

# Taptangelei, Unemployment & Digital Jobs:

## YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

Project~ETHER

siasa PLACE
We the people...inventing the future

April 2024

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| **BPOs** | - Business Process Outsourcing |
| **CoK2010** | - Constitution of Kenya, 2010 |
| **Covid-19** | - Corona Virus Disease |
| **DIY** | - Do-It-Yourself |
| **FGD** | - Focus Group Discussion |
| **MICDE** | - Ministry of Information, Communication, and the Digital Economy |
| **MSJC** | - Mathare Social Justice Centre |
| **PDF** | - People Dialogue Festival |
| **Project~ETHER** | - Ethical Tech Ecosystem for Human Rights |
| **SP** | - Siasa Place |

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# Acknowledgements

On the eve of the 2024 Labour Day celebrations whose theme is – quite aptly – Social Justice and Decent Work for All, this study is launched as a contribution to the ongoing national, continental and global discourse on the future of work, decent work and the dignity of work and workers. It is our hope that it will catalyse honest and meaningful reflection and action by key stakeholders at all levels for the benefit of workers.

The study is published in the public interest by Project~ETHER and Siasa Place. We thank Angela Chukunzira and Ivy Njoki for leading the research, and Ken Ogembo for effective coordination of the study. Special thanks to Vivian Okumu and Sammy Kipunyi (Nairobi), the Ajenda Kenya team (Mombasa), Steve Wander and Annette Juma (Kisumu) as well as Shikoh Kihika at Tribeless Youth (Nakuru) for playing a facilitating role and ensuring that the study went smoothly across the four city counties. We remain most grateful to all the respondents who participated in the study and shared their insights, hopes and aspirations.

Finally, we dedicate this study to African youth involved in the various forms of digital and online work, including content creators, online writers and content moderators whose valuable work contribute to a more vibrant as well as secure internet.

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*THE 'OLD GUARD' (THE AGE GROUP OF PEOPLE ABOVE 45 YEARS) WHO ARE UNWILLING TO EMBRACE TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE, ARE STUCK UP ON 'OLD' WORK CULTURE SUCH AS CLOCKING-IN, STAYING IN THE OFFICE UNTIL 5PM EVEN THOUGH ONE IS NOT NECESSARILY PRODUCTIVE - PARTICIPANT, MOMBASA COUNTY*

## About Project~ETHER

Project~ETHER exists to develop thought leadership, generate political will and catalyse civic, policy, legislative and judicial action towards the realization of a safe, empowering and human rights compliant labour market in the tech and related sectors at national, regional and continental levels.

## About Siasa Place

Siasa Place is a youth-led and youth-focused civic-tech organisation that is building confidence, skills, competencies and institutional structures necessary for meaningful and dignified participation of young people in politics, governance and the civic life.

> WORK IS ALL ABOUT PAYING BILLS AND SURVIVAL - PARTICIPANT, MOMBASA COUNTY

# Executive Summary

This study explores youth perspectives on the evolving definitions of work, particularly in the rapidly advancing digital landscape. According to the United Nations, Africa's youth population, typically aged 15-24, was estimated at around 226 million in January 2022. In Kenya, 75% of the population falls below the age of 35, indicating a significant demographic challenge in adapting to changing work paradigms driven by technological advancements.

The study challenges the notion that digital jobs primarily cater to foreign markets, highlighting a significant local demand for digital skills and employment. Despite government initiatives promoting digital literacy and employment, many youths perceive digital/online jobs as limited and temporary, often viewed as supplementary to traditional employment rather than a sustainable career path.

Key findings reveal that while 92% of respondents acknowledge the increased work opportunities brought about by digitalization, only 39% have engaged in digital jobs or expressed interest in exploring such opportunities for income generation. Interestingly, even among those describing themselves as unemployed, many have irregular sources of income, emphasising a shift in perceptions toward employment, emphasising formal contracts and regular income streams.

The study dives deep into the changing perceptions youth have about work. Many of the youth interviewed view work primarily as a source of income and very few as a passionate venture of purpose. The cry for decent work and decent pay was loud as many highlighted that it is not just about any job, but quality jobs that include fair remuneration, job security, as well as safe and humane working conditions and environments for all.

Moreover, the research underscores a preference for traditional employment models, such as research-based roles, over more technical skills like coding, suggesting an underutilization of available resources and untapped potential in the digital economy.

Challenges identified include the rapid pace of workplace changes, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting both formal and informal workers. Additionally, there's a growing demand for flexibility and upskilling, hindered by limited access to resources, including hardware devices and access to internet.
There are numerous opportunities in the sector and the establishment of multi-sectoral consultative platform – that includes policymakers, legislators, digital workers, labour law experts and human rights actors etc - to commence a national conversation on the future of work in digitalisation will be key.

Overall, the study sheds light on the complex dynamics shaping the youth workforce in Kenya, highlighting the need for holistic approaches to address the evolving nature of work, ensure inclusivity, and support youth aspirations for sustainable livelihoods in the digital age.

# I. INTRODUCTION

## a.) Study Context:

The protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including political, economic and social rights, is safeguarded under Chapter Four of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 (CoK2010), which sets out a progressive Bill of Rights enjoyable by all individuals in Kenya, including equality before the law, the right to equal opportunity, equal protection and equal benefit of the law.

The International Labour Standards on Occupational Safety and Health sets forth the principle that workers must be protected from sickness, disease and injury arising from their employment. Article 6 of the ICESCR mandates states to recognise the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts, and will take appropriate steps to safeguard this right. The Economic and Social Council in its general comment 18 of 2005 interpreted this right to mean that Work as specified in article 6 of the Covenant must be decent work. This is work that respects the fundamental rights of the human person as well as the rights of workers in terms of conditions of work safety and remuneration.

In the last several years, the world of work has experienced significant digitalization which has in many aspects improved productivity and efficiency, increased worker freedom and autonomy, as well as reduced costs for owners of capital. New media and emerging technologies are transforming many aspects of human life, including the future of work and ideas around employer-employee relationships, what constitutes an office as a workspace, as well as how to navigate the range of traditional employment benefits.

