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STATE OF THE EVIDENCE UPDATE: Scaling and Sustaining Youth Workforce Outcomes Through Systems Changes

Part of the USAID Learning Series: Youth Workforce Development in 2022: What Have We Learned?

After four years advancing learning through its Youth Workforce Development Learning Agenda, USAID initiated a process in 2022 to review new evidence related to the learning questions. Toward this end, the USAID Center for Education commissioned a team of researchers to conduct a desk review, from which a series of **State of the Evidence Updates** offers a short synopsis of learning around some of USAID’s current learning agenda themes.

With over two decades of investment in youth workforce development (YWFD) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), USAID and its development partners have an increased understanding of the kinds of services and supports that improve YWFD outcomes.ⁱ At this juncture the Agency is interested in deepening the evidence base about how larger numbers of and more diverse youth are able to access better and more equitable skills and employment opportunities over time.^{ii, iii} The premise of this brief is that the scaling of YWFD outcomes—and doing so equitably and sustainably—is predicated on some form of change, or series of changes, at the systems level.^{iv, v.}¹ This State of the Evidence Update highlights examples of transformative changes within and across local systems that have enabled the sustainability and scaling of YWFD outcomes in low- and middle-income countries.

ⁱ Over the years a number of rigorous randomized control trials have isolated the effects of different program components such as education and training, soft skills development, small business training, work exposure or work-based learning, and/or extending youths’ access to capital. USAID has prepared a series of evidence briefs on these topics, available at: <https://www.edulinks.org/resources/StateoftheEvidenceYouthWorkforceDevelopment>.

ⁱⁱ A 2017 systematic review of youth workforce development noted that a large proportion of evidence from low- and middle-income countries was “predominantly based on experimental impact evaluations of small-scale, targeted interventions, which were often implemented by NGOs or international organizations,” and that more information is needed to understand what can be replicated or scaled up. Source: Jochen Kluge et al., “Interventions to Improve the Labour Market Outcomes of Youth: A Systematic Review of Training, Entrepreneurship Promotion, Employment Services and Subsidized Employment Interventions,” *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 13 (2017): 151, 154.

ⁱⁱⁱ A 2021 issue paper defines scaling as “achieving sustainable impact at (large) scale.” See Richard Kohl, *Scaling and Systems: Issue Paper* (Scaling Up Community of Practice, 2021).

^{iv} USAID defines *systems* as “interconnected sets of actors—governments, civil society, the private sector, universities, individual citizens and others—that jointly produce a particular development outcome.” See USAID, *Local Systems: A Framework for Supporting Sustained Development* (Washington, D.C.: 2014), 4.

^v USAID’s Local Capacity Strengthening Policy notes: “In any local system, achieving and sustaining any development outcome depends on the contributions of multiple and interconnected actors. . . it is their commitment to exercising power with one another and their shared responsibility for tackling a common development challenge that binds them together as a local system.” See USAID, *Local Capacity Strengthening Policy* (Washington, D.C.: USAID), 10.

With decades of investment in LMICs, international YWFD has only limited evidence of sustained improvement of outcomes at scale.^{vi} While the field is learning more and more about the isolated interventions that lead to improved YWFD outcomes among a select population,² relatively little is known about how YWFD outcomes can be improved sustainably, equitably, and at scale across a system. For instance, a 2020 review of 11 USAID youth activities (including 6 YWFD activities) found that “the majority of activities relied on a relatively traditional perspective of achieving sustainability of scale—a perspective rooted in introducing a service delivery innovation (or proof of concept), with the expectation or hope that interventions would be adopted by local system actors.”³ This evidence brief seeks to answer the question: How can USAID and other donor-funded programs facilitate positive, more inclusive YWFD outcomes, at scale and over time, that are locally driven by YWFD system actors?

This brief is based on a rapid desk review of publicly available online literature on scaling and systems change in youth workforce development in LMICs. Using a predetermined taxonomy of internet search terms, the research team focused on literature from donor-funded international development YWFD programs, and those for which there were investments in reporting, evaluation, and learning on the topic of scaling and/or systems change.^{vii, viii} In total, the research team reviewed over 100 documents and prioritized 13+ examples (Annex 1) that demonstrated evidence of improved YWFD outcomes at scale, had documented impact on young people specifically, and offered robust documentation of systems change efforts. The team then mapped the data from these examples against an analytic framework, the [Youth Systems Framework](#),^{ix} to identify salient lessons learned and a set of recommendations for USAID and implementing partners.



