



# AFRICA'S YOUTH: ACTION NEEDED NOW TO SUPPORT THE CONTINENT'S GREATEST ASSET

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**Africa's young demographic could provide a powerful opportunity for development and beyond. But despite the growth in GDP of the last decade, African countries struggle to create jobs and to equip young people with the skills required to service their economies. This lack of economic opportunity is often combined with political disenfranchisement thus creating a potential cause of instability. In 2017, Mo Ibrahim emphasised that "this huge and immediate challenge requires committed leadership and robust governance if Africa is to enable its young people to build the prosperous and peaceful future we all want to see". This research brief brings together relevant facts and figures and concludes with a series of key questions as a basis for an open and frank reflection on the future of Africa's youth.**

## **The fastest growing demographic**

From 1950 to the present, Africa's population has grown steadily, gradually outnumbering Europe to reach 1.3 billion in 2020. It now represents the world's second largest population compared to other world regions, preceded only by Asia.

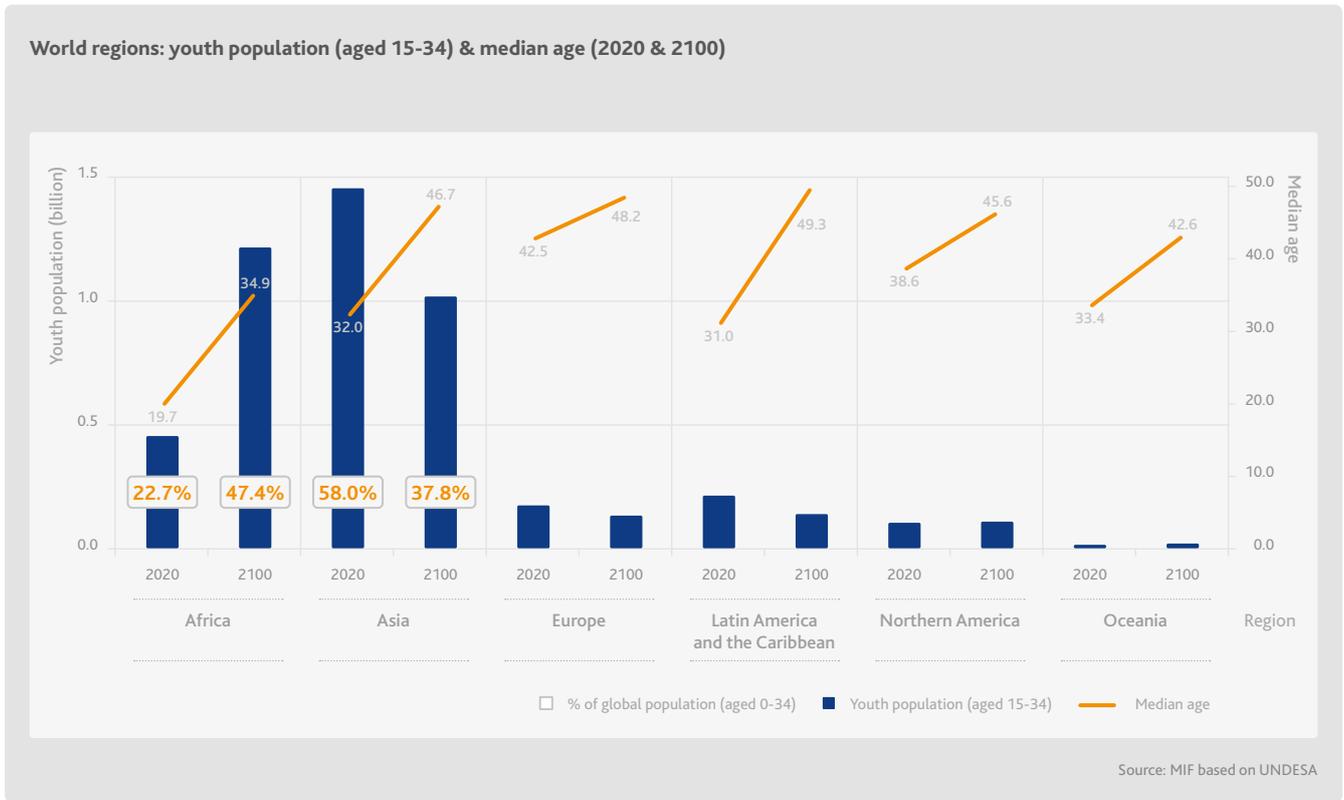
Although Africa's rate of growth is set to decline gradually, the continent's population is already the fastest growing in

