

Youth-Focused Programs and Peace-Building: A Policy Framework for Sustainable Employment and Security in Kenya

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000437>

Received: 07 September 2025; Accepted: 14 September 2025; Published: 14 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Unemployment among the youth has been an issue of serious concern on peace and security in Kenya and thus there is need to explore available programs and international best practice. This article examines the success of existing youth-oriented programs in Kenya and compares them with other jurisdictions. The comparison with the other jurisdiction then offers a policy framework on how Kenya can engage youth sustainably. By analyzing programs like the National Youth Service (NYS) in Kenya and the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in Nigeria, as well as innovative projects such as agricultural programs and blue economy projects, this paper finds gaps in the existing policy frameworks. The study reveals that despite the existence of individual program, Kenya does not have a coordinated government policy that will help in effective school to employment transitions. The results indicate that a multi-sectoral model that takes into consideration the extended education, development of skills, agricultural modernization and formal working opportunities can greatly increase the involvement of youth thus decreasing the level of threats to security. This framework deals with expected issues about economic reasons that would either support or not support the economic feasibility. The support or non-support uses arguments of cost-of-inaction and multifaceted resource mobilization. Moreover, the suggested model includes certain protection against political capture with the help of multi-stakeholder forms of governance and evidence-based monitoring systems.

Keywords: youth employment, peacebuilding, security, public policy, Kenya, comparative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Kenya is faced with a big challenge on how to deal with the youth unemployment issue that cannot be limited to economic factors only but also considers the issue of excluding the elements of peace and security. The Kenyan demographic composition, which is typified by a great number of youth, offers chances as well as challenges to the national growth and stability. The current statistics show that about 67 percent of the Kenya population is composed of people under 30 years old but the rate of unemployment among these youth is continuously growing (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). As a result, such a condition leads to the creation of conditions that can cause social instability, crimes and vulnerability to extremist recruitment.

The relationship that exists between youth unemployment and security threats has been reported in different contexts in different parts of the world. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the fact that unemployment is a vulnerability factor, not a causal factor of radicalisation. Studies indicate that the idle youth population can be susceptible to the enticement into criminal organizations and terror groups especially where the available good economic prospects are still limited (Urdal, 2012). Furthermore, a study conducted by Mercy Corps (2015) in Kenya confirms that certain groupings of youth marginalization and the entry into extremist groups are very much correlated, and the economic grievances, when compounded with social exclusion, provide the environment in which the radicalization process can take place.

More so, the available youth-oriented programs in Kenya such as the National Youth Service (NYS) have tried to solve these predicaments by training skills and providing temporary jobs to youth. However, because such programs have low capacity compared to the magnitude of youth unemployment, it is possible to conclude that the current strategies are not enough. Although the NYS has been able to work with thousands of the youth in a

year, it can only accommodate a small percentage of youth who have finished secondary education annually (Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs, 2022). Moreover, this low capacity of intake implies that millions of young Kenyans are not enrolled in formal structures of engagement, whereby many of them are now back in the same socio-economic statuses when they were enrolled in these programs.

Thus, this paper considers international best practices in youth programming and considers alternative ways that can be used to inform policy making in Kenya. The analysis will involve the analysis of the National Youth Service Corps of Nigeria, state level youth programs and innovative sectoral programs such as agricultural and blue economy programs. The comparative analysis is determined to avoid policy tourism by deriving principles as opposed to copying whole programs, and the adaptation strategies are clearly formulated to suit the Kenyan realities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth Unemployment and Security Connection

The theoretical framework connecting the issue of youth unemployment and security problems has been one of the areas that have been given serious attention in academic literature. As shown by Collier and Hoeffler (2004), the larger the number of unemployed young men in a country, the higher the threat of conflict and instability, which has a special relevance to Kenya because the youth bulge population is proportional to the lack of formal jobs in the country. Nevertheless, their analysis is mostly based on the aspects of civil conflicts, which might not necessarily be appropriate to understand the delicate security issue in Kenya, especially on the context of terrorism and petty crime.

Using this as the starting point, Mercy Corps (2015) offers more contextually aligned analysis based on the research specifically carried out in Kenya. In their research, they highlight that there are high correlations between youth marginalization and their recruitment to extremist organizations, with economic grievances, together with social exclusion, developing the conditions that are favorable to radicalization. However, although this study shows distinct correlations, it can exaggerate the importance of economic issues in the radicalization processes and that ideological and social exclusion factors may well be overshadowed by material deprivation.

