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Beyond Hustle:

Youth Entrepreneurship and the Green Jobs Future in Africa

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1.Executive Summary

This youth-led continental study synthesises findings from a trilogy of interconnected papers that each delve into critical aspects of youth development in Africa. The research explores: (1) Meaningful Youth Participation in governance and policymaking; (2) Youth Entrepreneurship and Green Jobs; and (3) Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). Conducted across 14 African countries and implemented by 27 young researchers, the study amplifies diverse youth perspectives gathered through surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews. The findings underscore persistent systemic barriers, financial exclusion, misaligned education systems, sociocultural stigma, bureaucratic constraints, and political tokenism that impede young people's ability to contribute to sustainable development. Key insights reveal strong youth interest in entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic independence, emerging but limited awareness of green jobs, widespread myths and stigma hindering SRHR uptake, and largely symbolic participation in formal decision-making spaces.

The trilogy proposes cross-cutting recommendations: expanding youth-friendly finance and entrepreneurship education; institutionalising youth representation with enforceable accountability; scaling comprehensive, culturally sensitive SRHR education and services; and leveraging digital platforms and intergenerational dialogue to amplify youth co-creation. These evidence-based recommendations are aligned with the AU–EU Joint Vision for 2030 and aim to transform youth insights into impactful policy and programming, recognising young Africans as active co-designers of their futures rather than passive beneficiaries.

Thus, this paper spotlights youth entrepreneurship, a critical pathway to economic empowerment for young Africans. For comprehensive insights into related areas, readers are encouraged to explore the accompanying papers focusing on Meaningful Youth Participation **https://restlessdevelopment.org/?s=research** and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights **https://restlessdevelopment.org/?s=research**, which together offer a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing youth across the continent.

2. Research Design and Methodology

This study is a continental youth-led research initiative that employed a mixed-methods, participatory design grounded in Restless Development's six-step youth-led methodology. The overarching aim of the research was to inform advocacy priorities guiding regional and cross-continental efforts related to the AU-EU partnership, with a particular focus on identifying the needs, obstacles, and priorities of young Africans under the AU-EU Joint Vision for 2030, which emphasises investment, peace, health, climate action, and youth inclusion (African Union & European Union, 2022).

A systematic literature review informed the identification of three key thematic areas: meaningful youth participation in policymaking, youth-led entrepreneurship, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). These areas were selected to address identified gaps and challenges, and to contribute evidence for continental Youth Power Hackathons focused on youth-led accountability, campaigning, and advocacy.

Overall Objective: To explore the role of meaningful youth participation in policymaking, youth-led entrepreneurship, and reproductive health initiatives in advancing Africa's socioeconomic development.

Specific Objectives

- Analyse how youth participation in policymaking and implementation contributes to socioeconomic development in African countries.
- Investigate the contribution of youth-led entrepreneurship to economic growth and diversification.
- Examine the influence of cultural and societal norms on access to and use of modern contraceptive methods among young adults.
- Propose strategies to accelerate youth participation in decision-making on reproductive health, entrepreneurship, and public policy for sustainable development.

Data collection occurred across 14 countries,[1]and was conducted in English, French, and Arabic to ensure inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. The research team, comprised of 27 young researchers who co-designed research instruments, led fieldwork, and ensured contextual appropriateness throughout the process. Data collection methods included 98 focus group discussions (n=955), 151 key informant interviews with civil society representatives, business leaders, and healthcare professionals, and 1,463 survey responses (722 women, 741 men) as indicated by Figure 1. The targeted age for the research was 15-35 years.

Country	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Grand Total
Burkina Faso	52	81	7	140
Burundi	33	74	2	109
Cameroon	49	43	17	109
Ghana	50	55		105
Kenya	46	54	2	102
Nigeria	91	57		148
Senegal	20	15		35
Sierra Leone	45	49	7	101
South Sudan	55	60	1	116
Tanzania	52	54	1	107
Tunisia	19	18		37
Uganda	46	74	12	132
Zambia	92	15		107
Zimbabwe	72	43		115
Grand Total	**722**	**692**	**49**	**1463**

Figure 1: Survey reach disaggregated by gender

Qualitative data were analysed inductively using NVivo software to identify emergent themes, while quantitative data were summarised using descriptive statistics in Excel. Ethical safeguards were rigorously implemented, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, using age-appropriate approaches, and carefully addressing power dynamics, particularly in SRHR-related contexts

[1] Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

Limitations

While the study acknowledges limitations such as uneven rural coverage and its cross-sectional design (which limits causal inference). Digital data collection and local partnerships helped mitigate this gap; the cross-sectional design limited causal analysis, focusing instead on associations and trends. Additional funding would enable broader geographic representation and longitudinal exploration. The tri-lingual, youth-led approach strengthens its validity by centring lived experiences, enhancing triangulation, and generating actionable evidence to inform AU–EU policy and youth-centred programming. This approach not only ensures the inclusion of diverse voices but also enhances the relevance and applicability of the findings for policymakers and stakeholders alike, ultimately contributing to more effective and youth-responsive interventions.

1. Introduction

The youth population in Africa is growing rapidly, comprising a significant share of the continent's total population. While this youth bulge offers incredible potential for economic growth and social development, African youth encounter numerous challenges that hinder their well-being and limit their opportunities for advancement.

Youth unemployment rates in Africa are among the highest globally, and many young people struggle to secure stable, decent-paying jobs. In Zimbabwe, 28.9% of youth aged 15-35 are unemployed, and nearly half of youth aged 18-35 (46%) are actively seeking jobs (World Bank, 2025). Many young people in West Africa enter the labour market early, often without completing sufficient education or acquiring adequate skills, which limits their employment opportunities and upward mobility (Statista, 2024).

Factors contributing to this challenge include rapid population growth, inadequate educational opportunities, and a mismatch between youth skills and labour market demands (World Bank, 2020). In addition, despite progress in expanding access to education in many African countries, significant disparities persist, particularly in rural areas and among traditionally marginalised populations (Spectator Africa, 2025). Poor infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and financial barriers prevent many youths from accessing quality education, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020).

Efforts to avert youth unemployment in Africa through entrepreneurship have gained significant momentum as both governments and the private sector recognise entrepreneurship as a key solution to job creation and expanded economic opportunities for young people.