the world and will remain so until 2100, when it is expected to reach 4.3 billion. In 2020, Europe is the only continent with a negative population growth rate, but between 2060 and 2070 it will be joined by Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean.

## **The youngest continent**

With a median age of 19.7 in 2020, Africa's population is already the youngest in the world. This is a significant age gap when compared to 31.0 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 32.0 in Asia, 33.4 in Oceania, 38.6 in Northern America and 42.5 in Europe, the oldest continent. Currently, around 60% of Africa's population is younger than 25 years, and more than a third between 15-34 years old. By 2100, Africa should still have the youngest population worldwide with a median age of 35.

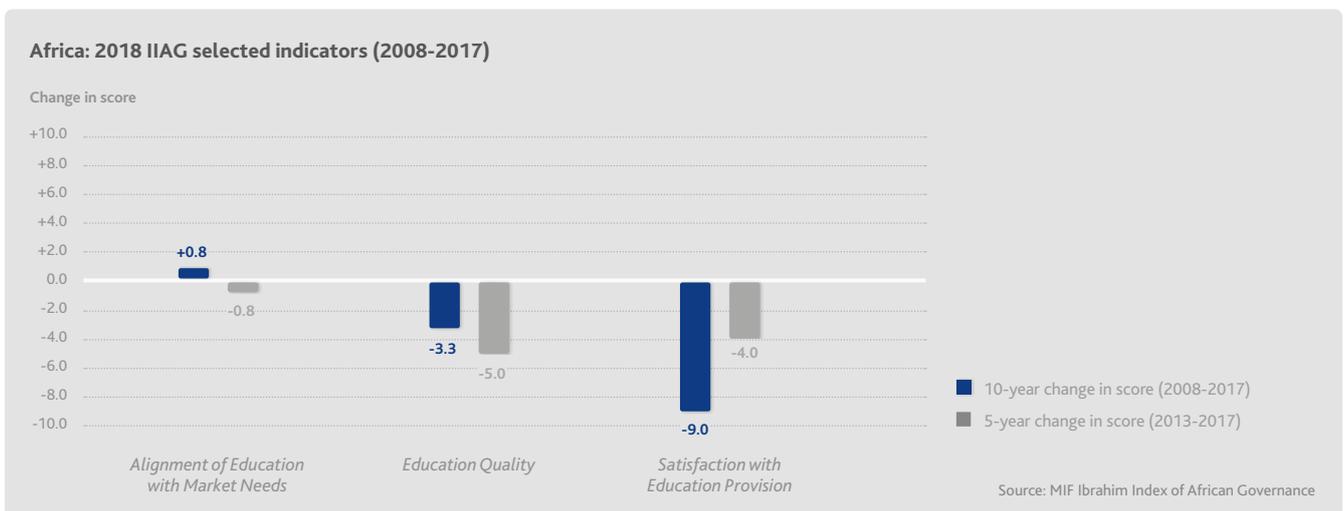
In 2020, Africa's population under 35 represents almost a billion people (540.8 million 0-14 year olds and 454.5 million 15-34 year olds), amounting to 22.7% of the world's total youth population, the second largest after Asia's (58.0%). Between now and 2100, Africa's youth is expected to grow by 181.4%, while Europe's will shrink by -21.4% and Asia's by -27.7%. By 2100, Africa's youth will be equivalent to twice Europe's entire population and almost one half of the world's youth will be from Africa.