In addition, Botha (2013) records how terrorist bands capitalize on unemployment among the young people in East Africa by giving them financial benefits to join their group. Also, Alonso (2018) emphasizes the use of economic vulnerabilities among the communities located on the coast and in the north, where the rates of youth unemployment are higher than the national ones. Nevertheless, they both admit the presence of ideological elements, social exclusion elements and perceived injustices that go beyond economic frustrations in radicalization, indicating that the use of youth employment programs is not a solution on its own, but is part of the overall peace-building strategies.

Comparative Analysis of National Youth Service Models

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) which started in 1973 in Nigeria gives a good comparative example to the national youth services program in Kenya (NYS). The NYSC scheme came into being after the Civil War in Nigeria and aims of the scheme included, among others, promoting national unity and utilization of skills (Marenin, 1990). It initially had 2,364 graduates in its start up, but currently it has about 250,000 graduates per year. Nevertheless, the studies of the effectiveness of NYSC provide inconsistent results that should be critically analyzed.

Although the program has been effective in ensuring massive participation during the past 50 years which is an indicator of institutional sustainability, critics have pointed out that the program has failed to make any meaningful contribution to graduate employment (Ojokuku & Odetunde, 2012). Through their analysis, they find that several graduates state that they have problems getting employment after their period of service implying that a period of national service alone without supporting policies to improve the integration of labour markets may not effectively address youth unemployment issues. This constraint, in turn, points to the

need to have programs that help to overcome structural labour market weaknesses, as opposed to the individual skill development.

However, the model provided by South Korea is more promising, as the National Service program focuses on the formation of skills and collaboration with the private sector (Kim and Lee, 2019). Korean model combines terms of military service with professional training, which opens opportunities of working in expansive sectors of the economy. Nonetheless, it would take a lot of institutional building and involvement of the private sector unlike the history of state-based industrialization in Korea to adapt to the Kenyan context. Thus, although the Korean model has shown some potential of integrating national service requirements with practical skill development, its success was entrenched deeply in certain historical situations of intense economic development and high state ability to co-ordinate industrial policy.

Sectoral Youth Employment Strategies

In Kenya, agricultural modernization poses huge youth employment opportunities due to the value that the sector presents to the economy of the country. The Israeli experience of innovation in agriculture shows that by introducing new technologies that provide attractive jobs to the educated young population, it is possible to generate a good group of skilled professionals (Ben-David, 2018). Israeli model is using the mix of traditional farming and advanced technology to provide high value jobs in the rural zone by applying modern methods such as hydroponics, precision farming and value addition processes. Nonetheless, although this could be a viable solution, to realise agricultural potential in Kenya, structural impediments such as insecure land tenure, susceptibility to climate change and dysfunctional market linkages need to be addressed to make the agricultural sector appear less profitable and prestigious as perceived.

Besides, another model that is relevant is Brazilian agricultural youth programs, which focus on building cooperatives and have access to credit facilities (Silva & Santos, 2020). Through technical training and financial aid, Brazilian programs have been effective in mobilizing young farmers and thus leading to their high output in farms and retention of youth in rural areas. However, the Brazilian model functions under a dissimilar institutional framework that is typified by greater participative customs and fully fledged credit markets that can probably restrict direct copying in Kenya unless there is a significant institutional advancement.

Moreover, blue economy programs are a new field of youth employment, especially applicable to the coastal areas of Kenya where unemployment levels are higher than the national ones. The blue economy youth program in Madagascar can show how marine conservation and job creation can be combined (Rakotoson & Tanner, 2021). The program uses the young people in the sustainable practices of fishing, marine tourism and coastal management but integrates the growth of aquaculture and conservation efforts of the environment. Nevertheless, as this model can depict how the sectoral development can be used to pursue several policy goals at the same time, its success relies on the need to resolve the weaknesses of the coastal infrastructure and build technical skills that remains low at the coastal regions of Kenya.

There are also openings that are available to youth in the information technology and service sector development with the key being to overcome the challenges of digital infrastructure gaps as well as providing equal access. The ICT youth programs in Rwanda have been found to be very successful in providing job opportunities and aiding the country in the digitization process (Ngabonziza & Uwimana, 2019). The Rwandan model concentrates on the roles played by the government and business in developing skills that match market demands, which highlight the potential of digital literacy programs to train young people on job prospects in the global market. However, the digital divide in Kenya can only be plugged by intentional policies such as decentralized training and concurrent investment in low-cost internet connectivity in all regions.