African youth are increasingly choosing entrepreneurship over traditional employment, driven by limited formal job opportunities and supported by expanding entrepreneurial ecosystems that provide funding, mentorship, and training programs tailored to youth needs (Afybc, 2025).

The AU-EU partnership has actively addressed youth unemployment by prioritising entrepreneurship as a key vehicle for sustainable development. Central to these efforts is the Africa-Europe Youth Academy (AEYA), which invests €50 million in formal and informal learning, leadership skills, and networking for youth. It includes components promoting youth mobility, training, mentoring, and youth-led local events, all aimed at unlocking young people's potential to become change agents (African Union, 2025).

Entrepreneurship is also a vital part of the AU-EU approach to the green transition. The partnership supports African entrepreneurs, startups, and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) developing innovative solutions in clean energy, sustainable agriculture, recycling, and other environmentally friendly sectors, including Oulu in West Africa, WiseCool in Kenya,[1] and OneGrid Energies Nigeria[2]. Support comes in the form of funding, mentorship, business incubation, and access to European and African markets. By empowering entrepreneurs, the AU-EU partnership stimulates local innovation, creates jobs, and drives community-based solutions tailored to Africa’s unique challenges and opportunities (European Commission, 2000).

2. Understanding of Youth Entrepreneurship and Green Jobs

Youth entrepreneurship is vital for innovation, job creation, and economic diversification in Africa (Agyapong & Boateng, 2017; World Bank, 2020). This study confirms its key role in innovation-led sustainable development across 14 countries.

Young people view entrepreneurship as real-world problem-solving rooted in their everyday challenges.

"There are problems, and a businessman is basically someone who sees a problem in society and finds a way to solve that problem, and basically, we pay for that person to solve that problem for us." **Male Respondent, Nigeria.**

It's also seen as a means of achieving financial autonomy. For example, in Cameroon, some young people describe it as their only pathway to personal and economic freedom. A female respondent echoes this statement:

"My understanding of youth entrepreneurship is that nowadays, youths are trying their best to create sources of income for themselves. This could involve selling items around campus, which can help achieve financial independence. I think youth entrepreneurship encompasses all the efforts made by youths to achieve some degree of financial or economic autonomy." **Female respondent, Cameroon.**

Many youths aim to contribute to the African economy through sustainable and environmentally friendly businesses. A Senegalese male key informant explained;

"Today, several young people are producing paving stones from plastic or industrial waste. Not only are they reducing waste accumulation, but they are also employing young people to manufacture, transport, and install these paving stones. This type of initiative helps combat environmental degradation while providing sustainable professional opportunities."

Green jobs are viewed through the lens of nature-based roles, tech-driven opportunities, and the circular economy. The innovation-driven understanding of green jobs was most nuanced in Tunisia. In focus groups, participants described green jobs as essential solutions to real-world environmental problems, highlighting local initiatives and the shifting role of big corporations towards sustainability. One female respondent from Tunisia explained:

"Green startups have become increasingly essential because of the growing need for sustainable solutions. These startups address challenges such as pollution, recycling, and food waste. Even big companies like Apple are starting to go green, trying to reduce their electronic waste. In Tunisia, NGOs and small businesses, particularly in the fashion sector, are doing remarkable work. There's even a brand that makes clothes from cactus-based materials!"

For many, green ventures are platforms for innovation and social impact. The green economy was described by a female respondent from Burundi as;

"The green economy, as I understand it, includes all economic activities that generate income while also respecting the environment. It's about earning a living without causing environmental harm, and the green economy should go beyond just avoiding damage; it should also actively protect and improve the environment."

In rural contexts, youth see green jobs through the lens of farming and agribusiness. As a male rural-based respondent from Kenya put it:

[2] Developed solar-powered cold storage units for rural clinics, preserving vaccines and medicines for over 3,000 people
[3] Makers of OnePlastic, a solar lantern made from recycled bottles, enhancing health and livelihoods in rural areas

What I understand about the green economy is how we can use agriculture to make money. Anything dealing with agriculture, how it can bring money to young people without hurting the environment.

However, youth entrepreneurship, particularly within the green economy, faces several challenges that limit its impact.

3. Challenges and Barriers to Youth Entrepreneurship.

Key themes are categorised into five barriers: skills and knowledge gaps, financial barriers, psychosocial and motivational constraints, social and identity-based exclusion, and structural barriers.