### Worsening education prospects

According to the 2018 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG), half of the continent’s 54 countries registered a deterioration in their score for the sub-category *Education* between 2013 and 2017, meaning that for over half of Africa’s citizens (51.5%) education outcomes have been worsening.

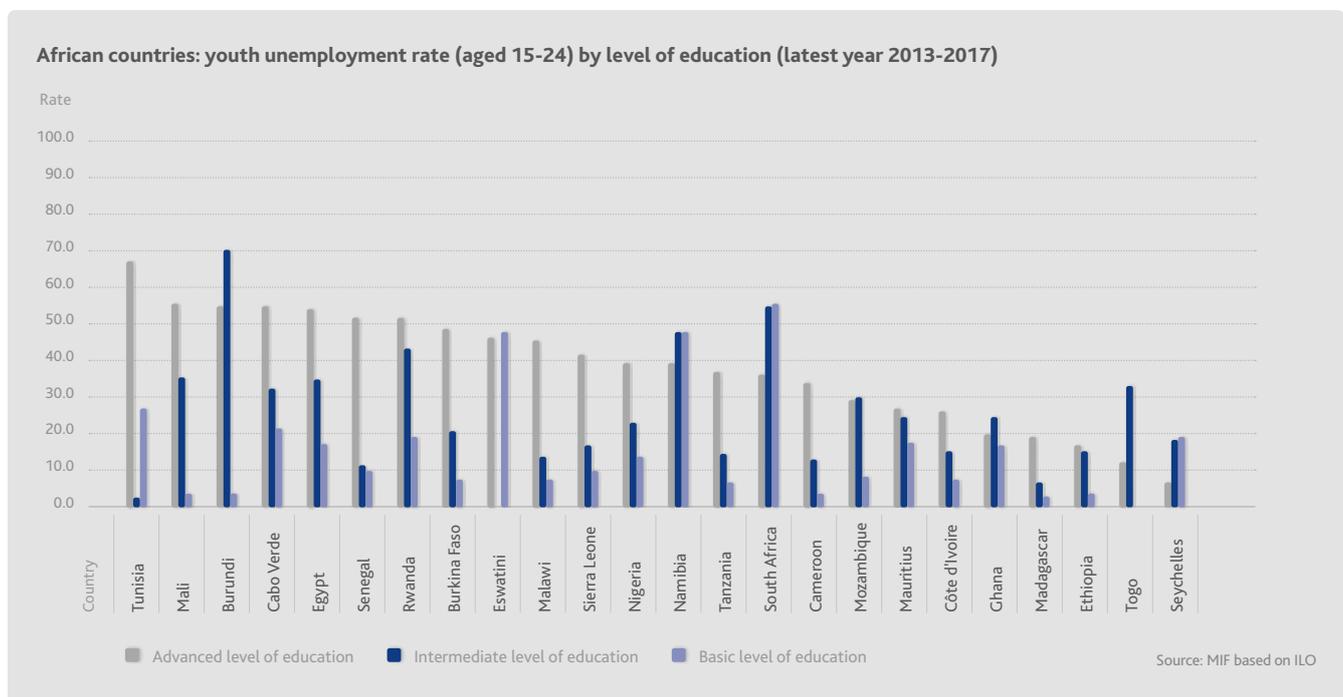
While there has been some improvement in terms of access to education, still only around half of those who would qualify for lower secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa are enrolled. The African average score for *Education Quality*, which measures the quality of basic, secondary and tertiary institutions, has deteriorated between 2013 and 2017, with only one country, Togo, showing improvement since 2013.



## A mismatch between education provision and job markets

In Africa the average match between the skills needed by businesses and the education requirement is worse than in the rest of world, and there is a weak link between higher education levels and better job prospects. Hardly any (1%) of 15-24 year olds in sub-Saharan Africa participate in vocational education programmes.

