



## POST COVID-19 ECONOMIC RECOVERY: LEVERAGING THE YOUTH POPULATION TO BUILD BACK BETTER.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world in 2019, which later spread to Africa in 2020, the pandemic resulted in unprecedented cases of severe illness and death in a magnitude not experienced before. This led to a strain in Africa's public health systems and caused socio-economic crisis, indiscriminately affecting lives and livelihoods of millions of people. At the peak of the outbreak, Africa, through the [Africa Joint Continental Strategy for COVID-19 Outbreak](#), embarked on enhanced synergies in the efforts deployed by governments, development partners, multilateral partners, and the private sector to strengthen surveillance, prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and control of COVID-19.

However, while the cautionary measures and strategies were effective in curbing the surge and flattening the curve of COVID-19 cases, they also presented new realities that left millions of young people at a disadvantage. With the introduction of curfews, lockdowns, and the work-from-home measures, many young people were impacted heavily by closure of educational institutions; pay cuts and job losses from organizations and companies that scaled down particularly those in transport and the tourism sectors; micro, small and medium enterprises were equally hard hit by the low purchasing power resulting in low and irregular earnings; and the interruption of recreational and leisure activities. The socio-economic disruption has reversed the hard-won economic and social gains, and impacted on the ability of many young people who have had to make due with a shrunken disposable income and a high cost of living, aggravating existing vulnerabilities and pushing most of them back to poverty.



To sustainably manage the shocks of the devastating pandemic by seeking innovative solutions to build back better, harnessing Africa's demographic dividend –the youth is inevitable. The need to empower the youth to identify, co-create and design the socio-economic recovery strategies that allow them to meaningfully participate and contribute to the bounce-back strategies, cannot be overemphasized.

Africa must expand the avenues for inclusive inter-generational approaches to the recovery efforts to mitigate compounding existing inequalities. This calls for deliberate action in key areas of health interventions, education, decent jobs opportunities, favorable business environment, and access to knowledge and information.

In advancing health interventions, Africa has employed innovative strategies by the youth to achieve speed and scale in the vaccination drive. Several pathways such as the [African Union COVID-19 Vaccination Bingwa Initiative](#), have focused on the last-mile interventions to accelerate the uptake of COVID-19 vaccination. The Bingwas initiative executed by building networks of youth champions across the continent to lead community-based responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, has proved effective as more and more young people take the lead as front-line responders in the fight against the pandemic.

The initiative has demonstrated the relevance of deliberate efforts to ensure the youth are fully involved, lead, and make direct attributable contribution to the last mile communication, advocacy and delivery of vaccines right where the people are. Beyond the health aspect of saving lives, the campaign drive for increased uptake of vaccines, has had a positive impact on the social and economic perspective as more countries have lifted the restrictions and allowed the resumption of free movement, education, trade and businesses informed by the high vaccine coverage and reductions in hospitalization and death from COVID-19 infections

To fully harness the demographic dividend of the youth to save lives and livelihoods, the innovativeness of the young people must be utilized. This will help to advance the medium and long-term objective of strengthening health systems on the continent under the established [Africa New Public Health Order](#), to create decent jobs, increase imports within and from the continent, increase productivity, and to promote inclusive sustainable development.

Without youth inclusion in COVID-19 economic recovery efforts, Africa is building on sinking sand. In echoing the words of Dr. Chiamaka Nwachukwu while delivering the plea of many young people at the Africa Investment Summit on Health 2021, "there must be a shift from the conversation where young people are seen as leaders of tomorrow and heirs of existing structures to one where we see them as collaborators and co-owners in the present."

## AFRICA'S NEW PUBLIC HEALTH ORDER IS A WATERSHED MOMENT FOR MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT.

The implementation of [the New Public Health Order for Africa](#) that seeks to safeguard the health and economic security of the continent opens viable opportunities to engage the youth as strategic partners under its five pillars focused on:

- ✔ Strong African Public Health Institutions that represent African priorities in global health governance and that drive progress on key health indicators;
- ✔ Expanded Manufacturing of Vaccines, Diagnostics, and Therapeutics to democratize access to life-saving medicines and equipment;
- ✔ Investment in Public Health Workforce and Leadership Programs to ensure Africa has a fit-for-purpose health workforce it needs to address health threats;
- ✔ Increased Domestic Investment in Health, including the domestic mobilization of financial resources, human capital, technical resources, and networks; and
- ✔ Respectful, Action-Oriented Partnerships to advance vaccine manufacturing, health workforce development, and strong public health institutions.

**To effectively advance the bold new public health order, African leaders and stakeholders must strategically partner with the youth to leverage their innovation, creativity, labor and resourcefulness. This calls for structural reforms to decisively address existing and emerging challenges of access to finance; investments in skilled labor force; technology and knowledge transfer, Intellectual Property Rights, and responsive policies.**

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, available [data](#) shows that of the 420 million youth aged between 15 and 35 in Africa, majority were unemployed, had insecure jobs or were in casual employment. The data further shows that close to 11 million youth enter the job market each year, but only 3 million formal jobs are created annually. The lack of paying jobs push youth into the informal sector, where jobs are typically less stable and have lower wages. Long spells of youth unemployment or vulnerable employment permanently lower their future productive potential. With the socio-economic disruption due to Covid-19, the situation has been aggravated. However, it is not all doom and gloom, there are avenues to recover and build back better.