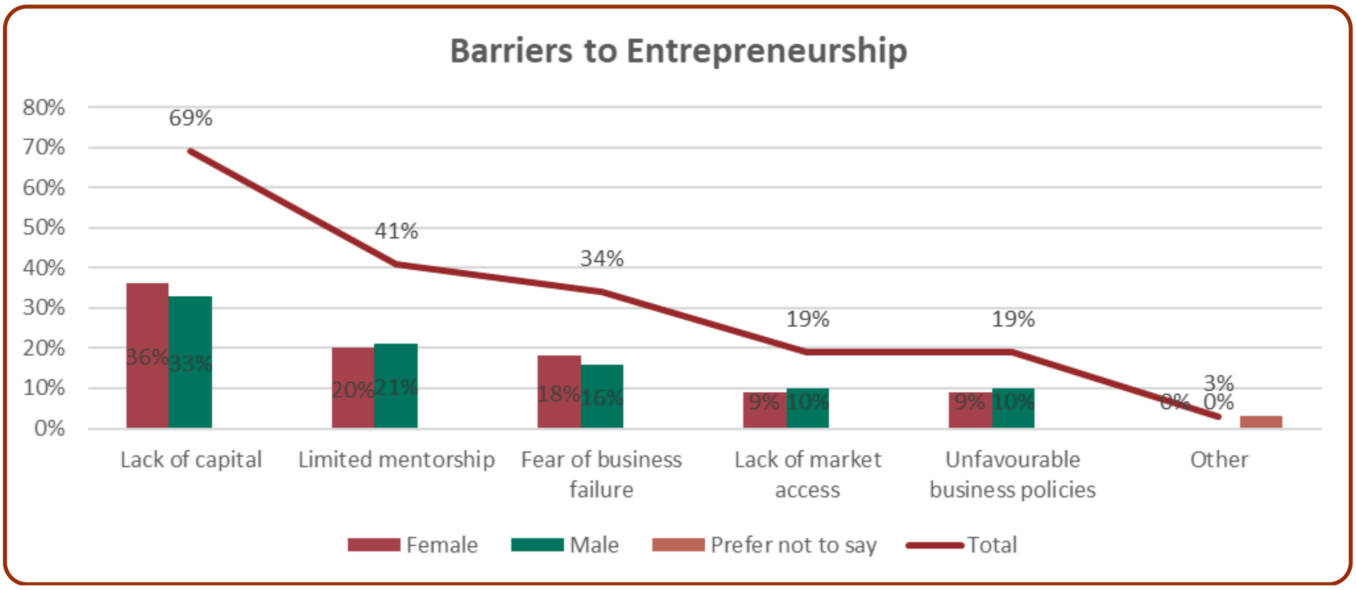


Figure 2: Barriers to Entrepreneurship disaggregated by gender

Figure 2 indicates that slightly more young women lack the capital to venture into business and fear business failure. The literature suggests that gender pay gaps and family commitments may limit women's wealth accumulation. Legal rights to property and ownership may also be restricted in some contexts. Additionally, financial institutions and investors often require collateral or matched investments, which women may struggle to provide, compounded by gender stereotypes that question women's ability to be entrepreneurs (Enterprise Research Centre, 2014). This financial barrier often leads women to choose businesses with lower growth potential.

3.1 Financial Barriers

Access to finance emerged as the most widely cited constraint facing young people seeking to start or grow their businesses. This finding was consistently echoed across both qualitative and quantitative data sources, underscoring the centrality of funding limitations in youth entrepreneurship challenges.

In interviews and focus group discussions, young respondents repeatedly emphasised that the lack of capital is a fundamental barrier. Many young people struggle to afford the initial start-up costs, especially in green enterprises that require substantial investments in equipment and infrastructure. These costs are prohibitive, particularly for those from rural areas or low-income backgrounds.

Loan access is also severely restricted across the 14 countries. Respondents reported that banks and other formal financial institutions often demand collateral or impose strict credit conditions, which young entrepreneurs, who typically have little to no assets, are unable to meet. This has led many youths to perceive that formal financial systems are not designed with them in mind.

High costs associated with business certification and licensing continue to hinder the growth of enterprises offering green products and services.

Grants and public financing mechanisms were frequently described as highly competitive and limited in scope. Youth experiences in Burundi exemplify this limitation through programs such as "Programme d'Autonomisation Economique et d'Emploi des Jeunes" (PAEEJ). The PAEEJ, or Program for the Economic Empowerment and Employment of Youth, was launched by the Government of Burundi in April 2021 to combat youth unemployment. With over 50% of the population aged 15 to 35 and approximately 400,000 young graduates unemployed, the program provides vocational training in fields such as baking, motorcycle mechanics, welding, and audiovisual production (Data from FGDs). It also promotes entrepreneurship and aims to integrate youth into the workforce to boost economic growth. While beneficial, the overwhelming demand for the PAEEJ's support underscores the broader challenge that youths face in accessing limited, competitive public resources for financial empowerment.

Sustaining a business can be challenging due to limited funds for essential services, such as legal and accounting services. Broader issues, such as economic instability and inflation, hinder long-term planning. In Nigeria, poor digital infrastructure and unreliable payment systems obstruct operations in the digital economy. In countries like Zimbabwe, institutional inefficiencies exacerbate these challenges, leaving youth frustrated by the lack of coordinated support from resource allocation agencies.

Additionally, in countries like Nigeria, young entrepreneurs in sectors such as renewable energy have reported being burdened by high import taxes. For example, solar panels, which are categorised under Heading 8501[1], are subject to import charges, including duties of up to 10% and Value-Added Tax (VAT). Even though these businesses address pressing environmental challenges, the high taxes effectively erode incentives to innovate.

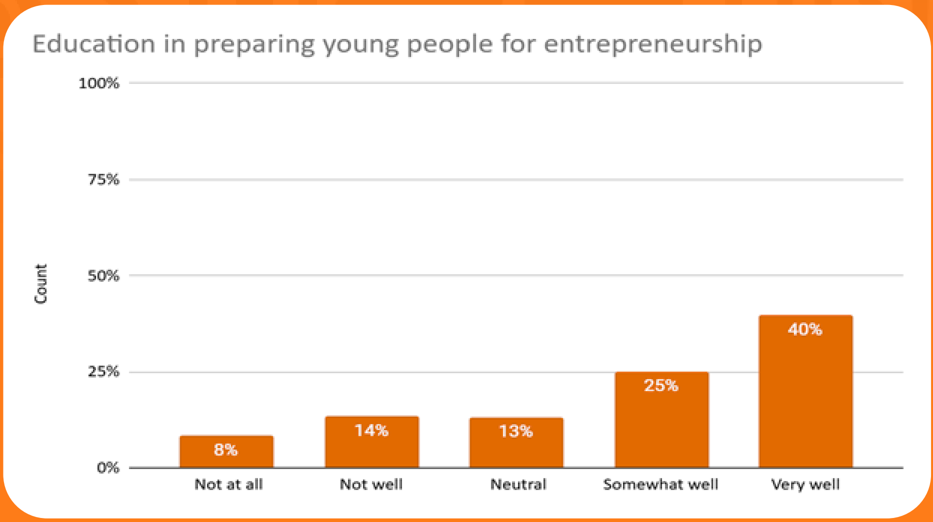
Figure 3: Barriers to youth entrepreneurs

These qualitative accounts are supported by the survey data, which reinforce the dominance of financial barriers among youth entrepreneurs, as indicated in Figure 3. The close alignment between these two figures confirms the strong role that financial exclusion plays in shaping youth entrepreneurship outcomes. The data collectively demonstrate a complex array of financial constraints that impede not only the establishment of businesses but also the sustainability and scalability of youth-led ventures across the continent.

3.2 Skills and Knowledge Gaps

A critical barrier identified by youth across all 14 countries is the persistent gap in relevant entrepreneurial skills and knowledge. This challenge manifests across both traditional business sectors and emerging fields, such as green jobs and the gig economy. The research reveals a significant disconnect between formal education systems and the practical needs of entrepreneurship, with only 40% of respondents reporting that their education adequately prepared them for business ventures (see Figure 4).