Current program Assessment: Kenya's NYS and County Initiatives

The National Youth Service is presently able to host around 10,000 youth in Kenya every year under different programs such as the paramilitary training, skills development and public works projects (NYS, 2023). Nonetheless, this ability is less than 2 percent of the number who are estimated to be going through secondary

school every year, which points to the insufficiency of the current program scale in comparison to the population requirements. Moreover, it is observed through analysis that program isolation obstructs effectiveness, and the lack of coordination between various initiatives. This then decreases resource efficiency and impacts the overall potential.

The National Youth Service is a uniformed service, which has a mandate to train young people on national service, patriotism and other vocational skills. Its goals encompass the advancement of the integration of the nation and offering a responsible channel of involvement to the youth via vocational preparation in engineering, mechanical trades, farming and hospitality. Although the NYS has its initial objectives, it is restricted in terms of intake capacity and employment results after the programs. The results of the interviews with NYS graduates in Nairobi and Mombasa counties indicate that around 60% of graduates experience considerable difficulties in getting hired at the end of the program. The difficulty of getting employed at the end of the program can be explained by lack of alignment between the taught skills and the labour market needs (field interviews, 2023).

Furthermore, county level programs such as Muranga Youth Service, Machakos Youth Service and the Green Army in Nairobi show that local government is aware of the issue of youth employment. The Green Army program employs about 2,000 young people in environmental management projects, which give them temporary jobs when it comes to dealing with issues of environmental cleanliness in the towns (Nairobi City County, 2022). These projects suggest the possibility of expanding the successful local projects on the national level. Nevertheless, the assessment of county programs demonstrates that the most widespread issues are the short period of engagement, the absence of connection with permanent jobs and the inability to coordinate various programs.

In addition, labour market data published by Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2023) show that unemployment rates among young people differ considerably across regions. The coastal counties had higher rates of unemployment than the national average amounting to over 35%. This geographical difference would imply that the design of the programs must consider the economic situation and opportunities in the region instead of pursuing standardized national strategy. As a result, the outcomes of the program analysis show that even though the participants learn the rudimentary skills, they do not have well-developed career progression routes that would contribute to employment in the long term.

Sectoral Employment Opportunities and Implementation Strategies

Agricultural Sector Modernization and Youth Engagement

The agricultural sector analysis shows that there is much potential in the employment of youth in modernization processes which would solve the structural problems to profitability and attractiveness. The agricultural sector of Kenya utilizes around 75 percent of the population in the rural areas and yet youth do not seek to join this industry because of the perception of poor returns and status (FAO, 2021). Nevertheless, the examples of Israel and Brazilian models prove that the integration of technology and the joint development of agriculture can make it an appealing field among educated youth.

However, to make it successful, it is important to target structural impediments underlying by using coordinated policy intervention. Mitigation strategies on structural barriers should involve modification of access to factors of production by availing of cheap land, capital and access to training. Moreover, the focus on collective bargaining power and market connections and concentration on whole value chains, encompassing cultivation to access to markets, can help to enhance cooperation development instead of concentrating on production itself.

Moreover, the participation of the youth in transforming agriculture should focus on new methods such as hydroponics, precision farming and value addition processes and the establishment of agricultural hubs that support business activities since growing to marketing. Specialization in high value cash crops, dairy farming, poultry and aquaculture, as well as processing and marketing infrastructure expansion has great potential of sustainable livelihoods that can supersede the conventional views of agricultural work.

Blue Economy Development and Regional Integration

The blue economy opportunities available to coastal counties have specific prospects given that the rate of youth unemployment is higher than average in the country, and the employment opportunities created can be geographically relevant thus solving both the economic and demographic problems. The successful example of Madagascar to integrate marine conservation with youth employment is also relevant to Kenya coastal development strategy as it is possible to show that environmental protection may be integrated with the creation of economic opportunities.

To do this, however, it has to be implemented with significant investment in coastal infrastructure and building up of technical capacity that is currently constrained. The blue economy should involve youth in sustainable fishing, development of aquaculture, marine tourism, port logistics and conservation of the coast. This strategy includes sustainable fishing methods, aquarium rearing, seaweed culture, eco-tourism practices as well as marine conservation practices such as mangroves restoration and coral reefs conservation.

In addition, these strategies generate job opportunities and ensure environmental sustainability goals and minimize the imbalance in development in the region. However, it will only be successful when there is a coordinated investment in port infrastructure, cold storage and transportation infrastructure that can facilitate the blue economy value chains and at the same time ensure that its benefits are distributed to the youth populations instead of being enjoyed by the prevailing economic elites.