WHAT DO “SCALING” AND “SYSTEMS CHANGE” LOOK LIKE IN YOUTH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEMS IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES?

YWFD programs that reported scaling and systems change efforts demonstrated great variation in the intended impact, the breadth and depth of impact, the theory of change, and the types of interventions and partnerships.

The 13 initiatives examined for this brief (see Annex 1) represent a range of interventions, including career centers for university or technical and vocational education and training (TVET) students, peer mentoring for adolescent girls and rural youth, integrated holistic work readiness and job intermediation services for vulnerable youth, private-sector-led skills development and job creation through co-investments, promoting media-based labor market information, and an online job matching platform. To achieve their scaling strategies, these programs often developed a breadth of partnerships with national and local government actors, employers and lead firms, the financial sector, nongovernmental organizations and private service providers, the media, and youth leaders and youth-led organizations. The time frames of these YWFD initiatives ranged from 4 to 13 years, with an average time frame of roughly 8 years.

^{vi} Such outcomes include demonstrated skills gains and improved access to education, employment and earnings, with impacts particularly among youth who have been traditionally marginalized from education and employment opportunities such as out-of-school youth, young women, youth with disability, young migrants, and youth affected by conflict and violence.

^{vii} Several YWFD systems change efforts led by national governments have been well documented; for example, the World Bank applied its SABER-WfD tool to examine national workforce development systems in 27 countries between 2011 and 2014. See J. P. Tan et al., *Workforce Development in Emerging Economies: Comparative Perspectives on Institutions, Praxis, and Policies* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2016). Moreover, OECD conducted a series of studies of post-secondary technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems, including in-depth reports for 20 countries, and shorter briefs for 15 additional countries, including the following USAID partners: Egypt, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Peru, South Africa, Thailand, Vietnam. See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Skills Beyond School: Synthesis Report* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2014).

^{viii} The research team found select examples of locally led initiatives with large-scale YWFD impact; however, there was little to no documentation of the approaches or lessons learned from these examples. For example, in India, two civil society organizations, [Yuva Parvatan](#) and [Pratham Institute](#), have reported wide reach in training and employing marginalized youth across the country.

^{ix} The Youth Systems Framework, developed by the Youth Systems Collaborative, suggests that five core enablers advance change across four domains of youth systems in low- and middle-income countries. The five enablers are: *stakeholder collaboration*; *vision and goals*; *systems mapping*; *data, evaluation, and learning*; and *capacity development*. And the four domains are *policies, services and practices, norms and mindsets*, and *resource flows*. See Ignatowski et al., “Building Youth Infrastructure: Early Lessons From the Youth Systems Collaborative,” *Journal of Youth Development* 16, no. 2–3 (2021).

Overall, this suggests YWFD programs have used a variety of approaches to intentionally and purposefully scale YWFD outcomes and promote systems change.

Although there was great variability in impact, the case studies revealed four common pathways by which donor-funded programs have supported YWFD systems change in LMICs. Evidence from donor-funded projects indicates that these four pathways contribute to improved youth education and employment outcomes at scale (see Annex I). These are:

1. **Institutionalization:** This entails introduction of a YWFD innovation (new or improved curricula, services, or practices) directly into a public education system.
2. **Attractor model:** A private service provider or group of providers develops a YWFD innovation, and their success attracts or encourages other actors to replicate, adapt, and/or scale similar or complementary practices.
3. **Youth-inclusive market systems development:** A youth-focused adaptation of market systems development, this approach works through market actors to strengthen the performance of economic markets and make them more inclusive of the poor.
4. **Collective impact:** This approach mobilizes diverse stakeholders at the local level to collectively identify and implement place-based, local solutions for youth skills development and employment.

Each strategy has implications in terms of approach, partnerships, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning. USAID YWFD activities would benefit from a better understanding of the trajectories of each pathway, and from using these models to incorporate explicit strategies for sustainability and scaling within activity implementation plans and evaluations.