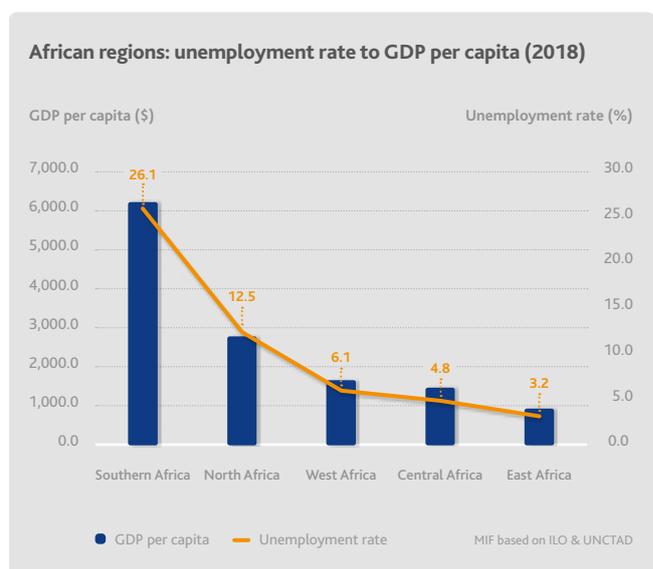
If African countries were to put in place policies to improve the quality of education and lessen the mismatch between education supply and job market demands, they could equip their growing youth population with the knowledge and skills conducive to productive employment. Current trends are not improving fast enough to keep up with the needs of the bulging youth population.



## High unemployment

In 2019, almost 16 million young Africans were facing unemployment, and youth unemployment is generally higher in urban than in rural areas. In South Africa, which has the second largest GDP on the continent, 55% of young people were jobless. It is of concern that in Africa, unlike in any other continent, the regions with higher GDP per capita also have higher rates of unemployment, as can be seen by comparing 2018's regional GDP per capita with 2018's unemployment rate.

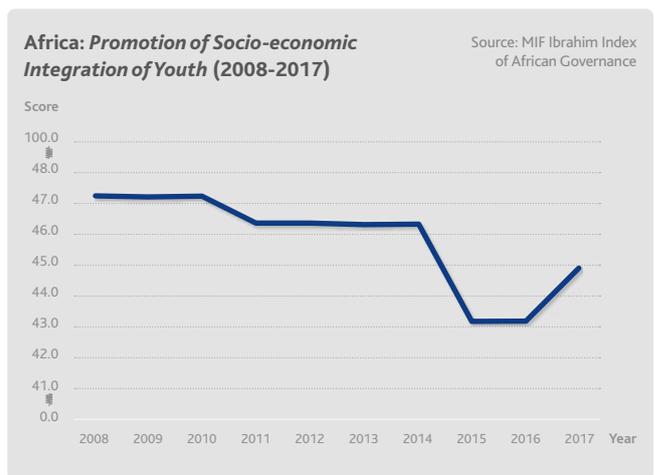
By 2030, 30 million young people are expected to enter the African labour market each year. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, while 18 million new formal jobs would be needed annually to absorb new entries into the labour market, only 3 million are currently being created.



With the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) underway, only about half of today's core jobs are expected to remain stable between now and 2022. This calls for a rethink of education curricula, vocational training and skills development to future-proof the next generation of learners and employees.