[4] "Heading 8501" refers to electric motors and generators, including photovoltaic generators (solar panels) that convert sunlight into electrical energy. Such items often include additional equipment like controllers or inverters to supply usable power directly to devices or systems



A critical barrier is the persistent gap in relevant entrepreneurial skills and knowledge. The research reveals a significant disconnect between formal education systems and the practical needs of entrepreneurship, as one Zimbabwean male respondent emphasised.

Figure 4: Education as a means to prepare young people for entrepreneurship (Survey data)

> *I believe we should incorporate more practical experiences into every subject that is essential for starting a business. Instead of focusing excessively on theory and reading, we should emphasise practical applications and real-life examples. For instance, having a simulated shop or a mock company could provide us with a better understanding of what it's truly like to run a business. By emphasising practical aspects, we would be better prepared to think critically when we enter the real world.*

This skills gap represents a fundamental constraint on youth entrepreneurship, limiting both business creation and sustainability across diverse economic sectors.

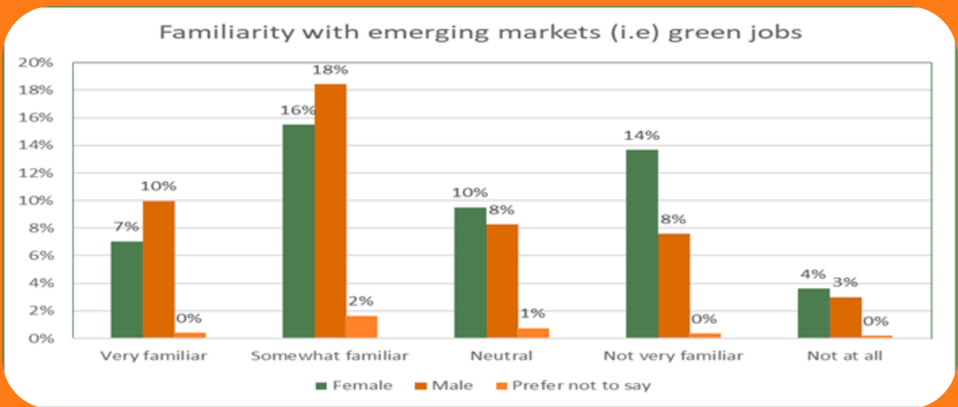


Figure 5: A gender comparison of familiarity with emerging markets (Survey data).

Another finding from this research is the knowledge gap among young individuals concerning emerging green jobs and evolving markets. The data indicate that only 17% of the sampled youth are aware of opportunities in green jobs and changing markets, as illustrated by Figure 5.

Figure 5 also highlights significant gender differences in self-reported familiarity with green job opportunities in emerging markets. Male respondents show higher familiarity, with 10% "very familiar" and 18% "somewhat familiar," for a total of 28%. In contrast, 7% of female respondents are "very familiar" and 16% "somewhat familiar," totalling 23%. Additionally, women are nearly twice as likely as men to be "not very familiar" with these opportunities (14% vs. 8%). This indicates a gender gap in awareness of green job prospects, suggesting women may face greater informational barriers in accessing opportunities in the green economy.

Moreover, language barriers further compound skills and knowledge gaps. In countries like Burundi, the prevalence of business resources and support documents written mainly in French or English has the unintended effect of excluding rural or less educated youth from accessing crucial information and support systems, since they mostly understand their native language, Kirundi.

The absence of mentorship also emerged. Youth noted the lack of access to experienced business mentors or networks, especially within the green economy, leaving them without critical guidance on identifying market opportunities or navigating early-stage business challenges.

Figure 6: Barriers to starting a business in emerging markets, Survey data

The survey data strongly amplify the qualitative insights. When asked about barriers to starting a business in emerging markets, responses are summarised in Figure 6. Rather than identifying a single dominant issue, the findings illuminate a broader structural challenge.

Young individuals are entering entrepreneurial environments without the essential foundational skills, contextual knowledge, or support systems requisite for success. The interplay of skill shortages, limited access to practical guidance, and the lack of mentorship frameworks constitutes a cumulative barrier that restricts youth entrepreneurship across the continent.

3.3 Structural and Institutional Barriers

The research revealed that the regulatory and institutional environment poses significant challenges for young entrepreneurs. Many youths described the process of starting a business as slowed by bureaucratic inefficiencies, citing delays in licensing and approvals from agencies, with the Burundi Development Agency being a typical example. These procedural hurdles increase the time and cost of launching ventures, discouraging many from formalising their businesses.

Poor infrastructure, including frequent electricity outages and unreliable transportation, frequently disrupts business operations, especially for those involved in green product supply chains, where consistent supply and logistics are crucial.

Examples mentioned included organic farming, waste collection and recycling, compost distribution, and sustainable packaging initiatives, all of which rely heavily on timely transportation and reliable access to energy to maintain product quality and operational flow. Moreover, informal youth-led businesses often face legal obstacles and lack official recognition, limiting their ability to access formal financial support or scale effectively.

Survey findings in Figure 7 indicate unfavourable policies and strict regulations, as 16% of respondents identified unfavourable business policies as a primary barrier to starting a business, and 16% pointed to government regulations as a key challenge in emerging markets.

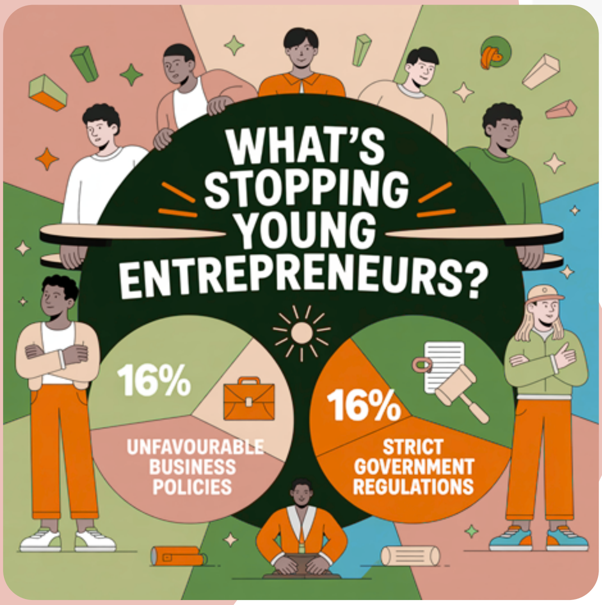


Figure 7: Challenges being faced by young people in starting businesses

The percentages indicate that nearly one in six young entrepreneurs perceive policy and regulation as major impediments.