To date, YWFD systems change efforts have been documented through several methods, and one can learn from these experiences to capture future YWFD systems change efforts in more robust ways.

Notably, the Brookings Institution's Millions Learning project has been documenting YWFD case studies in real time alongside its partners in Jordan, Tanzania, and Uganda.⁴ The Global Opportunity Youth Network (GOYN) is supporting similar learning labs that are making research, case studies, and other resources available to its global and local partners in nine countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.⁵ The International Youth Foundation (IYF) commissioned a series of outcome harvesting exercises to capture the systems change experiences of its diverse partners in Mozambique and Tanzania, and to determine whether the TVET sectors in these countries have taken up and are scaling life skills and career guidance in a sustainable way.⁶ Helvetas commissioned a case study examining Risi Albania project documents, academic journal and online articles to capture the experiences of its media systems change approach. Harambee, the Education Development Center, and World Learning conducted internal retrospective studies on the role of their programs in YWFD systems change. Two organizations, Chemonics (Uganda Youth Leadership for Agriculture/YLA)⁷ and FHI 360 (Morocco/USAID Career Centers),⁸ documented their systems change efforts within their final project reporting.

These efforts represent only a portion of what is possible in terms of developing and/or testing the use of complexity-aware monitoring, participatory evaluation approaches, diagnostic frameworks, and other methods in capturing the system-level impacts of YWFD initiatives.



WHAT COMMON LESSONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM THE EXISTING BODY OF EVIDENCE ABOUT “WHAT WORKS” TO FACILITATE SYSTEMS CHANGE FOR YWFD OUTCOMES, AND WHAT DO THOSE LESSONS IMPLY FOR FUTURE USAID ACTIVITIES?

Most initiatives indicated that they were designed with an explicit strategy for scaling and systems change. In some cases, the project's systems approach was made explicit from the outset (Uganda YLA, RisiAlbania, Jordan National Financial Education Program/FEP, Morocco Career Centers, GOYN); in other cases, the strategy for

scaling and systems change formed through an evolutionary process (Harambee in South Africa, Akazi Kanoze in Rwanda, Educate! in Uganda, Learner Guides in Tanzania). Most projects were implemented in phases over several years, sometimes as separate sequential projects. Some were not even considered to be “projects,” as in Jordan (FEP), South Africa (Harambee), and Uganda (Educate!) where the initiatives continue today after 13+ years. Many initiatives report that the successful progression of these phases relied on the intentionality of their scaling strategy; in fact, programs that had difficulty moving beyond the pilot stage acknowledged that they were not initially designed to scale, such as the Tanzania Learner Guide program.⁹

It has long been established that YWFD outcomes improve through multi-stakeholder collaboration among and between government agencies, the private sector, community institutions, and young people,^{10, 11} and the same principle held true for these case studies. Nearly all the programs noted that their success depended on the involvement of diverse stakeholders, including national and local government bodies, the private sector, civil society, and young people. Both the institutionalization and attractor model efforts emphasized the importance of aligning program efforts with government priorities as well as the needs and demands of both the private sector and young people.^x In Jordan, the successful institutionalization of the FEP was largely attributed to its ability to engage the Central Bank, the Ministry of Education, and INJAZ Jordan (a nongovernmental organization) through “a public-private partnership (PPP) model that broke with traditional ways of working and brought together contributions from diverse actors for funding, advocacy, and implementation.”¹² In Mozambique, where a new soft skills curriculum was institutionalized in the TVET system, an outcome harvesting report found that involving several different government agencies in the curriculum reform took time, but generated ownership and increased the likelihood of sustainability. This collaboration also helped system actors—including government representatives themselves—better understand the formal processes and governance structures through which reforms take place.¹³

In comparison, although there is only burgeoning evidence on the effects of collective impact models on YWFD outcomes in LMICs,¹⁴ the collaborative infrastructure of the GOYN has been rooted in the premise that identifying and addressing the root causes of youth unemployment can only be achieved through the leadership and involvement of a wide range of stakeholders.^{xi} To generate a broad participation, a few initiatives found value in a systems mapping process^{xii} that brought together these diverse perspectives. In Morocco, for example, FHI 360 facilitated a “whole system in the room” workshop to mobilize partners to agree to a common roadmap for establishing the Career Centers.¹⁵