### Living standards: a negative outlook

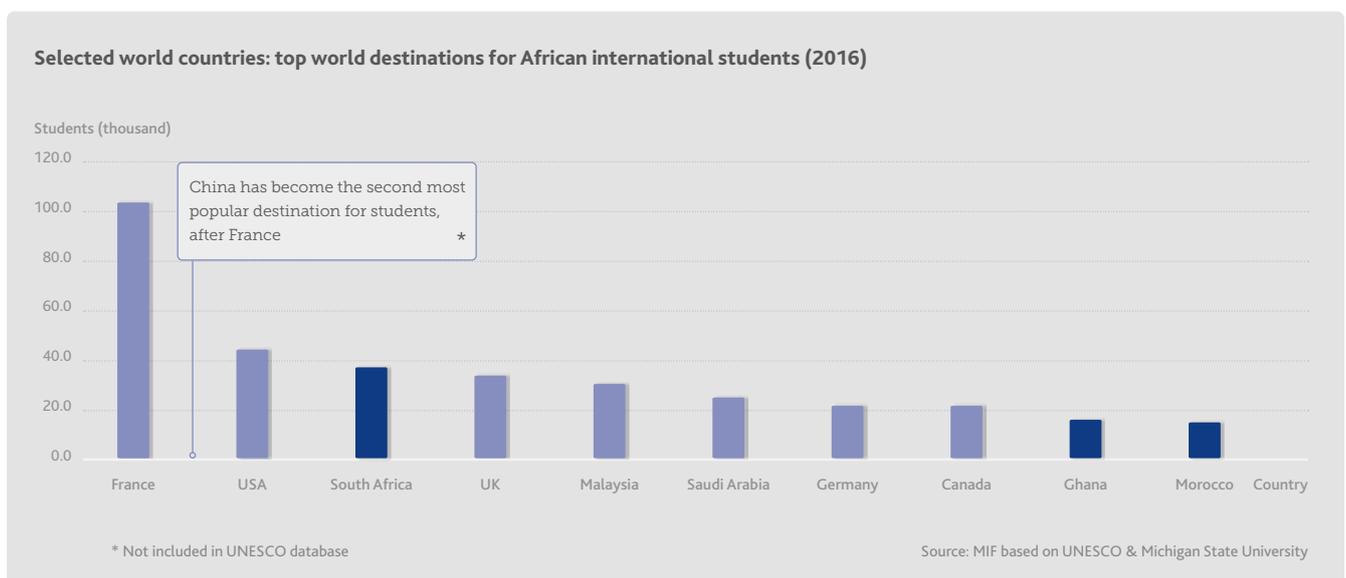
More than 40.0% of young Africans consider their current living situation to be very or fairly bad, and they regard unemployment to be by far the most significant problem. The IIAG's indicator *Promotion of Socio-economic Integration of Youth* informs about the efforts of governments in creating accessible programmes for youth in the areas of education, housing and/or employment and in which the continent has been on a negative trajectory between 2013 and 2017.



### Is Africa at risk of losing its youth?

Hope for better economic and social prospects is a major driver for African migrations. Furthermore, in 2017, 53.0% of surveyed members of extremist groups in Africa were between 17 and 26 years old when they joined. The offer of employment was the most frequently cited incentive at the time of recruitment.

Only 22.0% of African students studying abroad choose an African destination. Brain drain is particularly pervasive in the health sector – a key pillar of public service delivery and one that is all the more important in light of the current pandemic. Too many African countries have more locally born physicians working outside than in their home countries. In 2015, 86.0% of all African-educated physicians working in the US were trained in Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa. One in ten doctors working in the UK comes from Africa.