In particular, digitalization of work has emerged as a key aspect of technology-driven transformations of the workplace, and particularly the growing prominence of digital labour platforms characterized by jobs that are variously defined as digital, online, virtual and/or remote (platform jobs/work). In countries like Kenya for instance, the ever-rising number of educated unemployment, workforce displacements during Covid and post-Covid era, and an economy in regression have all put significant strain on available opportunities, forcing especially many young talented graduates into the digital/online economy.

Faced with job losses from business shutdowns due a sluggish economy and a brutal taxation regime, and inability to demonstrate tangible job creation, the past several months has seen the government of Kenya put significant emphasis on the opportunities that exist in technology-enabled online jobs for Kenyan youth. There have been public calls by senior government officials extolling the virtues of big-tech companies and business outsourcing companies (BPOs) operating in Kenya, and encouraging youth to prepare and take advantage of the 'Taptangelei' economic phenomenon – as it has come to be popularly known.

However, the campaign for digital and online opportunities is often silent on the risks and perils of this emerging area of opportunity. Not only is a clear and robust policy and regulatory framework for labour in the digital era lacking, but there is also a lack of job security and social protection for workers. Irregular hiring and termination of digital workers by global companies e.g. Facebook, Remotasks and Jumia Food delivery

services highlights the vulnerability of workers in this emerging realm of work, and especially those who depend primarily on such digital platforms work for their livelihood.

Additionally, a scorched earth, haphazard and adversarial taxation regime has sown confusion among an erstwhile thriving community of – predominantly youthful – content creators (TikTokers, Youtubers etc).

## b.) Study Objective

In view of the above context, and particularly the government push for digital/online jobs, this rapid study sought to document perspectives on work, employment, digital work and related opportunities from urban Kenyan youth. In particular, the study sought to understand:

i. What are the dominant youth perspectives on the meaning of 'work' and employment?
ii. How are youth embracing, rejecting, and/or adjusting to the changing nature of work?
iii. What do youth like/not like about government push for digital/online jobs?
iv. What kind of digital/online jobs do youth want or prefer?
v. What challenges are faced by youth in their pursuit of meaningful work?
vi. What are the future aspirations of youth in the context of the changing nature of work?

It is our hope that this initial study can shine light on existing gaps in policy and legislation, catalyse a national discourse and find common ground on how the country can harness the best of digital opportunities for the best interest of Kenyan youth by establishing and enforcing a socially just, safe, dignifying and human rights compliant labour market in the tech and related sectors in Kenya.

*Figure 3: Word cloud generated on the meaning of work*




> WORK MUST BE SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE AND APPROVED. IF YOU ARE INVOLVED IN ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES, CAN THAT BE WORK? - PARTICIPANT, KISUMU COUNTY

# II. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Despite the growth and convenience of digitalization that can allow for mediated interviews, the choice of an ethnographic approach was informed by the fact that ethnographic research provides a more intimate interaction and capture of participants' lived experiences.

The research deployed multiple qualitative research methodologies. The first involved conducting semi-structured interviews with youth participants drawn from existing Siasa Place networks in the four city counties as described above.

Secondly, Focus Group Discussions were deployed for their usefulness in complementing other methods of data collection and providing in-depth information in a relatively short period of time (Gundumogula 2020). Additionally, note-taking allowed for the documentation of observations and contributions, while voice recordings were used throughout the interviews to provide a reliable reference point for any information and insights that would otherwise not have been captured on the notes.

The research drew upon thematic analysis and narrative analysis to capture the data. Thematic analysis was used because it allows one to identify what was relevant in answering the research question of the study 'that works both to reflect reality and unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 81). Given the qualitative nature of this study, this is a more suitable way to be able to gain insights into the rich data that interviews have presented.

The main research instrument was a semi-structured questionnaire to interview youth drawn from various youth groups and their networks within the four city counties. Save for attending the People Dialogue Festival in Nairobi at the inception stage of this research, the study sample was selected from existing networks of Siasa Place.

**Scope:** The rapid study was conducted in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu and Nakuru within the month of March 2024. The primary target was youth in urban environments given the digitalisation aspects of the study. The choice of the study counties was also informed by the fact that these counties are city counties, and thus boast of significant levels of urbanisation. Given the time constraints of conducting the study, there was a need to use the existing networks, hence the reliance of the networks of youth organisations with existing partnership and/or collaboration relationships with Siasa Place.

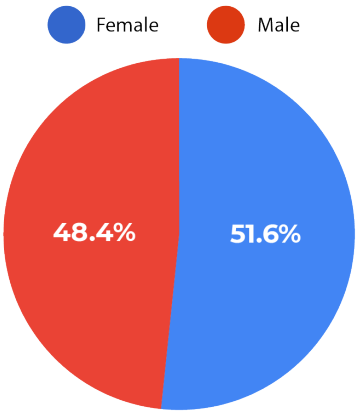
*Table 1: Distribution of interviews by county*

| County | Number of interviews |
|---|---|
| Nairobi | 46 |
| Mombasa | 30 |
| Kisumu | 30 |
| Nakuru | 22 |

**Participation** in the study was voluntary, with a focus on finding a balanced representation on diversity especially across gender and age. Actual names of participants have not been used to protect their privacy. Pseudonyms are used instead where necessary.

**Sample Characteristics:** Given the constraints of time, the study leveraged Siasa Place's existing networks and communities as the primary source of participants. For the same reason, the study targeted one third of respondents to come from Nairobi, with the rest evenly distributed across the 3 remaining counties. 128 out of the targeted 150 participants were reached and successfully interviewed, with participant distribution as outlined in Table 1.

