Today, the world is home to the largest generation of youth in history, with 1.8 billion individuals aged between 10 to 24 years.1 According to the recently released Uganda Bureau of Statistics National Population and Housing Census 2024 Preliminary Report, persons aged 18 – 30 years constitute 22.7 percent of Uganda’s population while those under 30 years of age are 73.2 percent.2 This demography is the nation’s resource for future growth and development, a reservoir of industry leaders, local innovators, cutting edge researchers, academics, and champions of sports and arts. They are the age cohort that is also experiencing a confluence of multidimensional challenges, which has been coined by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as a polycrisis. Whether it be the climate crisis, pandemic outbreaks, global conflicts, cost of living crises, growing poverty and inequality, negative consequences of digital technologies, all have the potential to threaten their demographic dividend.

Young people possess energy, creativity, idealism and can use their position and the advantages of their youth to contribute systematically to human history to drive positive change, foster innovation, and promote sustainable development, though their contribution must be systematically harnessed. Strengthening access to education, knowledge and skills presents a foundational opportunity to harness this growing potential, strengthen youth agency and build preparedness to navigate complex development challenges.

In 2014, the United Nations General Assembly declared 15 July as World Youth Skills Day to recognize the strategic importance of equipping young people with skills for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship, as well as for addressing global challenges and advancing sustainable development. This year, we join Uganda in commemorating World Youth Skills Day under the theme “Youth Skills for Peace and Development”. Supporting youth to access education and skills, especially rural youth and those living far from cities, goes beyond improving access to sustainable sources of incomes. It also advances improvements in a variety of other conditions of life in general, strengthening a sense of shared purpose, trust and willingness to cooperate, including with institutions of governance.

Skills have always been pivotal to human progress, enabling individuals to adapt, innovate, and contribute to their societies. As part of its broader strategy for economic development and poverty reduction, the Government of Uganda has prioritized youth skilling. Through strategic policy, regulatory measures and skilling initiatives, the Government has focused on equipping young people with relevant skills and tools to enhance productivity, promote economic development, and improve livelihoods across the country. Initiatives such as the Presidential Initiative on Skilling the Girl, Boy Child; Presidential Initiative on Wealth and Job Creation (Emyooga); and Youth Livelihoods Programmes reflect the Government’s commitment to enhancing youth skilling.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has also been at the forefront of promoting skills development as a crucial component of sustainable development. In collaboration with the Government and several partners, UNDP has implemented initiatives to empower young people and vulnerable communities such as refugees with the skills needed to enable them, especially women and girls, to respond collectively to achieve their valued shared outcomes of economic empowerment while also addressing the social stresses they face on a day-to-day basis. We have supported youth-led enterprises and inspire innovative ideas and business models with a commercial imperative; reskilled, upskilled and retooled young people including refugees to increase their competitiveness in the Fourth Industrial Revolution; and established and refurbished technical spaces to foster innovation, mentorship and networking.

Challenges
While progress has been made in promoting youth skills development for peace and development, significant challenges persist including gender disparities, challenging cultural dispensations, geographical inequalities, mismatch between skills and job market demands, and socio-economic barriers that constrain access to quality education and training opportunities. Additionally, the global economy is evolving at an unprecedented pace driven by technological advancements, demographic changes, shifting market demands and global challenges like climate change which are reshaping the world of work and transforming the landscape of employment opportunities for youth. Traditionally valued skills such as literacy and numeracy remain fundamental, but today’s world demands a broader set of competencies necessitating the need for a shift in youth skilling. Such shifts have been slow and unevenly distributed across the demography. However, the current environment presents many opportunities to accelerate and deepen such shifts with a rapidly expanding internet and compute backbone in Uganda, being driven by the National Digitalisation Roadmap.

Looking Ahead
The emergence of disruptive technology and evolving economic landscapes, compounded by geopolitical and sociocultural disruptions, has revolutionized industries and transformed businesses resulting in profound labour-market transformations. Technological breakthroughs such as the coming-of-age of artificial intelligence (AI), Cloud and Blockchain, Augmented and Virtual Reality (AR/VR) have created new avenues of growth – reshaping the way firms operate. Digital transformation has also created boundless opportunities and demand for new skills paving the way for innovative careers and entrepreneurial ventures in emerging sectors such as cybersecurity, data science, renewable energy, and creative arts.

The proliferation of digital media and online platforms has also increased demand for content creators, digital marketers, UX/UI designers, and multimedia specialists. Digital technologies have enabled remote work and freelance opportunities, allowing firms to outsource work to companies or start their own business from anywhere in the world. A 2023 report by the World Economic Forum posits that AI, machine learning (ML), big data analytics, climate solutions and environmental management technologies, as well as encryption and cybersecurity, are expected to be the biggest drivers of job growth.3 Equipping youth with these digital competencies not only enhances their employability but also empowers them to contribute meaningfully to fostering peace and inclusive development.

Uganda, like many countries worldwide, is increasingly embracing AI and ML technologies to drive innovation and address various challenges. For instance, AI and ML technologies are being used for crop disease detection, soil health monitoring, predictive analytics for weather patterns, and optimizing agricultural practices. AI has revolutionised healthcare in Uganda following its use in image analysis and diagnostics; transformed financial inclusion by expanding access to financial services through digital banking solutions and mobile payment platforms; and been adopted to advance wildlife conservation efforts and monitoring deforestation.