In at least six initiatives, the intermediary partner served in a facilitative role^{xiii} that was instrumental to the systems change process. An intermediary partner, also known as an “intermediary,” “backbone organization,” or “anchor partner,” is an organization that plays a central facilitative role in the systems change process, mobilizing stakeholders and driving continued momentum for each to collaborate and take action. In many cases, the role of the backbone partner evolved throughout the scaling journey. Several international organizations served in this intermediary role, while only a handful of the initiatives were facilitated by a local organization. In Jordan, INJAZ filled this role in setting up FEP; once the curriculum was handed over to the Ministry of Education, INJAZ began to shift its role to support the Ministry with implementation.¹⁶ In Algeria, while World Learning served as the primary facilitator during the Youth Employment Project (YEP), career center directors took the initiative to establish a national career federation to

^x Similarly, the Brookings Millions Learning Real-time Scaling Labs found that scaling should be approached as “responding to a deeply perceived need, rather than leading with a predetermined solution and then ‘searching’ for a problem to solve.” Its 2020 report recommends joint planning and engagement with government from the start. Source: Jenny Perlman Robinson et al., *Millions Learning Real-time Scaling Labs—Emerging Findings and Key Insights* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2020).

^{xi} According to the ILO, “The design of skills development interventions need to involve a wide range of stakeholders of the skills system and interventions need to be designed with them to address the root causes of identified problems . . .” (Skoog and Ripley 2022, 13).

^{xii} Systems mapping is a process by which stakeholders understand the parameters and dynamics of the system that produces a desired outcome. “It involves developing a collective understanding of who is (or should be) part of the system, who has power and who does not, and who has formal roles and responsibilities and who is operating informally. Identifying the institutional and individual actors in a system means also understanding their capacities, the rules that govern them, the patterns of behavior among them, and existing incentive (or disincentive) structures” (Ignatowski et al. 2021, 85). For more, search the [USAID Learning Lab](#).

^{xiii} Refer to J. Kania and M. Kramer, M. (2011, Winter). “Collective Impact,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9, no. 1 (2011); and S. Turner et al., (2012, July). “Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 2,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (2012).

support expanding the career centers to other sites.¹⁷ Educate! in Uganda, EDC in Rwanda, and Harambee in South Africa all found that as their credibility and partnership network grew over time, they played a larger backbone role in the YWFD ecosystem. Today, Harambee considers itself a “pathway manager” in addressing South Africa’s inclusive economic growth.¹⁸

A learning paper by GOYN notes: “It is important to align Anchor Partners’ interests between their existing organizational mandate and programs and the new role they take on as intermediaries in an ecosystem. Anchor Partners need to develop a mindset that considers how to develop partnerships and raise funds to advance the whole ecosystem, not just their own programmatic or institutional priorities.”¹⁹

When describing their transformative impact, most initiatives indicated that they observed significant shifts in stakeholder mindsets. Only two projects appeared to measure or capture widespread behavioral and attitudinal changes among diverse system stakeholders, indicating this may be an area of interest for future research.^{xiv} Projects commonly measured the shifts in perceived self-confidence and other soft skills among the youth participants. Many initiatives indicated that they had observed mindset shifts among other system actors, such as changes in school-level behaviors and attitudes around collaboration with the private sector; public attitudes and practices related to the value of soft skills; youth and family perceptions about the type of work that is valued; employer stigmas around employing marginalized youth or young women; or families’ perceptions about the value of a TVET education.

