth employment and entrepreneurship into trade union advocacy on trade and the AfCFTA

2

Promoting human capital development among young people

3

Strengthening trade union advocacy on Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT)

4

Addressing the structural barriers facing young entrepreneurs

This policy brief argues that these initiatives are important entry points for advancing the rights and interests of young people within the AfCFTA while also contributing to the organising of young workers and the renewal of trade unions in Africa.



Photo: IndustriALL

Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents significant labour market opportunities for young people in Africa. Estimates show that the AfCFTA has the potential to generate between 13 million and 16 million jobs, while the expansion of intra-African trade in agri-food products can reduce employment vulnerability through large-scale job creation, entrepreneurship development, and the strengthening of value chains on the continent.[1] Such jobs and entrepreneurship prospects are vital given the severe labour market challenges facing African youth, including high levels of unemployment and underemployment, concentration in the informal economy, and pervasive decent work deficits. Just about 30% of the jobs required annually to absorb the number of young people entering the labour force are created in the formal sector.[2] Nearly one-third of 15–35-year-old Africans are engaged in vulnerable employment[3], i.e. are either own-account workers or engaged in contributing family work.

These labour market challenges point out the urgency of creating productive and decent employment opportunities for Africa's youth population, highlighting the importance of ensuring that young people are positioned to benefit from employment and entrepreneurship opportunities of the AfCFTA.

This policy brief seeks to promote youth employment and entrepreneurship in the AfCFTA by providing insights that support trade union advocacy on trade and the AfCFTA. It forms part of the efforts by the Labour Research Service (LRS) to enhance the capacity of African trade unions, including their youth structures, to engage effectively on trade and AfCFTA. It highlights the stylised features of labour market conditions of the youth in Africa, explores the continent's demographic dividend potential, examines the AfCFTA and its employment and entrepreneurship potentials, and proposes recommendations to support trade union advocacy.

POTENTIAL JOBS FROM THE AfCFTA

13–16

million jobs

the AfCFTA has the potential to generate, according to estimates

30% of the jobs needed each year for young labour market entrants are created in the formal sector

Source: ITC (2021); World Data Lab et al. (2026).

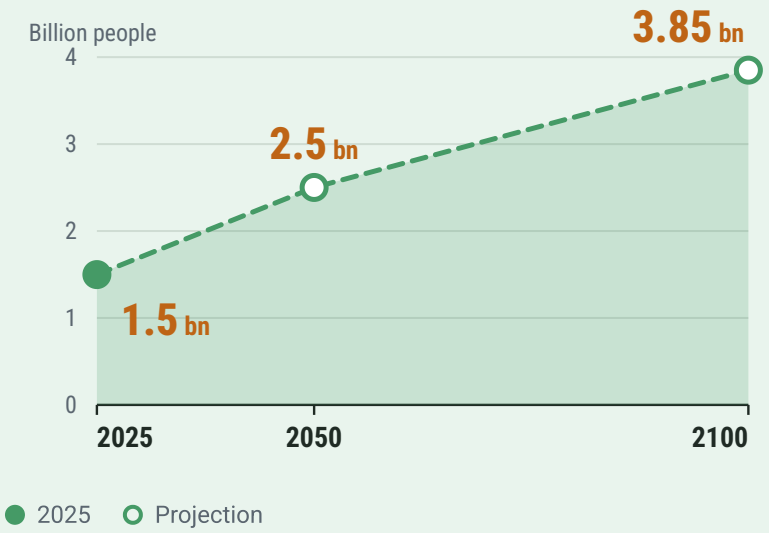


Africa's Potential Demographic Dividend

Africa's population structure and growth trajectory hold the potential to alter the continent's position in the world. In 2025, Africa had about 1.5 billion people, with the population projected to reach 2.5 billion in 2050 and 3.85 billion in 2100.[4] Analysis shows Africa's working-age population (15–64 years cohort) will be the world's largest labour force by 2040 and that the continent's demographic expansion, if harnessed through quality education, health investment and job creation, could underpin Africa's rise as the next major global growth pole.[5]

Africa has a large and growing young labour force.[6] According to the African Union (AU), the continent is home to the youngest population in the world, with more than 400 million people aged between 15 and 35 years.[7] This narrative is corroborated by the United Nations (UN), positing that with 70% of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) population under 30 years, Africa has the youngest population in the world.[8] Notably, the continent's median age is 19.8 years and 65% of the population is under age 25, and by the middle of this century, a third of the world's youth population is expected to live in Africa.[9]

Figure 1. Africa's population, 2025 to 2100



Source: Cilliers, *Demographics Thematic Futures* (ISS and African Futures, 2026).