This alignment between bureaucratic obstacles and weak policy highlights a critical gap. Despite policies ostensibly aimed at supporting youth entrepreneurship, many young people experience these frameworks as restrictive rather than enabling. The findings suggest that institutional support mechanisms lack the responsiveness and efficiency needed to meet the dynamic needs of youth-led startups, particularly in emerging sectors such as green entrepreneurship.

One young Nigerian male captured this layered frustration, particularly in the digital and e-commerce space, stating:

"It's hard, it's almost as if everything is working against us, mostly as Nigerians."

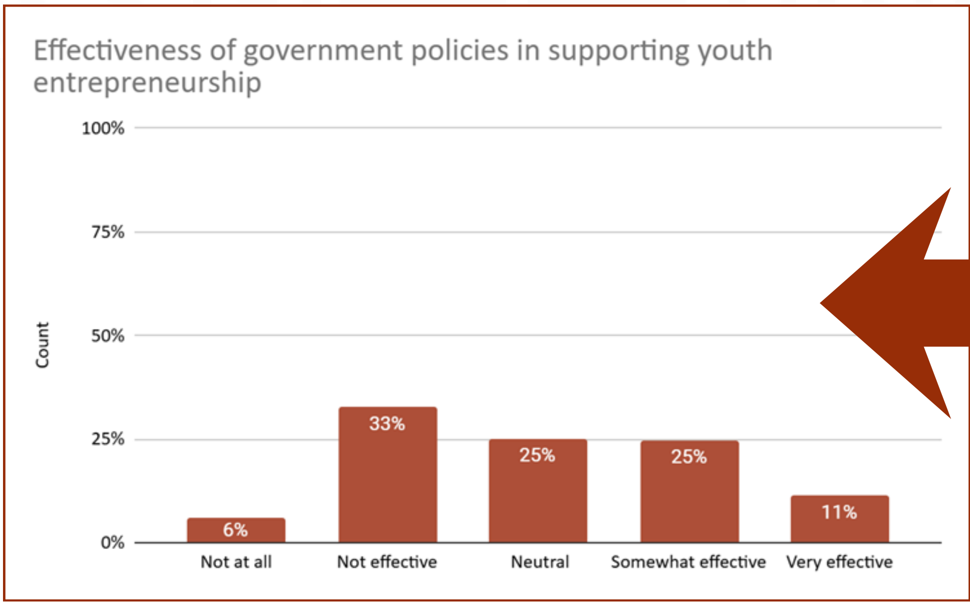
This pattern underscores the systemic and interconnected nature of challenges in youth entrepreneurship.

3.4 Motivational Constraints and Lack of Trust

Even in contexts where opportunities and resources are present, a lack of trust and motivational factors continue to limit youth engagement in entrepreneurship. The qualitative data reveal that many young people are held back by low confidence and emotional fatigue stemming from systemic challenges.

Youth across the 14 countries often fear failure, as indicated by 20% of respondents, primarily due to the financial risks of starting a business. The potential loss of limited resources and the fear of public embarrassment deter them from pursuing entrepreneurial ventures. This fear is intensified by a lack of local role models and success stories, making it hard for young individuals to view entrepreneurship as a viable or appealing option.

Arguably, external systemic barriers deeply influence these motivational and trust constraints. A widespread perception of weak institutional support and ineffective policies significantly demotivates youth entrepreneurs across the 14 countries. Young people deemed current government policies as ineffective in supporting youth entrepreneurship; only 11% of respondents rated them as "very effective", as indicated by Figure 8.



This lack of trust in government efforts reinforces a sense of abandonment and discourages entrepreneurial risk-taking.

Figure 8: Effectiveness of Government Policies in Supporting Youth Entrepreneurship (Survey data)

3.5 Social and Identity-Based Exclusion

Social identity and cultural norms create additional barriers to youth entrepreneurship, particularly for young women. They often face discrimination when accessing credit, negotiating deals, and working in male-dominated fields such as construction and renewable energy. These biases diminish their confidence and limit their opportunities, making it more challenging to start or sustain businesses.

Youth with disabilities also experience exclusion due to inaccessible infrastructure and limited inclusion in mainstream entrepreneurship programs. Their needs are often overlooked, leaving them without adequate support or resources to participate meaningfully in the business space.

Cultural and familial expectations further discourage entrepreneurship. In many communities, business is not seen as a viable career path. Youth consistently reported feeling pressured to pursue academic degrees rather than business ventures, leading to a lack of encouragement and support from their families during the early stages of entrepreneurship.

These barriers highlight how social exclusion, gender norms, and cultural perceptions continue to shape and constrain youth entrepreneurship.

4. Factors Contributing to the Growth of the Economic Sector through Youth Entrepreneurship

To understand how youth entrepreneurship impacts economic growth, it's essential to distinguish between two key concepts: drivers and enablers. Both are crucial in shaping this relationship, but they function differently.

Drivers are the forces that motivate and inspire young people to pursue entrepreneurship. Drivers serve as motivating forces or catalysts whose actions and leadership push initiatives forward, influence outcomes, or create impact (Capstera, 2025). These may include the need for employment or a desire for independence. Drivers answer the question: "What pushes young people to become entrepreneurs?"

Enablers of youth entrepreneurship include access to skills development, digital tools, finance, mentorship, market exposure, and supportive policies. They address the question: "What helps young entrepreneurs succeed and contribute to the economy?"

Ultimately, drivers create need and momentum, while enablers provide the foundation and tools for youth entrepreneurship to thrive, making both essential contributors to unlocking inclusive economic growth.

4.1 Drivers of Youth Entrepreneurship

4.1.1 Necessity-Driven Youth Entrepreneurship in response to unemployment.

Across Africa, the combination of unemployment and poverty drives youth entrepreneurship, pushing many young people to create innovative solutions to economic challenges. With few formal job opportunities, necessity often ignites creativity and ambition (ILO, 2020; World Bank, 2019). In a survey of 10 out of 14 countries, respondents indicated that the quest for stable employment fuels a new generation of entrepreneurs who develop ventures to meet immediate community needs.