Information Technology Sector Development and Digital Inclusion

The development of information technology sector presents good employment prospects, especially to the urban youth with secondary education but success is subject to systematic mitigation strategies of digital divide. The achievements of Rwanda in ICT youth employment indicate that the industry can be developed at a high pace by focusing on skills development and collaborating with the private sector in addition to facilitating national digitization plans.

Nonetheless, its use in Kenya would demand a huge investment on digital infrastructure and modernization of the education system to guarantee equal access on geographical and socio-economic lines. The mitigation measures to be taken to address the digital divide should encompass encouraging decentralized training initiatives instead of focusing programs in urban hubs, validating low entry barriers business models such as freelance websites and low-tech internet connectivity and power services, and making sure that affordable internet access and power supply are matched in all areas of the regions.

More so, the digital economy has the potential to provide youth employment in areas with low barriers of entry and global scale through investment in digital literacy programs, coding bootcamps and business process outsourcing centers which prepare youth to work in the fields of software development, data entry, customer services, as well as, digital marketing and cybersecurity. However, to succeed, it is necessary to solve infrastructure gaps and make digital skills training compatible with real market prospects instead of generating false hopes about potential jobs.

Educational System Enhancement and Labour Market Integration

Curriculum Reform and Skills Alignment

The reform of the educational system demands improvement of the youth employability by providing practical skills integration and longer engagement opportunities that would work to resolve the challenge of demand side employment creation and supply side skills development. This means the move to more realistic skills-based curriculum in response to present and future labour market needs whilst recognizing that skills mismatches are only one of a number of structural obstacles such as lack of formal sector creation of jobs.

Digital literacy, entrepreneurship and most important soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and teamwork training should be embedded in curriculum reform on all levels of education without lowering academic standards. Technical and vocational education should be better endowed with

resources and societal acceptance to lure the youth to join it without necessarily establishing stratification in education which will only fuel social inequalities.

Furthermore, intensification of Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) institutions by enhancing the facilities, acquiring modern equipment, recruiting qualified instructors and directing industry associations to co-design the program and provide apprenticeship opportunities can greatly increase program relevance and performance. This improvement should, however, be accompanied by geographical equity provisions so that improved institutions are located in rural and urban areas and not in current better places.

Educational Accessibility and Transition Support

The financial burden of education should be alleviated through scholarships, subsidized tuition and easy access to student loan schemes so that all social-economic levels can access educational programs equitably without making the educational programs to add to the already existing disparities. This not only keeps away the talented yet poor youth in school, but it also increases access to quality education and vocational training by both the poor and the rich.

It should also come with bridge programs that bridge the gap between secondary education and employment which have the added advantage of offering more skills training coupled with insuring that there is less pressure on the labour market due to the well-organized transitions between education and meaningful employment. The mitigation of social stratification should be done by ensuring that the sectors employment programs do not cause new hierarchies where high skill jobs are seen only as the domain of the educated city youth and the traditional industries reduce the rural youth to the work that is perceived as lowly.

In addition, introduction of mentorship programs and career guidance services in schools can educate students on the different career opportunities, their skills and expectations as well as trends in the labour market and relate learning decisions to economic opportunities. This includes the training of the teachers and career counsellors as well as bringing the industry professionals to give their input so that the students make a wise decision about their future academic and work prospects.

Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy

Integrated Youth Employment Framework

Kenya needs to develop a mainstreamed youth employment policy framework that incorporates the current programs and increases the coverage to the requirement of the population based on systematic coordination frameworks. This framework must outline objectives, performance measures and coordination structures at the national and county level and it must integrate various intervention measures such as skills training, support of entrepreneurship, public works program and partnership with the private sector.

Mechanisms of policy coordination must involve the creation of a National Youth Employment Coordination Committee that comprises of representation of relevant ministries, county governments, the private sector and youth organizations. This multi-stakeholder system provides checks and balances systems and increases transparency and spreads influence of any one political organization. The body would lead program correspondence, resources and performance tracking through the various initiatives and systematic incorporation of multiple intervention strategies.

Nevertheless, the challenges related to the implementation are institutional capacity constraints, resource constraints and the coordination problems at multiple levels of government and sectors. These issues may be countered by staged implementation strategies, the capacity building strategies that are systematic and institutional development strategies that enhance current strengths and mitigate the current weaknesses.

Economic Justification and Resource Mobilization

The existing program needs to be considerably increased to tackle the magnitude of youth unemployment in Kenya with economically reasonable investment policies. It has been argued that to attain significant change to

the rate of unemployment, youth employment programs must be designed to take on at least 25% of secondary school graduates every year, which is considerable increases in the capacity levels of current programs.