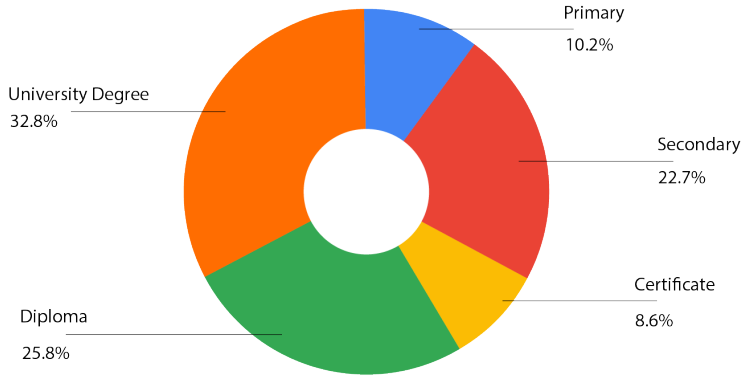
*Figure 1: Percentage of male and female respondents*
*Gender*




51.6% of all participants were female, compared to 48.4% male. All participants either described themselves as male or female, with none identifying themselves outside of this binary. 70% of the respondents were between the ages of 18-29, 23% were between the ages of 30-34, while a smaller percentage (7%) of the respondents were above 35 years.

While the level of educational achievement varied among study participants, most participants (67.2%) had obtained or were in the process of obtaining a tertiary education qualification.

*Figure 2: Level of education of participants.*




**WE ARE NOT EVEN FIGHTING TECHNOLOGY, WE JUST WANT IT TO WORK FOR US FAIRLY -PARTICIPANT, NAKURU COUNTY**

# III. KEY FINDINGS AND EMERGING THEMES

To answer the question on youth perspectives on employment, digitalisation and the changing nature of work, the rapid study proceeded along six broad lines of inquiry namely: What are the dominant youth perspectives on the meaning of 'work' and employment?; How are youth embracing, rejecting, and/or adjusting to the changing nature of work?; What do youth like/not like about government push for digital/online jobs; What kind of digital/online jobs do youth want or prefer?; What challenges are faced by youth in their pursuit of meaningful work? And What are the future aspirations of youth in the context of the changing nature of work?

## A. What are the dominant youth perspectives on the meaning of 'work' and employment?

**1. Work = Income:**

At 92%, a vast majority of the respondents felt that income is an integral part of what 'work' meant. Respondents who felt 'remuneration' is/should not be an integral part of what defines 'work' preferred terms such as 'purpose' and 'fulfilment.' Most participants were recent graduates from tertiary institutions or those working in formal jobs with a contract.

During the Focus Group Discussion in Mombasa County for instance, the group agreed with a participant that: 'Work is all about paying bills and survival.'

Subsequently, the study finds that 'work' is predominantly perceived as engagement in an activity for the express purpose of getting an income. The word cloud in figure 6 collates dominant phrases used to describe what work is by respondents.

Additionally, some respondents like *Teresia, a 23-year-old university student feels that work is something that one must define for themselves, something that someone chooses to do or not do, and that it is not dependent on any external factors, adding that:



> ...I observed in Kongowea market for instance, there was someone selling home made fresh juice in a bucket, another was ironing with a charcoal iron box, so he had no costs for electricity, and was charging 20 Kenya shillings per clothing. He was doing it in the open air, so he didn't have any rental expenses.... uuuhm... in my opinion eerm... it's just people being picky, there is nothing like 'there are no jobs'

**| Teresia, Mombasa**

**2. Employment = regular, predictable income:**

In terms of (un)employment, there are contradictory findings. Firstly, that all youth who described themselves as unemployed, had a source of income somewhat. It was mostly irregular, and therefore, their understanding of employment was that of having a formal contract and regular, predictable income. The word cloud in figure 6 below demonstrates the dominant perspectives on work and/or employment.

Among participants who self-identified as unemployed (even though they had some sort of irregular income), the common denominator was the lack of a formal contract at work. Among participants who fell in this category were community organisers and volunteers who juggle between short term jobs and supporting various organisations. Some participants simply referred to themselves as 'hustlers,' Interestingly, when asked how they earned a living, some respondents simply responded that they were 'hustlers.' Among the hustles listed by participants included waste management, selling food items, second-hand clothes, tailoring as well as salon business.

**3. Digitalisation has created more opportunities:**
Majority of the study respondents (92%) agreed that digitalisation has created more opportunities for work for those interested. However, only 39% of those interviewed admitted to having attempted digital/online jobs and/or are keen to explore digital job opportunities.

Predictably, the enduring question of whether technology has created more or killed job opportunities surfaced. While majority of the participants answered in the affirmative, there was general consensus that the rise of technology is bound to lead to some job losses.

**4. Work should be legally, ethically and socially acceptable:**
Study participants debated the ethical and legal considerations in the qualification of work. For instance, *Njuguna Waweru, 27 (Nairobi) pointed out that 'work must be socially acceptable and approved. If you are involved in illegal activities, can that be work?' An FGD in Kisumu County debated whether digitalisation has made it very easy to engage in illegal activities such as scamming, and whether scamming should count as work.

## B. How are youth embracing, rejecting, and/or adjusting to the changing nature of work?

**i. Embracers and Adjusters:**
Among some young professionals like *Ruth, a 29-year-old in Mombasa, work is seen merely as a (boring) routine, adding that:

> ... at the beginning of one's working life one is full of enthusiasm and optimism to make a real impact and change in the world. But, over time, one gets caught up in office bureaucracies, the 'old guard' not wanting to implement change or embrace new methods of working. Ruth describes the 'old guard' as the age group of people above 45 years who are unwilling to embrace technological change, are stuck up on 'old' work culture such as clocking-in, staying in the office until 5pm even though one is not necessarily productive
>
> **| Ruth, Mombasa**

Youth perspectives on the changing nature of work and the workplace could be partially attributed to the agency of the state. Among the youth interviewed, some were trained by state programs such as *Ajira Digital*, an initiative by the *Ministry of Information, Communication, and the Digital Economy* (MICDE), and whose aim is to facilitate access to digital job opportunities for interested youth. Another programme that featured prominently during the study was the *Jitume* Programme that trains and prepares youth to access digital job opportunities. Its preparatory training covers issues such as access to digital devices, skills on using them as well as how to access opportunities within the BPOs (Business Process Outsourcing) sector, regardless of geographical location.

Youth are leveraging the use of social media platforms to advance their businesses. In Kisumu for example, *Jane uses Facebook and WhatsApp to advertise her vegetable business. Some youth consider the use of social media a fundamental part of growing their business.