By

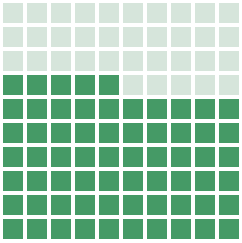
2040

Africa's working-age population (15–64 years) will be the world's largest labour force.

If harnessed through

- **quality education,**
- **health investment and**
- **job creation,**

this demographic expansion could underpin Africa's rise as the next major global growth pole.



65%

of the population is under age 25

19.8 yrs

the continent's median age

400m+

people aged between 15 and 35 years

Source: ITC (2021) and AfCFTA (2024) for median age and under-25 share; AU, *Youth Development* (n.d.) for people aged 15 to 35.

The African Youth Charter states that "Africa's greatest resource is its youthful population and that, through their active and full participation, Africans can surmount the difficulties that lie ahead".[10] Similarly, the International Trade Centre (ITC) has argued that Africa's youth bulge constitutes a comparative advantage, providing a productive and dynamic labour force characterised by energy, creativity, and a willingness to innovate.[11] The youth bulge, defined as a stage of development in which a nation successfully reduces infant mortality while maintaining a high fertility rate, resulting in a large proportion of the population consisting of children and young adults,[12] has the potential to generate a demographic dividend and yield economic and social gains in Africa.[13]

Demographic dividend results from changes in fertility and mortality levels that alter the age structure. Typically, characterised by a transition from high child dependency and relatively few older persons to a larger share of the working-age population, the demographic dividend starts when the growth rate of the labour force exceeds that of dependents; the resulting decline in dependency burdens can generate surplus resources for investment in economic development and improved family welfare.[14] A second demographic dividend arises as the population ages and individuals anticipate longer periods of retirement. At this stage, incentives to accumulate assets and increase savings become stronger[15] to guarantee financial security.[16] These resources can go into investments that raise national income[17]. In summary, while the first demographic dividend generates a temporary economic gain through a favourable age structure and lower dependency burdens, the second demographic dividend converts this advantage into accumulated wealth and assets that contribute to sustainable economic development.[18]

According to the UN, Africa's high number of young people is an opportunity for growth, provided these young people are empowered to realise their full potential.[19] Africa can harness a demographic dividend through accelerated economic growth driven by a rising working-age population, a tech-savvy population that pushes innovation, declining dependency ratios, and a massive market for goods, services, and digital platforms.[20] In essence, harnessing the youth bulge and its demographic dividends in Africa depends on economic growth and labour market efficiency.

> **Africa's greatest resource is its youthful population.**
>
> African Youth Charter (AU, 2006)

KEY CONCEPTS

DEFINITION

Youth bulge

A stage of development in which a nation successfully reduces infant mortality while maintaining a high fertility rate, resulting in a large proportion of the population consisting of children and young adults.

FIRST DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

A temporary economic gain

generated through a favourable age structure and lower dependency burdens.

SECOND DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

Accumulated wealth and assets

converted from the advantage of a favourable age structure and lower dependency burdens, contributing to sustainable economic development.

Youth and Labour Market in Africa

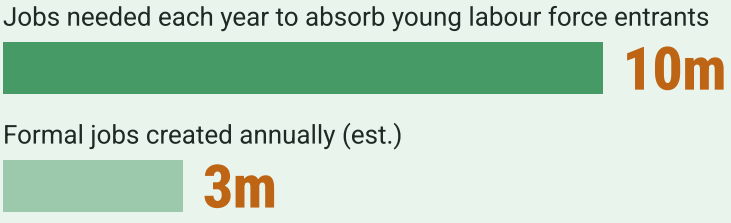
Despite Africa's demographic dividend potential, labour market outcomes among young people remain suboptimal. High youth unemployment and underemployment constitute a major socioeconomic and labour market challenge across the continent. It is estimated that 10 million jobs are needed each year to absorb the number of young people entering the labour force, yet only about 3 million formal jobs are created annually.[21] In 2019, around 13.4% of Africans aged 15–24 were unemployed, while nearly one-third of 15–35-year-olds were without employment.[22] In Southern Africa, youth unemployment averages 34.7%.[23]