Although measurements of these mindset shifts were not always evident, two exceptions stand out. First, the outcome harvesting exercise from Tanzania’s Via program found that the program led to unexpected shifts in teacher behaviors (avoiding skipping working days, listening more, and mediating conflict between students in the classroom), improved relationships between vocational centers and employers in Tanzania, and expanded learning between vocational centers.²⁰ Second, while several projects described how they strategically used data and developed targeted information materials or campaigns to shape attitudes and motivate changed behaviors, the RisiAlbania program stood out by measuring these changes with a post-intervention survey among youth, family members, and employers. The program had used a “media systems change” strategy to increase the role of media as a provider of labor market information at scale and in a sustainable way.²¹ A post-intervention survey found that 71 percent of respondents said the media products changed their perceptions around employment. Another 32 percent said that the media programs had directly influenced their choices about education/training or a job search.²²

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Improving YWFD outcomes at scale relied on the financial and non-financial contributions of diverse partners. Scaling strategies among a large majority of YWFD initiatives relied on public sector financing, but that was only part of the puzzle. A key to success for the integration of the FEP curriculum in Jordan’s secondary schools was leveraging financing from the Central Bank of Jordan, private banks, and government institutions.²³ Harambee’s job-matching platform was initially funded as a social investment by Yellowwoods, an investment holding company in South Africa, but soon accessed public funds. Ultimately this partnership led to the creation of South Africa’s first social impact bond (SIB).²⁴ SIBs represent an emerging practice in YWFD known as results-based financing, a mechanism by which investors contract implementers to achieve predetermined results, with payment based directly on the achievement of those outcomes. In addition to South Africa, several countries have experimented with results-based financing mechanisms for youth workforce development, such as the SIBs created in Colombia,^{25, 26, 27} Morocco,²⁸ and Nepal.^{xv} A Brookings analysis explored the potential benefits and downsides of SIBs, indicating that because there is no longitudinal data on SIBs it is not yet possible to confirm their impact on long-term outcomes.²⁹

^{xiv} The same findings appear to be true for U.S. domestic workforce development efforts. A crosswalk of systems change efforts in education to employment programming in the United States found that “culture and narrative shift” were among the least commonly explored elements in systems change frameworks. Nikki Aikens, Ramya Tallapragada, and Dana Robinson, *Crosswalk of Frameworks for Understanding Systems Change* (Princeton and Philadelphia: Mathematica and Equal Measure, 2021).

^{xv} Refer to: “Results-based Financing Employment Fund Nepal” at website www.helvetas.org, accessed January 24, 2024

An emerging promising practice in YWFD financing has been the mobilization of resources at the local level through place-based, collective impact approaches. As seen in Kenya, the Philippines, and globally through the GOYN initiative, government, the private sector, civil society, and youth have formed partnerships at the subnational or local level with the purpose of mobilizing political will and resources around common youth development goals. These innovative collaboration mechanisms have led to more efficient and more inclusive use of local YWFD resources. In Kenya, nine counties established County Youth Employment Compacts, which led the strategy for county-level skills training reforms and programs and mobilized \$5.7 million in new revenue for youth programming.³⁰ In the Philippines, mayors' offices in 22 municipalities have formed public/private coordination mechanisms known as [Youth Development Alliances](#) (YDAs), which align strategies and have leveraged \$2.7 M in local resources for out-of-school youth.^{31, 32} Across the GOYN network, local communities have raised over \$4 million to support economic pathways for youth who are not in education or employment (known as "Opportunity Youth"). One example of the potential power of these collaboration mechanisms is in Brazil, where GOYN São Paulo produced two seminal reports that influenced the city's municipality to set up a new \$3 million entrepreneurship fund to train 10,000 young entrepreneurs by 2024.³³ While the United States offers a number of documented examples of collective impact, place-based, and/or other collaboration models in YWFD,^{34, 35, 36} few appear to be documented in LMICs,³⁷ indicating this is an area of interest for future research.

In cases where development partners were introducing an innovation in service delivery, they noted the importance of local stakeholders continuously adapting the innovation, so it could be made affordable at scale. Several examples continuously adjusted service delivery packages to make them affordable for the government or for private individuals or organizations. While doing so, the organizations conducted cost analyses to determine how to distribute the cost burden across different stakeholders. For example, in Uganda, Educate! described its experimentation with "cost-optimizing approaches" and ran cost analysis scenarios according to different economies of scale.³⁸ In Tanzania, IYF worked with the Tanzanian government to increase student fees in TVETs.³⁹ In Rwanda, EDC and the Ministry of Education conducted a joint cost analysis for integrating work readiness into the national curriculum, and modified the curriculum accordingly.⁴⁰ Two programs used technology to lower their costs: Harambee introduced Google Cloud as a low-cost solution for managing the Accelerator's data,⁴¹ while Educate! reduced its transportation expenses by introducing a mobile money platform to automate its payment system for peer mentors.⁴² Two other programs (in Rwanda and Uganda) noted that youth entrepreneurship interventions were more cost-intensive, due to youth's need for continued follow-on support.