... the use of social media ensures that I have a wider audience and some of my customers discovered me and my business from my Facebook page

**| Jane, Kisumu**

The study findings also challenge conventional perception that digital jobs are externally oriented, meant for the exclusive foreign market. Across all the four urban areas, there were people who exclusively relied on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as a source of income and/or employment, thus challenging the idea that digital jobs are only created exclusively to benefit the market abroad as is often presented by state agencies.

For instance, young people like 27-year-old *Joseph studied Maritime Engineering but combining his tech-savviness and interest in politics led to his involvement in the 2022 campaigns, providing social media strategy services to one of the candidates in Mombasa gubernatorial race, and subsequent formal employment in the period after the elections. Joseph's story and acquired career trajectory mirrors that of 26-year-old Mercy, a self-employed Public Relations and Communications graduate consulting as a social media strategist in Kisumu.

*Ann, a 31-year-old insurance marketer in Kisumu County encountered a shift in her work as banks are selling insurance to clients directly, threatening to turn her job redundant. To survive, she uses LinkedIn to widen her outreach to potential clients by posting on advertising policies and benefits. Ann admits she has to upskill by embracing other platforms to reach corporate clients.
The examples above demonstrate how youth are using acquired social media skills as a source of livelihood in job types that did not exist before the advent of social media. And, at the same time many participants do not necessarily study for these jobs. These are often new sets of skills acquired separate from formal curriculum.

**ii. Resisters and the Barriers:**
The positive attitude that is embracing the changing nature of work is not universal among the participants. Youth in the informal settlements of Mathare and Kibera Nairobi expressed reservations on uptake of digital work, mostly linked to lack of access to information, devices and the right skills. The level of educational achievement can also affect uptake of digital opportunities, as 35-year-old *Peter opined, adding that being a primary school graduate impacts his confidence in acquiring computer skills, let alone undertaking digital jobs.



When you do not have papers, it is hard to have the confidence. I think literacy is one thing, and digital literacy is another. You need to be literate to get the other literacy. You see? Eerm.. that becomes difficult to access....

**| Peter, Nairobi**

Not all youth are excited and embracing and taking advantage' of the new trend of digitalisation. *Omar, in Kibera, Nairobi explained that he would like to become a chef. He is not so keen on doing digital jobs because he foresees it as a saturated market, and thus prefers going abroad to do manual jobs so that he can raise fees for culinary school.



You cannot believe how much the world needs plumbers, electricians and other so called 'lowly jobs'. These jobs are becoming scarce and that is why I want to go the Gulf or Canada to do these jobs. They will pay me so well and I will raise my fees to finance my dreams of becoming a chef. I will not waste my time doing these digital jobs. There is no guarantee that they will pay well.... eerm, also why, why.. is the government even invested in them so much?

**| Omar, Nairobi**

There are also ideological barriers responsible for the resistance to uptake of digitalisation work. *Iminza, a 24-year-old Community Health Volunteer (CHV) from Mathare is sceptical of what she calls 'techno-determinism,' and the implied idea that digitalisation could be a panacea to the problems that youth face. She fears that once youth in Mathare are empowered to use these platforms, their aim will be to aspire for social mobility rather than structurally challenging and changing their living conditions. She believed that community work was very important in bringing change.



Even these computers and apps or whatever... everything that exists, cannot solve our problems. How do we think just earning money can fix things? They won't fix our communities. How can we solve the problem of drug abuse, alcoholism, all this poverty... look... walk in every ward in Mathare, the issues are so many. We do not have clean water; we do not have places like gardens to relax...the efforts outside MSJC [Mathare Social Justice Centre] have created a green space. Only our community service and volunteering can solve these problems

**| Iminza, Nairobi**

Several participants cited the risk of scams and conmanship as the major reason for refraining from uptake of any digital work, with a dominant view of online jobs as predominantly fraudulent. As 29-year-old *Mary elucidates:



'These online jobs are lies to con you your hard-earned money.' Therein lies the aspect of mistrust of the opportunities either marketed as 'get rich quick schemes or pyramid schemes that only benefit a few people

**| Mary, Nairobi**

The huge trust and integrity deficit online has affected uptake of these opportunities has also affected online vendors of goods and services. FGD participants in Kisumu said that due to unemployment, desperation leads unscrupulous people to put up objects for sale that are not legitimate. As *Mary, a 34-year-old *mitumba* seller at Kibuye market shared, many people sell 'fake' clothes on online platforms like Instagram pages that are used for bait marketing purposes, even for non-existent clothes.

When a baited client orders for the non-existent advertised clothes, the client is offered whatever is in stock as an alternative, with the excuse that whatever was advertised is 'sold out'. Some youth mentioned that although this is a survival tactic and a way to get customers, it is unethical, and it poses a challenge on sustainability and erodes trust even for legitimate online vendors.

Another issue that arose both in the focus group discussions and the one-on-one interviews was the presence of 'gatekeepers' to access meaningful digital jobs. On one hand, it literally meant that people who first accessed these opportunities are denying the same for others. Although this was contested by youth in Mombasa who mentioned that in the digital world, there is space for everybody. There were also respondents saying, 'I do not have anyone to show me how to go about it'. Meaning that there is need to have a guide. Which is paradoxical, given that there is a notion that cyberspace is 'open', a contrast of the opinions that other respondents gave. In part, this had to do with the level of confidence to use digital tools and devices, which is greatly linked to exposure and socio-economic class.

There is big desire for 'security' among some youth. When asking about their future aspirations for example, some mentioned the need for them to be employed. *Janet, 33, mentioned that what counts as a safe work is the perks that ensure you live a dignified life. For her, this was the presence of social security.



I need to know I will have pension when I retire someday, when I get unwell, I want to walk into a hospital without fear that I cannot pay my bills or that I can have paid maternity leave.... Uh, these things , we do not have them, and what is the point? To live..live like this with no safety? And then say you work...?

**| Janet, Kisumu**

During the period of the study, *Remotasks*, an online platform that links clients to service providers shut down their operations in Kenya. This meant that those that had projects or clients, then lost a source of income. 'You see, such happenings are the things that lead me to want a secure 9-5,' she reiterated. This search for job security, employment was more common among the older youth (30-35).