Many young Africans in employment experience decent work deficits. Almost one-third of 15–35-year-olds are in vulnerable employment,[24] defined to include own-account workers and contributing family workers. Confronted with a dearth of formal employment opportunities, the majority of Africa's youth are compelled to eke out a living in the informal economy.[25] In 2022, around 98% of 15–29-year-olds in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) were employed informally.[26]

Across Africa, most young workers are in informal and low-paying jobs. Estimates show that out of Africa's 304 million young workers, 104 million live in households below the international poverty line.[27] Young Africans in the informal economy typically grapple with low wages, unsafe and exploitative working conditions, low productivity, and limited opportunities for skills acquisition and upward labour market mobility.

The poor labour market outcomes among young people reflect the structure and drivers of economic growth in Africa. Although many countries have recorded robust gross domestic product (GDP) growth over the past decades, this growth has not enabled structural transformation.[28] Growth has been driven by commodity exports, public expenditure, and low-productivity service sectors, rather than by labour-intensive manufacturing or modern, high-productivity services.[29] In addition, weak industrial base, fragmented regional markets, skills mismatches, and limited access to finance are pervasive, constraining the growth of youth-led enterprises in Africa.[30] This pattern of growth has limited the capacities of African economies to generate sufficient quality employment opportunities, causing job creation to lag behind the growth of the labour force and reducing the potential demographic dividend.[31]

Figure 2. The jobs gap: jobs needed each year and formal jobs created



Source: World Data Lab, Mastercard Foundation and Development Policy Research Unit (2026).

YOUNG WORKERS IN POVERTY

104m of 304m

young workers live in households below the international poverty line.



Each bar about 10 million young workers

Source: World Data Lab et al. (2026).



Photo: Rejoice Emmanuel/UNDP Zambia

Youth in Intra-African Trade

Intra-African trade plays an important role in the livelihoods of young Africans. It is estimated that informal cross-border trade (ICBT) provides income for about 43% of young people on the continent, with women accounting for about 70% of participants. ICBT's importance for the livelihoods of young people manifests in two main ways: direct income generation and contribution to employment creation. Traders purchase goods across borders and resell them in local markets, generating income through rapid turnover.[32] ICBT supports employment along the value chain, including transportation, loading, distribution, and market vending.[33] In essence, ICBT constitutes an important source of income and employment for young people, particularly those excluded from formal labour markets.

Nonetheless, young people face barriers in intra-African trade. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), infrastructure deficits, limited access to modern technologies and finance, unreliable electricity supply, and inadequate broadband connectivity constrain youth participation in cross-border trade.[34] Complex regulatory and compliance requirements further impede the ability of young entrepreneurs and traders to engage effectively in intra-African commerce.[35] In addition, policy frameworks prioritise formal trade, reinforcing economic structures that undervalue ICBT and leaving informal traders, particularly women and youth, vulnerable to exploitation and corruption at border crossings.[36]

43%

of young people on the continent get an income from ICBT (estimated)

70% of ICBT participants are women (estimated)



Africa's national borders. Illustrative: the map does not show specific trade routes or volumes.

ICBT SUPPORTS EMPLOYMENT ALONG THE VALUE CHAIN

Source: Kedir, Siwale and Kamara (2025)

Transportation → **Loading** → **Distribution** → **Market vending**

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

It is in this context that the AfCFTA is significant for African youth. The AfCFTA is the world's largest free trade area, bringing together 55 African countries and eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs).[37] According to the AU, the AfCFTA is to promote socioeconomic growth and development through, among other things, accelerating intra-African trade.[38] Its primary mandate is to establish a single continental market serving about 1.3 billion people, with a combined GDP of US$3.4 trillion.[39] The objectives of the AfCFTA are to boost intra-African trade, promote economic diversification, accelerate industrialisation, and contribute to broader development goals, including poverty reduction and the creation of decent work opportunities across the continent.[40] The protocols to the AfCFTA include:

1. Protocol on Trade in Goods
2. Protocol on Trade in Services
3. Protocol on Rules & Procedure on the Settlement of Disputes
4. Protocol on Investment
5. Protocol on Intellectual Property Rights
6. Protocol on Competition Policy
7. **Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade**

Among the protocols of the AfCFTA, the Protocol to the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area on Women and Youth in Trade (hereafter referred to as the Protocol on Women and Youth) holds particular significance for young people in Africa. It recognises that women and youth face systemic, structural, and financial barriers that constrain their meaningful participation in intra-African trade[41] and seeks to address these challenges by advancing pathways for the promotion and protection of the rights and interests of women and youth within the AfCFTA.