The suggested amount of investment of 2 percent of the GDP is explained by the cost-of-inaction arguments that acknowledge economic losses related to the youth inactivity, in terms of higher crime rates, social instability, and the high costs of counterterrorism and security operation, which may be larger than the investment of the proposed programs. These programs have economic justification as direct national investments in security strategies, which will contribute to the economy in terms of enhanced productivity, tax base expansion and stimulation of economic growth.

Besides, resource mobilization, it incorporates multifaceted resources mobilization strategies such as government allocations, international development partnerships and contributions by the private sector using public- private partnerships instead of basing on pure public funds. The budget allocations of the government must be gradually raised to the intended figures to 2 percent of GDP after five years and international development partnerships must be also sought by the government to reach the proposed levels of technical assistance and transfer of knowledge to hasten the program development.

Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

Evidence-based performance evaluation should be used to implement a monitoring and evaluation system in tracking program performance to prompt an ongoing improvement and accountability without political capture. Among the key outcomes, there ought to be employment results, skills development, program coverage and security impact indicators when giving evidence-based policy choices and program changes.

The evaluation studies must occur on a regular basis to determine the effectiveness of the programs and what could be improved in the program based on the feedback of the participants, the employer and the community impact analysis. Through these reviews, one should have knowledge on the program outcomes and use this in the ongoing improvement activities as well as create evidence base to guide policy refinement and scaling decisions.

Also, accountability mechanisms ought to incorporate transparent reporting, stakeholder feedback and independent review processes that inhibit program capture and responsiveness to beneficiary needs and evolving economic circumstances. Monitoring framework must be able to aid in operational management and strategic policy formulation by providing data collection and analysis in a systematic manner to guide evidence-based decision making.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As the analysis shows, the existing strategy of Kenya regarding youth employment has its positive aspects, but it is still not sufficient to respond to the magnitude and urgency of the issue the demographic Ottawa of the country has to deal with. Current programs like the NYS have shown that there is capacity but is not in a scale that can help in making significant changes as per the rate of youth unemployment that the program can make significant changes to the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people every year.

The international comparative analysis offers good information in the development of policies, but outright imitation of foreign models is not good as Kenya requires certain specific contextual needs and institutional capabilities. The Nigerian NYSC case can be used to show that institutional sustainability is possible, but the impact of these programs has not been significant due to the need to develop programs that are answerable to structural labour market issues instead of concentrating on the skill development of individuals.

In addition, sectoral analysis demonstrates a huge potential of youth employment in the agricultural modernization, blue economy and information technology, but the opportunities should be realized by a combined policy intervention that considers the challenge of skills development in the supply side and the challenge of employment creation in the demand side. The security dimension of unemployment among the youth is a phenomenon that requires immediate and extensive policy action that appreciates the fact that

unemployment is a vulnerability factor that has the potential of transiting into radicalization and is therefore not a causal factor.

In addition, institutional capacity constraints, resource constraints and coordination problems across various government levels and sectors are a challenge of implementation, but the challenges can be resolved using staged implementation strategies, systematic capacity development and institutional development strategies. The framework includes the mechanisms that will be used to solve the issue of political viability by using the multi-stakeholder governance structures and evidence-based monitoring systems.

CONCLUSION

The problem of youth unemployment in Kenya is a burning issue that needs a concerted policy approach that will meet current employment demands, as well as these problems on a fundamental level of structural labour market failure. The current programs though useful are still too small and lack coordination to take the size of the problem that the large number of youth in Kenya is facing.

The international comparative analysis gives a great contribution to policy development based on the extraction of principles instead of program imitation, where strategies of adapting to the Kenyan contextual realities would be tailored to such contextual characteristics like institutional capacity, sectoral development priority, and demographics. The opportunities in the sectors of agriculture, blue economy and information technology have high potential of youth employment creation but such potential can only be realized through coordinated investment in skills development, infrastructural development and in collaborating with the private sector.

Youth unemployment has security implications that justify significant amounts of public investment in employment programs based on cost-of-inaction arguments that make program costs to be higher than inaction costs such as the costs of security operation and forgone productivity. Its implementation should be in stages, with massive mobilization of resources and systems to keep accountability and avoid political capture.

Kenya has the potential to create new forms of youth employment that will focus on both economic as well as security agendas. It takes political dedication, sufficient resources and evidence-based and best practice implementation to achieve success. The potential of achieving demographic dividends from Kenya's youth population is achievable through employment programming in which challenges are turned into opportunities to develop the country.

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