In terms of adjusting to the changing nature of work. Most youth reported that one must embrace dynamism. And this was one of the major reasons for fighting with the 'old guard' in workplaces. The generational differences present a challenge because it also meant ideological differences for perspectives on work. For example, most youth mentioned that they no longer found it meaningful to work regular hours from 8 am-5pm. 'It's 2024, we can't be working 9-5,' said *Millicent, 26-year-old based in Kisumu. During the Mombasa FGD, participants argued that the pandemic had shifted work culture and there was need for adjustment. It also became a common complaint among youth who were employed that they would prefer to work from home either fully or partially. 27-year-old *Francis complained that the workplace can be toxic, and he would like some personal space to work and that would mean at least 3 out of 5 days a week. He mentioned that this would optimise his performance at work because his mental health would be boosted. 'These are issues they [older generation] would not understand', he said.

Another aspect was the need for flexibility, to be able to get meaningful work. At the focus group discussion in Nakuru county, *Kelvin, 33, aptly described embracing the changing nature of what work means embracing irregularity of both income and routine.



.. Leo tuko forex. Kesho tuko maandamano. Kesho yake tunaenda kufanya kwa miradi ya NGO

**| Kelvin, Kisumu**

*[Today we work in the forex. Tomorrow we go for political demonstrations. The day after, we involve ourselves in various NGO projects.]*

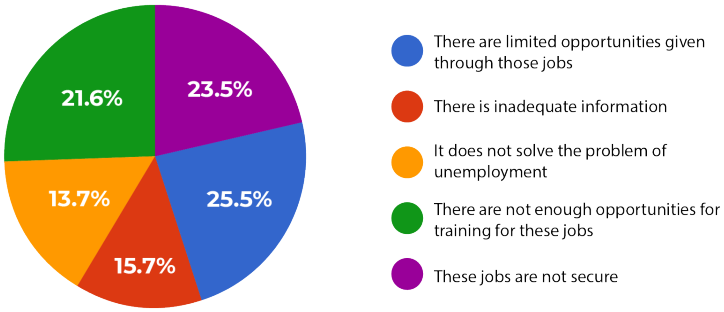
This irregularity also meant that one had to constantly upskill and/or diversify their skillsets. One therefore cannot be rigid, and expertise is often developed over time. This could also be observed from the shift in direction of what was studied at tertiary level vis-à-vis what is being performed at work.

## C. What do youth like/not like about government push for digital/online jobs?

**What youth like:** 54% of the respondents said they liked programmes such as Ajira which provided the training to equip the youth with skills needed for these digital/online job opportunities. 35% of the respondents like government push to popularise digital/online jobs because they provide an alternative employment opportunity and opportunity for 'self-employment' for interested persons. Other respondents felt that the government campaign has ensured there is adequate information on digital/online jobs, although 2% of respondents noted that the government is not doing much (could do more) through the Ajira and similar programmes.

**What youth don't like:** Among the respondent, a majority (25.5%) believe that there are very limited opportunities that digital/online jobs can offer. Most youth consider these jobs mostly as 'part-time' and short-term opportunities to enable one to keep up with economic hardships or as a 'landing space' as one is actively searching for a 'real' job.

*Figure 4: What youth dislike about the government push for digital jobs*
*What don't you like about the push for digital jobs*

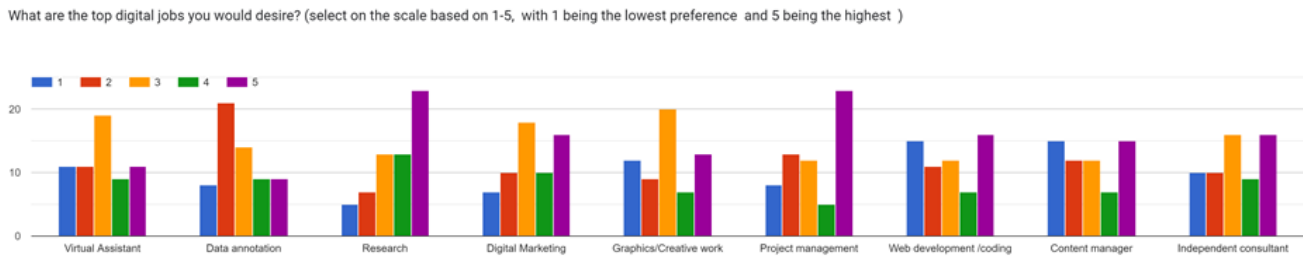



The second reason youth don't like the push and the jobs has to do with their lack of job security of the jobs as well as the lack of social protection. Reference is made to the recent termination of hundreds of Facebook workers in Kenya, the sudden closure of Remotasks operations and the exit of the Jumia food delivery services from Kenya highlights the vulnerability of workers in this emerging realm of work, and especially those who depend primarily on such digital platforms work for their livelihood.

Contrary to the first response, 22% believe that there is insufficient training and preparations for these job opportunities, while 14% of respondents believe that these jobs do not solve the unemployment problem. 16% believe that despite the government push, there is still lack of adequate information concerning the digital/online jobs.

## D. What kind of digital/online jobs do youth want or prefer?

The study respondents ranked jobs in a scale of 1-5 with '1' being the least desired and '5' being the most desired. The most desired virtual job is research and related opportunities, while data annotation is the least desired among the respondents. In part, this could be due to the respondents' current skill possession and career trajectories. However, there are jobs that had similar polarities such as the web development/ coding it was least desired and most desired by a similar number of respondents.




## E. What challenges are faced by youth in their pursuit of meaningful work?

**Lack of flexible structures and work spaces:** Some of the major challenges that youth face is the dynamism of the new workplace. This shift especially since the pandemic, has been sudden and it is affecting formal and informal workers alike. The desire for 'freedom' and 'flexibility' in spaces that do not adjust to the changing nature of work is a source of concern for some youth. For example, 25-year-old *Yassin, 25 works for an NGO and does not like the idea of going to the office every day. He also feels not taken seriously 'not being taken seriously and unheard as his opinions are often sidelined because he is young and less experienced. Yassin believes flexi-time should be incorporated in today's workplace as it would allow people like him to work from home and boost productivity and mental health.