THE AfCFTA AT A GLANCE

55
African countries

8
Regional Economic Communities

1.3bn
people in a single market

US$3.4tn
combined GDP

Source: AfCFTA, *About The AfCFTA* (n.d.).

The objectives of the Protocol on Women and Youth

1. Support and enhance the effective participation of Women and Youth in intra-African trade
2. Improve the inclusion of Women and Youth in Trade in the implementation of the AfCFTA to achieve sustainable economic development at the national, regional, and continental levels
3. Strengthen the capacity of Women and Youth in Trade
4. Enhance access to opportunities for Women and Youth in Trade
5. Promote value addition and innovation for increased imports and exports by Women and Youth in Trade
6. Support the inclusion of women and youth into regional and continental value chains
7. Support measures that promote the formalisation of the trade activities of women and youth

The outlined objectives of the Protocol on Women and Youth are significant, targeting the structural constraints that limit the participation of women and young people in intra-African trade. Effective implementation of the Protocol has the potential to tackle the decent work deficits experienced by young people engaged in cross-border trade, including those involved in ICBT. According to the ECA, the implementation of the Protocol on Women and Youth in trade and the Protocol on Digital Trade can promote youth entrepreneurship and create jobs for Africa's youth.[42] By promoting greater inclusion, protection, and access to economic opportunities, the Protocol on Women and Youth can help ensure that the benefits of the AfCFTA are harnessed by youth and contribute to the realisation of demographic dividends in Africa.

The Independent Continental Youth Advisory Council on AfCFTA (ICOYACA)

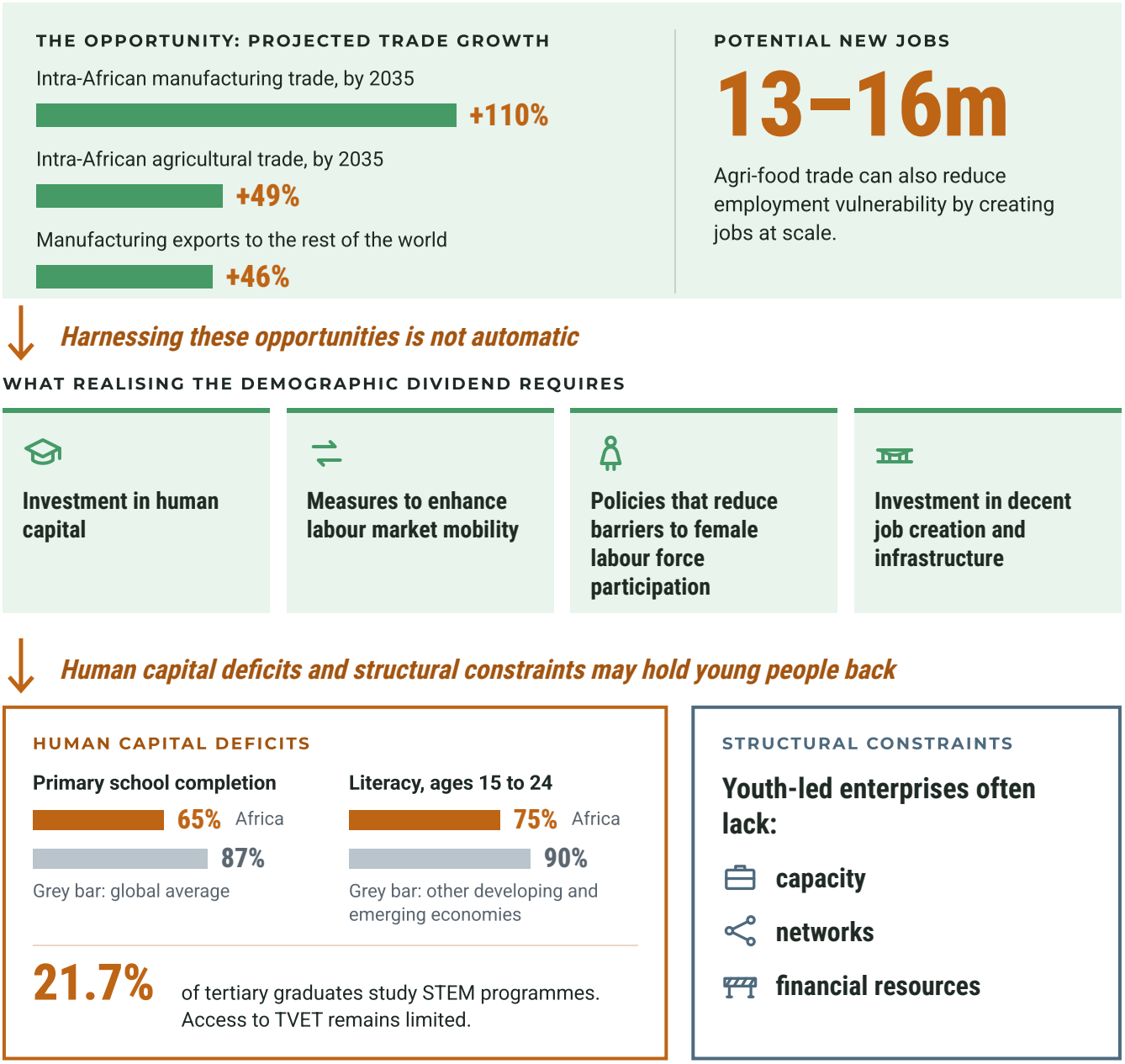
In addition to the Protocol on Women and Youth, the Independent Continental Youth Advisory Council on AfCFTA (ICOYACA) provides a platform for youth engagement on the AfCFTA. Established to facilitate the institutionalisation of youth participation in the decision-making and implementation processes of the AfCFTA, ICOYACA seeks to mobilise and empower young people to participate in intra-African trade.[43] The Council is affiliated with YouLead Africa, a joint initiative of the East African Community (EAC) and the MS Training Centre for Development Cooperation (MSTCDC). With representatives from each country, ICOYACA offers a valuable avenue for young people to influence AfCFTA implementation and trade policy development across the continent.