## Agriculture: the next frontier for employment and growth?

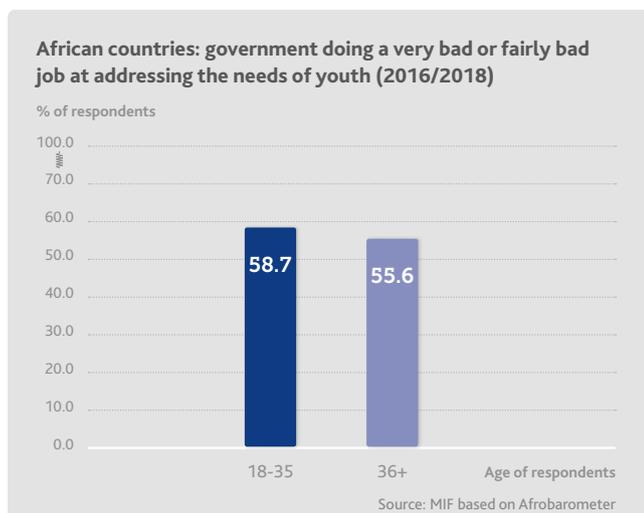
Agriculture is expected to remain the main pool of employment for youth in sub-Saharan Africa, but for a majority of young people, agriculture is still often seen as outdated, unprofitable and hard work. However, agriculture is key both for economic growth and food security in a continent where eight countries import 90% of their food demand - Botswana, Cabo Verde, Djibouti, Gambia, Lesotho, Mauritania, Seychelles and Somalia. How to make this sector appealing for youth is a key issue. In addition, research shows that many simple technologies could solve some of the main challenges currently faced by African farmers.

## An integrated continent under the AfCFTA to make the most of Africa's human capital

Shortages in certain employment sectors in some African countries could compensate for high unemployment rates in others but for many businesses in Africa, it is often easier to employ a skilled non-African expatriate than a skilled African expatriate. Also, African countries often do not mutually recognise diplomas and certificates, resulting in limited intra-continental mobility. However, Africa is seeing some progress under the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) which offers a step forward in addressing some of these issues.

## Youth and politics: a relationship to rebuild?

The gap between the median age of Africa's population and that of its executive leaders is about 45 years. In Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa at least 75.0% of the youth think that their governments do not care about their needs. About 60.0% of Africans, and especially the youth, think that their governments are doing a very or a fairly bad job of addressing the youth's needs.



## Youth and COVID-19: accelerating challenges but with room for optimism

The challenges faced by young people against the backdrop of the current COVID-19 health crisis can be seen in the results of a survey among young Africans in the Mo Ibrahim Foundation's Now Generation Network (NGN). This network consists of the Ibrahim alumni, fellows, scholars and the participants of the annual Now Generation Forum (NGF).

For a majority of the NGN cohort, the COVID-19 health risk ranks behind multiple, complex and larger structural concerns such as economic insecurity, other health priorities, the threat to democracy and the need to change the current economic model. When asked about the biggest challenges facing their country more than three quarters of respondents (79%) cite economic instability. Unemployment is the second biggest challenge for two thirds (66%). They believe that governments are too concerned with prevention measures and are not paying enough attention to the necessary economic and social mitigation measures.

Young Africans are also at the forefront of fighting the COVID-19 crisis. Over half of the respondents (54%) are involved in initiatives to support the response to the pandemic and projects from all over the continent are testament to the engagement and innovation of Africa's youth.

From Burkina Faso, to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and South Africa, young people have set up different information initiatives and platforms to educate others on protection measures against COVID-19 and to halt the spread of misinformation. In Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Kenya, young people are engaged in improving access to hygiene facilities and products and in Nigeria, Mozambique and Liberia young people are at the forefront of making and distributing face masks, while young people in Tunisia are manufacturing respirators and 3D protective masks.

A large majority (84%) feel that this crisis could become an opportunity to amend current policies, either a specific health policy or economic policy more generally.

## Conclusion

Since 2017, Mo Ibrahim has warned about Africa being at a tipping point and at risk of failing its youth. Since then, key steps forward such as the implementation of the AfCFTA are creating a more conducive environment for Africa's youth to thrive. In other areas, such as education, the pace of improvement is not keeping up with the needs of the bulging youth population. To reverse this trend and to avert failure, answers must be found to the following key questions:

- How can employment opportunities be provided for an expanding youth population?
- How will Africa ensure it does not lose its youth to extra-continental migration or extremism, fuelling instability and reversing decades of progress?
- How can the potential of youth for innovation be linked with the needs of the agricultural sector or the fight against COVID-19 in terms of research, development and new technology?
- What do African leaders need to do to reconnect with their largest constituency?

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