**Constant need for Upskilling:** This is because, on one hand, one often needs resources and time to be able to do this. For those who are in formal full-time employment, they often fear missing out on the time to upskill. For example, 34-year-old *Karisa works as a paramedic and spends most of his time in the hospital feels he has no time to gain other skills outside his workplace. He fears that he is missing out on self-improvement and diversifying his skillset as compared to his peers who are freelancers and often must engage in multiple projects and constantly learn and re-learn.

**Access to hardware (devices):** Access to digital/online opportunities is limited only to those who have access to the devices (the right computer and mobile phone) and internet connectivity, but also the confidence levels which increases with exposure.

While many youth may have access to android mobile phones for instance, the study finds that there are several barriers to meaningful engagement of youth with digital opportunities. While many youth may have access to android mobile phones for instance, there is a limit to what can be done online from a mobile telephone.

**Access to 'software' of connectivity:** Taking advantage of digital opportunities presupposes access to electricity and internet bundles. As *Faith (28y.o) from Kibera points out:

'I do have a smartphone, but I do not have money to buy bundles all the time.' There is also the issue of access to data. The cost of data bundles is high and that also discourages engagement online. Faith further mentioned that one needs to have electricity all the time, and to her, this was not a luxury she always had access to.

Evidently, the several layers that predetermine digital engagement then limits one's dynamism for the future workplace.

**Networks, taxation and gatekeeping:** 'Is it all about who you know?' Some youth felt that networks are a fundamental determinant of success in finding, keeping and expanding work opportunities generally, including digital jobs where there are 'gatekeepers' who dominate the space. Both *Mohammed (31) and Khadija (27) argue that there are gatekeepers even in the digital spaces who may present barriers to entry and success for youth. Participants also raised the issue of taxation or threats of taxation for gig work by the government, noting the injustice of taxation despite government not providing any infrastructure for instance for content creators.



once the state discovers that youth are earning money, they want to grab the opportunity from them by exorbitantly taxing them yet there are no sources of income

**| Khadija, Nairobi**

**Access to capital vis-à-vis fear of loans:** According to youth, lack of capital is a significant hinderance to youth owned businesses. There is a paradox, that the lack of capital would exist despite the rise of digital lenders that allows youth to access quick loans and/or financial services including the 'hustler fund,' and others. However, youth fear that the more indebted one is, the more stressed they are likely to be, especially when dealing with the numerous predatory lenders, licenced or otherwise.

**The internship trap:** Since graduating from Kabarak University in 2022, 27-year-old *Edwin says he is still doing a series of internships, describing himself as a 'serial intern' and insisting that this case was not unique to him. He further added that he is being pushed to do other jobs like online writing and upskilling just to be able to get out of what he described as the 'internship trap.' For others like 30-year-old Zuleha from Mombasa, it was the lack of opportunity to take up these roles as she could not afford to take up an internship because it was unpaid and that even though the training could have been valuable, she needed a source of income at least to cater for her transport.

Criminalisation the joblessness and 'the Baze:' Police harassment and brutality is also a challenge for the youth. This was especially emphasized in the informal settlements in Nairobi. For instance, *Mark (25) shared the double challenge of being a youth and male in the informal settlements, as one is always a target of police brutality.



... because one has no job, it is always presumed that one is engaging in crime. We are criminalized, so I am a thug even though I did nothing. Police are always after me

**| Mark, Nairobi**

In Mombasa, the experience was similar among male youth. *Hassan Abubakar, 30 stated that due to the nature of his work he mostly looks for work at the 'baze.' The baze, to him is an important 'third space' for information and updates whether social or political. It is also an important space for networks and connections. This is where he is linked to work opportunities and therefore, it is a threat to his work when the baze is constantly shrinking due to police harassment.

## F. What are the future aspirations of youth in the context of the changing nature of work?

While the FGD participants in Nairobi, Kisumu and Mombasa counties showed optimism for a liveable future, Nakuru participants were the least optimistic, as their collective response to the question on 'future aspirations' elicited a near-unanimous response: 'What future?'

In relation to work and digitalisation, there is a shared growing concern by the youth that the growth of Artificial Intelligence is a threat to their future. *Josephine, a 28-year-old part-time online worker noted that even though digital jobs may look lucrative for now, some of these jobs include teaching machines how to do the work, and once the machines learn, they are likely to replace a significant number of human labour.

Additionally, the youth noted the obtaining global polycrisis, and raised concerns about how the multiple crises ranging from climate change, corruption, food crisis, wars and political and social upheavals, as well as disinformation and misinformation makes it much harder to focus on and plan for the future and 'security' especially economic security. This hopelessness is exacerbated by the fact that most digital/online jobs are gigs that are do not offer meaningful (or any) form of social security for the youth.

Digitalisation has also popularised the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) culture, further reducing the proportion of jobs that traditionally went to artisans and affecting job security. For instance, *Omar (29) from Mombasa is a mechanic noted that people can self-diagnose issues on their cars just by watching YouTube and Google to know the problems. For people like Omar, the growth of DIY that is empowered by increased digitalisation is becoming costly to them.

Yet all is not lost in hopelessness and gloom of possible bleak futures. Many youth still aspire to start their own businesses, like the 22-year-old *Suleiman who – inspired by his father's own business - hopes to one day have is own wholesale shop business. However, a considerable number of participating youth still hope to secure a full time traditional 9-5 job, driven by the quest for social security. Still, others pray for flexible jobs that can allow them to maximise their time, talent and be easy on their mental health.

# IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rapid transformations are happening in the world of work, aided by increasing internet connectivity and the emergence of digital job opportunities. Innovative approaches to work are challenging old ways of work and working. Generational gaps exist and determine perspectives and attitudes towards work. These transformations are happening faster than the requisite legal and regulatory frameworks can cope, resulting in potential vulnerabilities for workers, particularly the youth who dominate the digital/online workspace. Overall, youth appreciate the potential of these opportunities for their own economic empowerment through earning an honest livelihood. Youth also want these jobs to meet the minimum threshold for decent jobs, including fairness and dignity.