The AfCFTA and Youth Employment

As noted earlier, youth unemployment remains one of the most important socioeconomic challenges of African economies, making the opportunities presented by the AfCFTA particularly significant. The AfCFTA is expected to stimulate the production and distribution of goods and services, creating employment opportunities for young Africans. Among the sectors expected to benefit are manufacturing and agriculture.

World Bank estimates show that intra-African manufacturing trade is projected to increase by 110% by 2035, while manufacturing exports to the rest of the world are expected to rise by 46%.[44] Significant gains are also anticipated in agriculture, with intra-African agricultural trade projected to grow by 49% by 2035.[45]

Figure 3. The AfCFTA's employment opportunity, and what decides whether young people benefit



Source: ITC (2021); UNFPA (n.d.); Mpako, Balongo and Ghambi (2026); UNESCO, AU and UNICEF (2025); UN (n.d.); ECA (2023).

The output expansion expected under the AfCFTA has the potential to generate substantial employment opportunities. As mentioned earlier, estimates suggest that the AfCFTA could create between 13 million and 16 million new jobs.[46] Beyond increasing the quantity of jobs, the AfCFTA also has the potential to improve the quality of employment. As noted earlier, growth is anticipated in agricultural and manufacturing sectors. In particular, the expansion of intra-African trade in agri-food products can reduce employment vulnerability by creating jobs at scale, stimulating entrepreneurship, and strengthening value chains in Africa.[47]

The AfCFTA and Africa's demographic dividend present a dual opportunity for economic growth and employment expansion on the continent. However, harnessing these opportunities is not automatic. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), while the demographic dividend offers a window of opportunity for economic growth, its benefits may not be realised.[48] Harnessing the demographic dividend can be constrained by inadequate investment in decent job creation and infrastructure development.[49] Realising its full potential requires investments in human capital, measures to enhance labour market mobility, and policies that reduce barriers to female labour force participation.[50]

Yet, available data point to human capital inadequacies among young people in Africa. These inadequacies are reflected in low educational attainment, as well as insufficient qualifications and skills required for industrial and modern economies. Estimates show that primary school completion rate in Africa is about 65%, compared to a global average of 87%, while literacy rate among young people aged 15 to 24 is about 75%, lower than the 90% recorded in other developing and emerging economies.[51] A joint publication by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the AU notes that access to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) remains limited on the continent, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.[52] Available data also show that only 21.7% of tertiary education graduates study Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programmes.[53] Such educational outcomes raise concerns about the ability of African youth to fully harness the opportunities presented by the AfCFTA, particularly in sectors such as agro-processing and manufacturing, where significant job growth is expected.