When discussing their motivations, a male participant from Burkina Faso noted, "Some individuals are motivated by passion, while others are compelled by unemployment," highlighting the interplay of aspiration and necessity in entrepreneurship as suggested by Klyver et al., 2013. A female participant from Tanzania also shared her perspective.

"*I sell vegetables at the market. On occasion, I prepare and sell mandazi[1] in the morning. These activities enable me to support myself and my younger brother."*

The intersection of economic pressures and educational aspirations is therefore a powerful driving force behind business ventures.

4.1.2 Availability of Entrepreneurship Programs

With 40% of young people feeling that education prepares them "very well" for entrepreneurship, learning spaces play a vital role. Universities in Tunisia, Burkina Faso, and Ghana not only provide higher education but also host innovation pitch competitions and ecological hubs, supporting the growth of young entrepreneurs. A female respondent from Burundi remarked that "schools now teach basic entrepreneurship." This curriculum integration, together with programmes such as PAEEJ in Burundi and the MacDan Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge in Ghana, further enhances support for aspiring entrepreneurs.

[5] is a type of sweet fried bread or doughnut-like pastry from East Africa, made from dough typically including flour, sugar, yeast, milk (often coconut milk), and spices like cardamom, then deep-fried to a fluffy texture

4.1.3 Digital Platforms for E-commerce

In recent years, digital platforms have transformed the entrepreneurial landscape for youth in Africa (Ajide & Osinubi, 2023). These platforms lower barriers to entry for young entrepreneurs by offering significant cost advantages, enabling startups to thrive with little to no initial investment and reduced tax burdens. A male respondent from Burundi noted, "Online sales are profitable at the moment, because they are less costly and there is no tax to pay." This shift to digital commerce has created accessible pathways for aspiring entrepreneurs and boosted the growth of youth-led enterprises amid economic challenges.

4.1.4 Potential in the Emerging Markets (Green Economy and Gig Economy)

The emergence of the green economy has provided fertile ground for this new wave of innovators, who are motivated by a blend of personal ambition, social responsibility, and environmental consciousness (Gangiah, 2024). When respondents were asked about their motivations for starting ventures in the green economy and, more broadly, in youth entrepreneurship, their responses revealed a rich tapestry of inspiration and determination.

A male respondent from Sierra Leone shared, *“Yes, I have thought of that…just that it can only happen when there are available opportunities for such. I got my inspiration from my passion for a safe environment.”*

Meanwhile, a Nigerian Female respondent said, *“Seeing the impact of plastic pollution and knowing that millions of women lacked access to safe menstrual products pushed me to develop a biodegradable alternative made from plant-based fibre.”*

Another youth from Burundi shared, *“Passion for art and nature drove me to address waste and demand for unique products.”*

Through this research, it became clear that enthusiasm for green job entrepreneurship is further supported by UNDP-backed initiatives, such as the Néré Project in Burkina Faso, which has empowered young people to engage in green entrepreneurship. Echoing these qualitative insights, survey results reveal that 47% of young people “agreed” that emerging markets, such as green jobs, provide viable opportunities for entrepreneurship.

4.1.5 Financial Independence

Eight of the 14 countries stated that they pursue youth entrepreneurship to achieve financial independence and address real-life challenges. Across these countries, young people repeatedly emphasised that financial autonomy is essential for their entrepreneurial ambitions. As a female respondent from Cameroon asserted, *“We cannot do anything if we are not financially independent.”* Similarly, a male respondent from Ghana noted, *“young people want to be financially independent while solving real-life challenges.”* These testimonies reveal how the desire for self-sufficiency and a determination to create solutions in their communities inspire many young Africans to embark on entrepreneurial ventures.

4.1.6 Interpersonal Skill Development. (Value for oneself and others)

Young entrepreneurs emphasised that the success of their entrepreneurial journeys relied on commitment to developing interpersonal qualities, such as self-awareness, resilience, patience, and, crucially, an orientation toward creating value for others. For instance, a female respondent from Cameroon described *“the importance of focus and self-awareness, emphasising the need to stay committed to personal goals.”* In Burkina Faso, another female respondent noted, *“in business, you must remain resilient and have courage. Never give up when you care about something.”* Patience was repeatedly underscored by a female respondent from Sierra Leone, who explained, *“Starting a business requires patience.”*

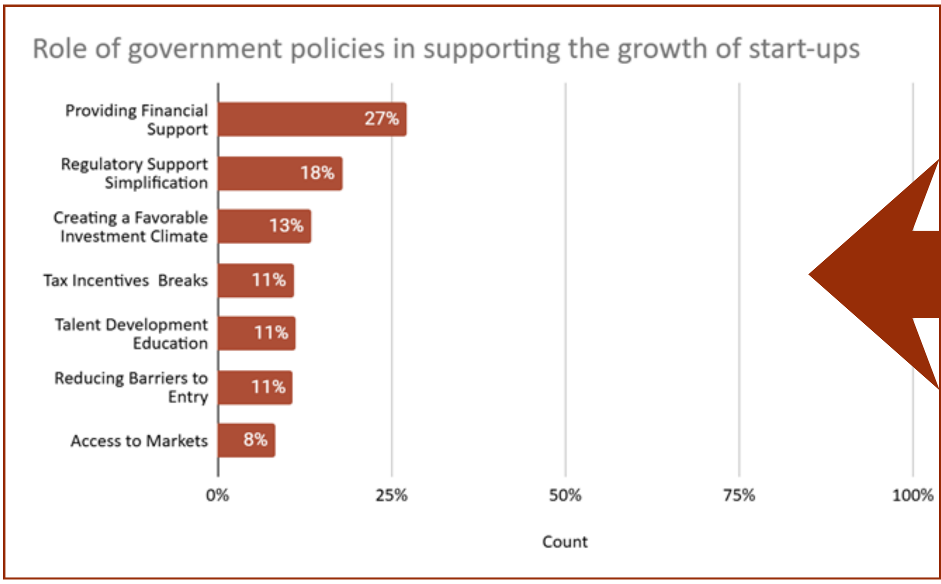
Significantly, the most striking insight was the realisation that entrepreneurship is not only about personal success but also about benefiting the wider community. A male respondent from Ghana reflected, *"The biggest takeaway has been learning how to create value for others using your skills, and how that, in turn, creates value for you."* This perspective highlights a vital lesson: by focusing on solving real problems and serving others, young business owners have found that their growth and opportunities multiply.