As the government is seizing on these opportunities to redirect national demands for jobs towards the largely 'ungoverned' digital platforms, there is a need for new and/or improved policy standards and legal instruments to ensure the potential vulnerabilities do not undermine the promise of digitalisation as an enabler of economic growth and socio-economic empowerment of Kenyan youth through liveable jobs.

In view of the above, the study makes the following recommendation for policymakers, legislators, youth and youth-serving organisations, big-tech companies and their local BPO partners, among others:

1. **The convergence of labour, technology and human rights requires new tools to minimise exploitation and other vulnerabilities for the new digital workers. Developing and enforcing new policy and regulatory frameworks will be critical.**
2. **Deepen government popularisation efforts, accompanied by sufficient and accurate information to empower youth to make informed choices and access to devices and/or equipment.**
3. **Government has a duty of care to its citizens, hence there is need to shift government's focus from 'any jobs' to 'quality jobs' that meet the minimum threshold of decent and dignifying work devoid of exploitation and rights violations.**
4. **Review, update and enforce conditions of entry by BPOs and big-tech into the Kenyan market, with a focus on accountability and compliance with the provisions of the Constitution of Kenya.**
5. **Expand the scope of the preparatory training under existing government initiatives like Ajira Programme for interested youth, to include post-training support, linkages with capital, as well support for equipment for those in need.**
6. **Reduce duplication for political expediency, and develop well-thought, long-term, sustainable 'Digital Skills Improvement and Opportunity' programmes that survive multiple political regimes, to enable learning and improvement.**
7. **Digitalisation will bring new opportunities. It will also eradicate others or reduce significantly the human agency required to do them. Adaptation, upskilling and attitude change will be key to surviving and thriving in the emerging digital workspace across all sectors of the economy.**

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# VI. ANNEXURES

## Annex 01: Detailed Participants' Demographic Profiles

**Geographic scope:** The research covered the four urban city counties of Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu and Nakuru. Participants were contacted and selected through pre-existing networks of youth-led and youth-serving organisations as described in the methodology section.

**Gender and Age:** Slightly more women (51.6%) were interviewed as compared to men (48.4%). All participants either described themselves as male or female, with none identifying themselves outside of this binary.
70% of the respondents were between the ages of 18-29, 23% were between the ages of 30-34, while a smaller percentage (7%) of the respondents were above 35 years. In terms of gender distribution based on age; for the age range of 18-24; 50% identified as female and 50% were male. For the ages 25-29; 65% were female and 55% were male. While for the ages 30-34; 60% were female while 40% were male. For those above age 35, 80% were male while 20% were female.

*Figure 1: Percentage of male and female respondents*
*Gender*

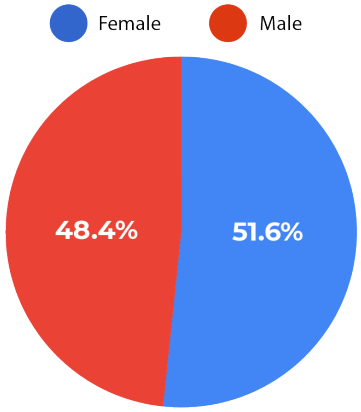
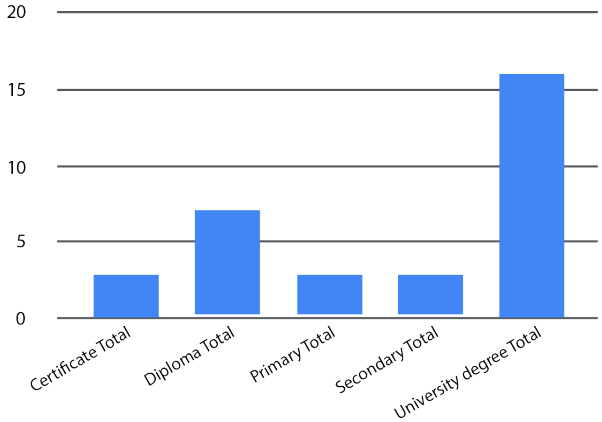
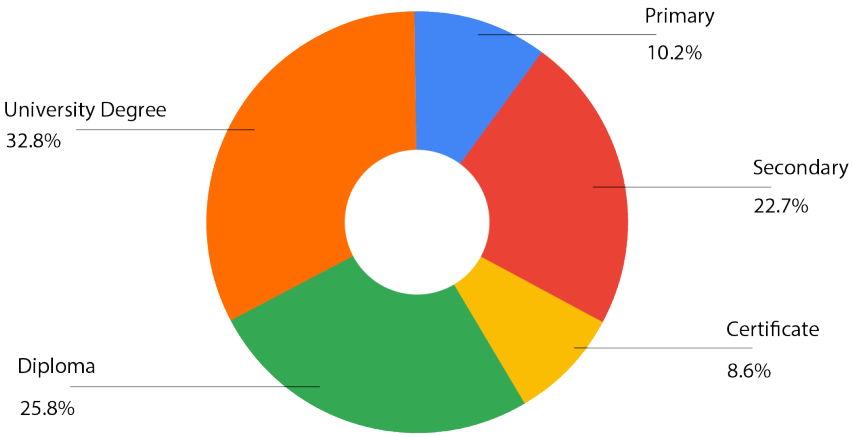



*Figure 4: Chart showing the number of youth that received additional training vis-a vis their level of education*
*Number of yout who received additional raining based on their education level*



**Educational Achievement:** The education levels varied among the participants with most participants (67.2%) having obtained or in the process of obtaining tertiary education. This is partly because university students were involved in the research and were affiliated to the partners of Siasa Place. For instance, in Mombasa County, most of the participants were students and Ajenda Kenya works closely with the Technical University of Mombasa.