In addition to the above, there are structural challenges that may limit the ability of young people to benefit from the opportunities presented by the AfCFTA. The ECA has noted that youth-led enterprises on the continent often lack the capacity, networks, and financial resources needed to seize economic opportunities.[54] These structural constraints, combined with human capital deficits, may hinder young people's ability to take advantage of the employment and entrepreneurial opportunities expected to arise from the expansion of intra-African trade under the AfCFTA.



Nortec vocational school, Zambia. Photo: Volvo Group

Policy Options for Trade Unions

Over the past decades, efforts to renew African trade unions have involved organising young workers, including those engaged in the informal economy. Many trade unions have established departments and structures to advance the rights and interests of young people within trade unions, workplaces, and society. This approach positions the challenges and opportunities facing young people within the AfCFTA as a trade union concern, requiring deliberate policy and organisational responses. Consequently, this paper makes the following recommendations for consideration by trade unions:

OPTION 1

Integrating youth employment and entrepreneurship into trade unions' trade and AfCFTA advocacy

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that neither the demographic dividend nor the benefits of the AfCFTA will materialise automatically. Therefore, trade unions, in pursuit of ambitions to promote and protect the rights and interests of young workers of the continent, need to integrate youth employment and entrepreneurship issues into their AfCFTA advocacy and engagement strategies. This will require continental, regional and national trade union youth structures to explore opportunities to collaborate with youth-led organisations such as the ICOYACA to ensure that the voices of young trade unionists are reflected in youth campaigns on trade and the AfCFTA. Such collaboration can strengthen advocacy efforts through alliance-building, knowledge sharing, and enhanced youth participation in trade policy discussions.

OPTION 2

Promoting human capital development

Trade union campaigns aimed at promoting youth employment and entrepreneurship within the AfCFTA should prioritise human capital development. Particular attention should be given to investments in TVET, STEM education, and apprenticeship programmes to ensure that young people acquire the skills and competencies needed to seize the employment and entrepreneurial opportunities available within the AfCFTA. This will also require engaging with education authorities on elevating the status of TVET qualifications to be comparable with traditional academic qualifications and providing incentives that encourage young people to pursue vocational training pathways.

OPTION

3

Strengthening advocacy for ICBT

Given the concentration of young people in ICBT, trade union advocacy on trade and the AfCFTA needs to pay attention to the challenges faced by young cross-border traders, particularly precarious working conditions and administrative barriers. This requires promoting social dialogue between trade authorities, border management agencies, and young traders, with a focus on simplifying border procedures and facilitating trade. Such efforts would not only protect the rights and interests of young workers engaged in ICBT but also create opportunities for trade unions to organise and represent the youth.

OPTION

4

Addressing structural barriers facing young entrepreneurs

Trade union advocacy on trade and the AfCFTA should also be broadened to address the structural challenges confronting young entrepreneurs. These include limited access to finance, business networks, markets, information, and capacity-building opportunities. Trade unions can advocate for policies and programmes that improve access to these resources, thereby enabling young people to seize economic opportunities of the AfCFTA and participate more effectively in intra-African trade.

Conclusion

This policy brief adds to the resources produced by the LRS to support trade union advocacy on trade and the AfCFTA. It focuses on promoting youth employment and entrepreneurship within the AfCFTA, as a response to the pervasive labour market challenges facing young people on the continent. The brief argues that the AfCFTA and Africa's demographic dividend potential together present a dual opportunity to accelerate economic growth, expand employment, and advance sustainable development.

However, the realisation of these opportunities is not automatic. Persistent human capital deficits and structural constraints that have limited young people's ability to take advantage of existing economic opportunities may also undermine the capacity of the AfCFTA to promote labour market efficiency and improve employment outcomes, particularly for young workers. Addressing these challenges is critical to ensuring that intra-African trade translates into meaningful and inclusive gains for Africa's youth.

This brief makes a case for incorporating youth issues into trade union campaigns on trade and the AfCFTA. While the recommendations presented in this brief are by no means exhaustive, they provide entry points for promoting the rights and interests of young people within the AfCFTA. Importantly, such initiatives can also contribute to organising young workers, thereby supporting trade union renewal and strengthening the future of the labour movement on the continent.

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