The creative economy has also emerged as a transformative force, offering youth avenues for economic empowerment, cultural expression, and societal enrichment. For instance, Nigeria’s film industry – Nollywood - stands as a beacon of creativity, storytelling prowess and economic opportunity contributing an estimated USD $600 million to the Nigerian economy annually and employing 300,000 people directly and up to 1 million indirectly.4 Integrating the creative economy into youth skilling initiatives can play a vital role in fostering innovation, promoting cultural diversity, providing economic opportunities, and strengthening social cohesion.

Call to Action
The landscape of youth skilling is rich with emerging opportunities that promise to shape the future of work and economic prosperity globally. We must empower young people with ever-evolving abilities to seize these opportunities. This includes integrating emerging technologies into skills development programs, and promoting skills development programs that embrace diversity and inclusivity. Building and sustaining these youth abilities with a focus on women and girls is especially important considering they constitute over half the population of Uganda. Skills development also needs to be seen in the direction of improving material conditions, while improving relationships at different levels, strengthening inclusion and social integration, and addressing the challenging issue of equality across the society. In this way, skilling presents a direct contribution to development and peace. Empowering youth with the skills and opportunities to contribute to peacebuilding, social cohesion, and economic prosperity is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic investment in global prosperity and stability. Only by doing so can we unlock the potential of young people as catalysts for positive change in their communities and beyond.

Happy World Youth Skills Day 2024.
The Kalaha University Business Incubation Centre has been established as a tailored incubation program with structured business development activities that have clear deliverables at every stage to help young innovators and youth-led startups innovate and grow. This initiative is designed to tap into the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit of young people to promote the growth of the creative economy.

Fostering Innovation in Uganda’s Public Universities

Launched in 2024, the Makerere University UniPod is one of 13 UniPods to be established across the continent under UNDP’s Technology Initiative, a new development model that aims to transform Africa’s public universities into centres of innovation. The initiative is designed to tap into the talents and entrepreneurial spirit of young people to promote innovation and entrepreneurship, foster innovation and influence business solutions to address youth unemployment on the continent. The 200-capacity UniPod is open to all impact-driven entrepreneurship, foster innovation, and influence business solutions to address youth unemployment on the continent. The initiative aims to transform Africa’s public universities into centres of innovation.

UNDP has implemented interventions to empower and develop young people in collaboration with the Government of Uganda and partners, placing emphasis on the leadership and agency of youth in the country’s sustainable development journey. This concurrent effort underscores the commitment to nurturing the potential of Uganda’s youth and promoting their active role in shaping a sustainable future.

UNDP’s Youth4Business Innovation and Entrepreneurship Facility, launched by H.E. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, President of the Republic of Uganda, has served as a catalyst for innovation by enabling youth to pilot and implement sustainable and community-driven innovative ideas and solutions. The five-100 initiative provided youth-led micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) with technical assistance, concessional loans, and flexible funding mechanisms to accelerate recovery from social and economic shocks. The initiative has expanded 150 new desert jobs for youth, retained and skilled 850 youth and had a multiplier effect through the creation of over 100,000 indirect jobs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing that creative initiatives are a vital force in accelerating human development and socioeconomic transformation, UNDP’s Creatives Innovation Challenge has empowered 40 creative enterprises in the areas of visual and performing arts, fashion design, writing, and publishing, digital media, film, and animation, through business incubation and acceleration support, equipping creative entrepreneurs with the knowledge, tools, and skills to be built scalable businesses with potential for job creation.

Green Recovery and Digitalization to rebuild a Resilient Tourism Sector

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures, UNDP in partnership with the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, Uganda Tourism Board (UTB), and Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), has harnessed nature-based solutions and digital technologies to accelerate recovery of Uganda’s tourism sector following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through the UNDP’s regional tourism initiative, the Uganda Host and Refugee Community Empowerment Project (UHRCEP), UNDP has supported skills development for employment and entrepreneurship through workshops, equipping young people and refugees with vocational and entrepreneurial skills, and supporting the digital transformation of Uganda’s creative economy.

Value Chain Development

UNDP is encouraging inclusive and sustainable economic growth through value chain development, fostering partnerships with the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) and other organizations to address challenges and opportunities in Uganda’s coffee value chain and beyond. Through the Uganda Host and Refugee Community Empowerment Project (UHRCEP), UNDP and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) have collaborated to support youth-led startups in the coffee sector through the Islamic Development Bank’s Value Chain Initiative for Africa.

In partnership with IsDB, UNDP continues to support youth engagement, job creation, and entrepreneurial ventures in Uganda’s coffee sector. Through the Islamic Development Bank’s Value Chain Initiative for Africa, UNDP-supported coffee cooperatives are creating jobs and opportunities for youth and women in the coffee sector. Through the Islamic Development Bank’s Value Chain Initiative for Africa, UNDP-supported coffee cooperatives are creating jobs and opportunities for youth and women in the coffee sector. Through the Islamic Development Bank’s Value Chain Initiative for Africa, UNDP-supported coffee cooperatives are creating jobs and opportunities for youth and women in the coffee sector.