This indicates that while many young people are still learning about green jobs and emerging markets, there is evident enthusiasm and confidence in their potential. Youth recognise green jobs as promising opportunities for entrepreneurship and economic growth, even if their current knowledge about these fields is limited. This optimism suggests a strong foundation for future engagement and investment in green sectors.

4.2 Enablers of Economic Sector Growth through Youth Entrepreneurship

4.2.1 Financial Empowerment

Financial empowerment is crucial for youth entrepreneurship and broader economic growth across 14 countries. Young people emphasise the need for access to funding, financial independence, and investment literacy to build sustainable businesses. Empowering youth through mechanisms like youth-friendly funding schemes and green financing has been argued to increase the likelihood of establishing viable enterprises that contribute to local economies. Support measures such as tax relief and reduced import duties for green startups are also seen as essential. Quantitative data shows that 22% of young people identified access to funding as the most beneficial support, while 27% ranked financial support as the key government contribution to startup development. (see Figure 9).



These insights are indicative that financial empowerment plays a pivotal role in fostering individual entrepreneurial endeavors and promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Figure 9: The role of government in supporting the growth of start-ups

Furthermore, academic insights confirm that perceived access to finance significantly strengthens young people's entrepreneurial attitudes, abilities, and intentions, particularly in contexts where financial literacy is also promoted (Svotwa et al., 2022). Similarly, literature from a multi-country study across Africa highlights the positive link between financial inclusion and youth-led firm creation, emphasising that accessible financial services can enable more young people to enter and thrive in the entrepreneurial space (Ajide, 2020).

4.2.2 Entrepreneurship Education as a Foundational Enabler

Entrepreneurship education is essential for economic growth, especially as youth in the 14 countries call for practical, experience-based learning. They advocate for African education systems to prioritise skills such as digital literacy, vocational training, and business development to help students create income-generating ventures and drive innovation. This approach aligns with findings from Gwija, Eresia-Eke, and Iwu (2014), which emphasise that practical entrepreneurship education enhances youth readiness and business success. The need to strengthen and destigmatise vocational training was highlighted, with young people insisting that it should be valued alongside academic degrees and tailored to labour market demands. Svotwa et al. (2022) support the notion that aligned education fosters entrepreneurship.

Youth also emphasised integrating innovation and entrepreneurship into education, proposing the creation of Innovation Labs, Maker Spaces, and green initiatives that foster creativity and sustainability. A demand for more inclusive learning environments was clear, where students can experiment with ideas and access mentorship, believing that aligning education with entrepreneurial skills can unlock Africa's economic potential.

4.2.3 Policy and Institutional Support

Across the 14 countries studied, young people unanimously emphasised that effective policy and institutional support are essential enablers of youth entrepreneurship and, by extension, broader economic growth. Quantitative insights substantiated the need for targeted support. Figure 10 captures youth views on the government's role in supporting start-ups, indicating clear priorities for both regulatory streamlining and financial assistance.

Figure 10: Role of Government in Supporting Start-ups

Respondents primarily cited financial support (27%) and access to funding (22%) as the most beneficial forms of support. Although less explicitly mentioned, the overall importance of policy and ecosystem development was strongly implied through these consistent calls for more enabling environments.

The call for policy changes aligns directly with recommendations from the UNCTAD[1]/Commonwealth Policy Guide on Youth Entrepreneurship, which advocates simplifying business registration, integrating entrepreneurship into education policy, and offering incentives for youth-led and environmentally friendly start-ups (Mugione et al., 2023; OECD, 2017).

Literature indicates that young people call for the creation of engagement platforms that enable them to actively participate in shaping policy, access mentorship opportunities, and connect with support systems, being recognised as partners rather than mere beneficiaries (Blackburn & Gamble, 2024).

[6] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

Therefore, targeted and youth-responsive policy and institutional reforms are not just supportive measures; they are foundational catalysts for sustainable economic transformation. By empowering youth entrepreneurship through policy and institutional enablers, governments can convert youth innovation into tangible engines of national development.

4.2.4 Exposure and Capacity Strengthening

To accelerate economic growth, the full potential of youth entrepreneurship must be unlocked with exposure and strategic partnerships. Across all 14 countries, young people emphasised these elements as vital to scaling ideas into sustainable ventures with broader economic impact. This viewpoint aligns with the UNDP Youth Co: Lab initiative report (2023), which states that exposure to entrepreneurship ecosystems through national strategies, training, and international partnerships significantly enhances youth's capacity to contribute to inclusive economic growth.

Youth show creativity and entrepreneurial ambition but face gaps in networks, mentorship, and international exposure. Strategic partnerships, especially public-private collaborations like telecom-backed innovation hubs, are crucial for addressing these gaps. They provide resources, facilitate knowledge transfer, and connect young entrepreneurs to opportunities. Aspyee (2022) emphasises that structured industry placements and private-sector partnerships equip youth with skills and networks often lacking in traditional education.
The research findings indicated that 19% of youth prioritise business training and mentorship, and 15% emphasise market access opportunities. Exposure to fundamental market dynamics, relevant data, and insights is a crucial enabler for youth entrepreneurship in emerging markets.

The OECD titled "Unlocking the Potential of Youth Entrepreneurship in Developing Countries: From Subsistence to Performance" (2017) highlights that a lack of market intelligence and strategic advice hinders young entrepreneurs' competitiveness. International collaborations, cross-border learning, and participation in regional platforms are deemed vital for adapting to evolving economies and enhancing business resilience. Literature argues that increased visibility, capacity building, and confident market entry enable youth-led enterprises to drive innovation, create jobs, and integrate African economies into regional and global value chains (Obuya & Moronge, 2022).