Africa is keen on investing in the manufacturing ecosystem beyond fill-and-finish to include production throughout the value chain. Pharmaceutical products are currently manufactured in a few countries -South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco and Egypt-, with the continent incurring a heavy import burden of over 80% of pharmaceutical and medical consumables. Data shows that the level of development of pharmaceutical manufacturing system in Africa is minimal with an estimate of only 38 countries engaged in pharmaceutical manufacturing and mostly in the final formulation and packaging of the drugs.



The pharmaceutical industry is a capital intensive sector and access to finance for young people remains a challenge. However, there are avenues to integrate the youth in the industry by harnessing both their digital and non-digital innovation in the value chain. Massive opportunities lie in supporting industries that provide raw materials and inputs, including active and inactive ingredients for vaccines and other consumables such as the production of vials, sterile bottles, syringes, masks, rubber stoppers, among other items. The [Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Plan for Africa](#) (PMPA) emphasizes multi-stakeholder collaboration and encourages the procurement of medical products from Africa-based companies. Digital innovation such as cross-border payment services and online tracking systems of logistics and supply of drugs and equipment across borders to prevent counterfeits, will elevate the youth from micro to macro businesses. Existing digital innovations such as the [Africa Medical Supplies Platform](#) (AMSP) platform demonstrates the importance of advancing innovations. The online platform designed to enable speed and scale in COVID-19 prevention and containment measures, revolutionized the ways of identifying manufacturers, sourcing, procurement, distribution, and payment for critical medical equipment by authorized African government entities at the peak of the pandemic.

As Africa looks at increasing domestic resource mobilization and implementing the commitment to allocate 15% of their national budgets to the health sector, the spending of the budgets must include direct benefits to the youth such as decent salaries for health workers including community health workers as a means to stem the brain-drain from the continent, and indirect benefits such as the allocation of a percentage of procurement of goods and services to the youth. The budgets must equally be directed at investments in protecting intellectual property rights to advance the “Made-in-Africa” efforts.





In advancing partnerships towards vaccine manufacturing and health workforce development, young people must be at the centre stage to benefit from training and skills development and accelerated technology transfer. Expanding access to technology and leveraging opportunities in the digital economy will close the gaps in the widening inequalities aggravated by the pandemic.

A shift is necessary in reviewing education, training and skills development ecosystem to make it responsive and fit-for-purpose to the labour market demands. Incentives to attract the youth must be put in place to stimulate a knowledge economy that increases the appetite for the growth of the 4th Industrial Revolution. This equally calls for a mindset shift from the overreliance on white collar jobs, to creating a generation of entrepreneurs and employers in the blue collar job sector. Over 86% of all employment on the continent is in the informal sector, a backbone of economic activity.

Recently (March 2023), Rwanda received infrastructure to set up the first mRNA vaccine production facility in Africa. The facility is expected to produce 50 million doses per year and conduct trials on new therapeutics for malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDs as well as cancer. The latest developments have been received with optimism, particularly by young professionals who are eyeing the opportunities in the facility, but also those who see opportunities for business through tradable goods and services.

In addition to production linked investment, a favorable business environment that allows the youth to establish sustainable enterprises is critical. Infrastructural investment in transport systems, energy, ICT, among other services will support low cost production and modern production techniques. The African Continental Free Trade Area also provides an opportunity to remove Non-Tariff Barriers and allow young people to benefit from a wider market from the intra-African trade. The nexus between efforts to build back better and infrastructure development are evidenced through challenges experienced in ensuring the transportation of the COVID-19 vaccines from the factories to health facilities without any degradation in efficacy or safety.

Further, addressing policy incoherence will improve competitiveness and allow young people to produce goods and services that are able to compete favorably on the continental and global levels.

The young people have demonstrated zeal to lead and contribute to sustainable transformation on the continent devoid of tokenism. To achieve the Africa-led ambitious new public health order, intergenerational collaboration in the design and implementation of policies and actions to build back better post the COVID-19 pandemic are inevitable.

Visit [www.africacdc.org/](http://www.africacdc.org/) to learn more about how Africa CDC strengthens the capacity and capability of Africa's public health institutions as well as partnerships to detect and respond quickly and effectively to disease threats and outbreaks, based on data-driven interventions and programmes.

For further information, please contact

**Dr. Chrys Promesse Kaniki** | Senior Technical Officer for Strategic Programmes | Africa CDC | E-mail: [kanikic@african-union.org](mailto:kanikic@african-union.org) | [www.africacdc.org](http://www.africacdc.org) | Addis Ababa | Ethiopia

Directorate of Information and Communication | African Union Commission, E-mail: [DIC@african-union.org](mailto:DIC@african-union.org) | Website: [www.au.africa](http://www.au.africa) | Addis Ababa | Ethiopia

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