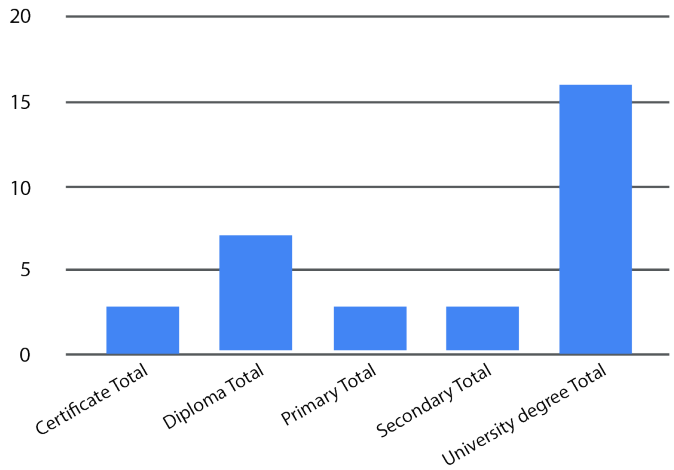
***Figure 2: Level of education of participants.***




Respondents had studied a variety of courses, including social work, development studies, computer science, marine engineering, human resource management, law, media and journalism, geology, hair and beauty as well as hospitality. Some participants had undergone additional training for skills required for the job market, including benefiting from government programmes such as *Ajira Digital* and the *Jitume Programme* whose upskilling prepares individuals for online jobs. Others engaged in self-paced and self-taught courses with online instructions and engagement such as Coursera course on corporate management. While majority of respondents had a university degree, the highest level of education obtained amongst the research participants was a master's degree.

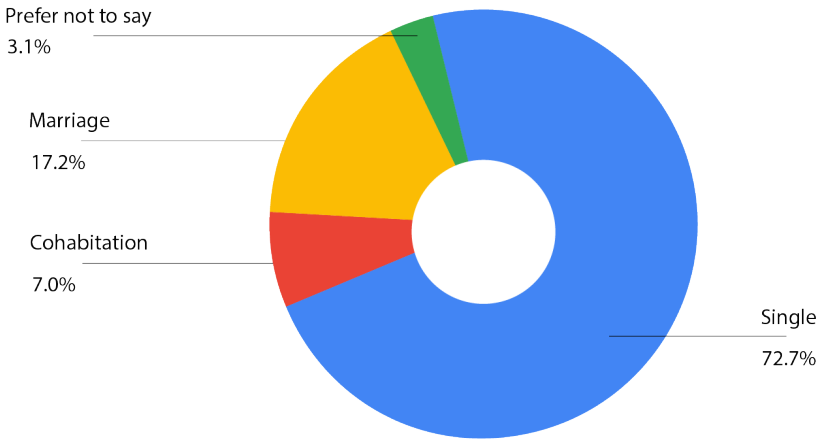
***Figure 4: Chart showing the number of youth that received additional training vis-a vis their level of education***

*Number of yout who received additional raining based on their education level*



**Marital Status:** Most participants were single. By single they meant that they were not married, and they were not co-habiting, but were involved in romantic relationships. Others were not in any romantic relationship at all. In summary, 72% of the participants were single, 17.2% were married, while 7% were co-habiting. Only 3% of the participants opted to not reveal their relationship status.

***Figure 5: Pie chart visualising the marital status of the respondents***
*Marital status*




## Annex 02: Detailed Methodological Note

### Entry into the Field

The rapid study was conducted in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu and Nakuru within the month of March 2024. The primary target was youth in urban environments given the digitalisation aspects of the study. The choice of the study counties was also informed by the fact that these counties are city counties, and thus boast of significant levels of urbanisation. Given the time constraints of conducting the study, there was need to use the existing networks, hence the reliance of the networks of youth organisations with existing partnership and/or collaboration relationships with Siasa Place.

**Nairobi**

In Nairobi, various contacts of Siasa Place were used to be able to get in touch with different research participants. In addition, there was a festival that took place in early March 2024. The People Dialogue Festival (PDF) took place at the University of Nairobi. PDF is an initiative by the Centre for Multiparty Democracy (CMD-Kenya) aimed at shaping the discourse around critical issues by bringing together leaders and people to engage in meaningful conversations about pressing challenges and opportunities facing the broader society in Kenya. This festival provided an opportunity to meet a range of youth from different walks of life. While many included university students, there were some who worked for various organisations, self-employed and the unemployed.

The PDF was the first point of contact, and I observed the nature of the festival. These entailed panel discussions, entertainment arenas, exhibitors included Non-profit youth centred organisations, student-led initiatives, political parties, and social movements who run different initiatives for the youth including mentorship. Because this was the first entry point into the research, it set a tone for excitement of youth engagement. The interviews conducted here were random selection and voluntary participation. A semi-structured interview was used as a guide to have face-to-face interviews with the participant. On average, an

interview lasted 10-15 minutes. The festival was running for four days from 6th-9th March. 22 interviews were conducted over the course of 2 days.

The other interviews in Nairobi were carried out in informal settlements. They were convened by partners of Siasa Place, who are community organisers that facilitated this research in Kibera and Mathare respectively. In Kibera, the research took place at Slum Peace and Empowerment Centre (SPEC) which houses youth volunteers dedicated to enhancing public health in their communities. Here, 8 were interviewed. While in Mathare, 15 interviews took place in an open space that is lent to community members for events. The bulk of the research participants were drawn from Nairobi on the basis that there was more time to do the fieldwork in Nairobi as compared to other counties.

**Mombasa**

In Mombasa, a community forum on youth participation in governance was held at the Majengo Social Hall. Attended by students, community members and workers, it was from this community forum that 30 youth were drawn and interviewed for the study. A Focus Group Discussion was held the following day at the Ajenda Kenya offices, with a group of 15 youth who comprised of students, professionals and some community members.

**Kisumu**

In Kisumu, 30 key informant interviews were conducted on the sidelines of an event on the challenges that Kenyan youth face while seeking employment and work, held at the YWCA Kisumu. The focus group discussion was conducted the following day with an additional 12 participants.

**Nakuru**

Tribeless Youth uses art, music, digital media and other forms of creativity to demystify the ideologies of "my tribe, my people" to promote peaceful coexistence and unity among Kenyan youth. The organisation held a debate on Governance and Leadership, attendance from whose select participants a Focus Group Discussion was conducted, as well as key informant interviews with 22 participants from the debate were interviewed.




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