4.2.5 Media, Awareness Building, and Social Acceptance

Media, infused with storytelling and entertainment, significantly shapes youth perceptions of entrepreneurship (Edoro, 2023). Respondents across 14 countries affirmed the media's vital role in transforming perceptions and building support for youth-led innovation. Highlighting both successes and real-world challenges through "edutainment" is crucial for awareness and understanding emerging sectors. Participants emphasised leveraging visual and digital platforms, particularly for sustainability-focused ventures. Effective social media use enhances visibility and brand appeal (Europe et al., 2025). Digital literacy training and collaborative content creation are needed to amplify reach. Simplifying complex ideas and partnering with media professionals is recommended. Technology, paired with digital branding, helps overcome market barriers (Mumi et al., 2025) and attract support, thereby normalising youth participation.

[6] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

5. Recommendations

Recommendations	AU–EU Joint Vision Pillar(s)
1. Incentivise youth-led green entrepreneurship through tax relief, green financing, and support for eco-innovations in sectors like agriculture, recycling, and renewable energy.	Green Transition & Energy Access
2. Integrate green skills, environmental stewardship, and climate entrepreneurship into all levels of formal and informal education.	Green Transition & Energy Access
3. Promote youth-driven digital media and storytelling to highlight green economy opportunities and shift mindsets towards sustainability.	Green Transition & Energy Access
4. Expand youth access to funding via youth-friendly grants, accessible loan facilities, and targeted investment literacy programs.	Economic Integration & Investment
5. Embed practical, market-driven entrepreneurship education and destigmatise vocational training in secondary and tertiary curricula.	Economic Integration & Investment
6. Simplify business registration and regulatory processes for youth-led enterprises and foster public-private partnerships for market access.	Economic Integration & Investment

6. Conclusion

This research highlights the significant potential of youth entrepreneurship to drive economic growth and sustainable development across Africa, particularly in emerging sectors like the green economy. Young people demonstrate a nuanced understanding of entrepreneurship, linking it to problem-solving, financial independence, and societal contribution. Their perspectives reveal a pragmatic approach to business, shaped by lived experiences and local challenges. Entrepreneurship is viewed as a means to address community needs, foster innovation, and create employment opportunities, aligning with broader trends in the literature (Agyapong & Boateng, 2017; World Bank, 2020).

Notably, there's a growing recognition among youth of green jobs and eco-innovations as viable entrepreneurial avenues. From recycling industrial waste to solar energy initiatives, young people are actively identifying and utilising these opportunities as dual mechanisms to tackle environmental degradation while creating sustainable livelihoods. This demonstrates awareness and enthusiasm for aligning entrepreneurship with climate action.

Barriers to Youth Entrepreneurship

Despite this entrepreneurial drive, numerous barriers constrain youth's ability to translate ideas into sustainable ventures. Financial barriers emerged as the most significant constraint, encompassing both access to start-up capital and long-term business sustainability. Young entrepreneurs face prohibitive start-up costs, limited collateral for loans, high import duties, and complex licensing requirements. These barriers are often amplified for young women, who encounter gender-based biases and restrictions on property ownership, highlighting structural inequities (Enterprise Research Centre, 2014).

Skills and knowledge gaps also limit entrepreneurial success. While education is valued, it is often overly theoretical, insufficiently practical, and poorly aligned with real-world business contexts. Youth report limited exposure to entrepreneurial training, financial literacy, proposal writing, and market research, as well as inadequate guidance on emerging sectors like green jobs. Furthermore, mentorship deficits and language barriers limit access to knowledge and resources, particularly for rural and less educated youth. Without practical skills and supportive networks, young entrepreneurs struggle to navigate the complexities of launching and sustaining viable businesses.

Structural and institutional constraints further compound these challenges. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, weak regulatory frameworks, and poor infrastructure create an environment where young entrepreneurs must contend with delays, inconsistent electricity, unreliable transportation, and limited market access. These systemic barriers undermine confidence, dissuade the formalisation of enterprises, and exacerbate the risk-averse mindset prevalent among young people. Motivational and psychosocial factors, including fear of failure, low confidence, and limited visibility of role models, further restrict engagement in entrepreneurial activities.

Youth perceive government policies as largely ineffective, with only a minority rating them as supportive, reflecting the need for responsive, youth-centred policy frameworks. Social and identity-based exclusion also persists, with women, youth with disabilities, and culturally marginalised groups facing discrimination and limited encouragement. These combined structural, motivational, and social barriers demonstrate the multifaceted nature of challenges confronting youth entrepreneurship and highlight the need for comprehensive, integrated interventions.

Drivers and Enablers of Youth Entrepreneurship

The research identifies key drivers and enablers that can catalyse youth entrepreneurship and, by extension, economic sector growth. Employment necessity and financial independence are primary motivators, encouraging youth to develop innovative solutions in contexts of high unemployment. Additionally, the availability of entrepreneurship programmes, digital platforms for e-commerce, and opportunities in emerging markets, especially green and gig economy sectors, further incentivise entrepreneurial activity.

The findings reveal that youth are motivated not only by economic necessity but also by the desire to create social value, address environmental challenges, and develop interpersonal skills such as resilience, patience, and self-awareness. These drivers highlight the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that shape youth entrepreneurial behaviour, as well as the potential of youth-led ventures to make meaningful contributions to economic development.

Enablers play a key role in transforming entrepreneurial potential into sustainable outcomes by providing essential resources and support. Financial empowerment through youth-friendly loans, grants, and investment education is fundamental. Entrepreneurship education with practical, market-driven curricula equips youth with the skills they need, while policy support streamlines processes and fosters engagement. Exposure, capacity strengthening, and strategic partnerships enhance access to markets and mentorship. Media initiatives also shift societal perceptions and promote youth participation in entrepreneurship.

Partnerships and Integrated Approaches

The findings reinforce the partnership between youth entrepreneurship, green job creation, and sustainable economic growth. They emphasise the vital importance of adopting integrated approaches that combine financial, educational, institutional, and societal support mechanisms. The AU-EU partnership's focus on renewable energy, green skills development, and youth empowerment closely aligns with the aspirations and capacities of young African entrepreneurs.

By fostering youth-led innovation, expanding access to resources, and creating supportive policy environments, stakeholders can unlock Africa's youth as a driving force for inclusive economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social transformation. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that targeted interventions addressing both barriers and enablers can make youth entrepreneurship – particularly in the green economy – a powerful lever for economic development, job creation, and long-term societal resilience across the continent.

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