These examples support the conclusions of a 2020 white paper on *Scaling Up Youth Workforce Development*, which recommended that calculating "the unit cost of youth employment" is a prerequisite of designing for scale.⁴³

As new innovations in service delivery were being introduced, their continuous adaptation by local stakeholders was also important for ensuring their relevance to the local context and uptake across the system. Across cases studies, it was found that innovations in service delivery were best tested out among a small number of institutions first, but designed in a flexible and modular fashion so the curriculum and other services could be easily adapted as they were scaled out to additional institutions, different youth segments, or different contexts.^{xvi} This was particularly true for the attractor model programs, which reportedly offered flexibility for system actors to test innovations, generate feedback, adapt and evaluate, and thereby identify the key elements that were linked to better YWFD outcomes. In Uganda, Educate! offers an open source curriculum to allow program designers to take and adapt its programs to other countries.⁴⁴ In Jordan, FEP reported that its success depended on a "long timeframe to continuously test and refine the approach."⁴⁵ Similarly, Harambee, describes its evolution in three phases: (1) the first proof of concept stage, which placed 780 youth in income-earning positions; (2) "building solutions for scale-up," in which Harambee used feedback from youth and employers to adapt and test three aspects of its model and ultimately trained 56,000 youth and placed 18,000 people in jobs; and (3) "activating the network effect," where Harambee is working to "move beyond the numbers and build the tools and capabilities to support government, policy makers,

^{xvi} Similar findings have been confirmed by other education case studies covered by the Brookings Millions Learning Real-time Scaling Labs. Refer to Robinson et al. (2020); and Jenny Perlman Robinson and Molly Curtiss, *Millions Learning Real-Time Scaling Labs: Designing an Adaptive Learning Process to Support Large-Scale Change in Education* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2018) .

employers, and social investors to develop large-scale solutions needed for systems change.” Other programs described similar phased, iterative, and adaptive approaches to their scaling strategies.

In the case studies covered by this desk review, the policy environment offered an important backdrop to the changes that were happening on the ground, often fueling many of the transformative changes seen on the service delivery side. In some contexts, national policies were cited as a motivator for stakeholders to take action, such as in Jordan where the scaling of the FEP was motivated by the Central Bank of Jordan’s signing of the Maya Declaration and the subsequent implementation of Jordan’s National Financial Inclusion Strategy (NFIS).^{xvii} In both Uganda and Rwanda, the projects took advantage of new reforms in entrepreneurship education to introduce skills curricula and work-based learning into secondary schools.^{46, 47} Other projects started to use their credibility to shape policy: Harambee reported using its data systems to develop an evidence base that has shaped national planning and policy in the education-to-employment transition.⁴⁸ In Morocco, the success of the Career Center model was incorporated into the national Roadmap for the Development of the Vocational Training Sector, which confirmed the Minister of National Education’s intent to establish a career center in each of the country’s 12 regions.⁴⁹

YWFD programs that were geared toward systems change invested in regular data collection from diverse sources and relied on these feedback loops as part of a larger process of continuous learning and iteration. Three projects (Harambee, Via, Rwanda) reported investing a notable amount of resources in monitoring, evaluation, and learning. In addition to their regular monitoring and performance management systems, three initiatives (South Africa, Rwanda, Uganda Educate!) conducted randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to evaluate the efficacy of their projects.^{50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55} Among the 13 project cases the research team examined, evaluation methods included tracer studies, outcome harvesting, social network analysis, employer surveys, youth surveys and focus groups, and independent program evaluations. Three projects (South Africa, Rwanda, and Via in Mozambique and Tanzania), as well as reports on SIBs in YWFD,⁵⁶ noted that the transparency of data helped to elevate service delivery. One Via evaluation notes that in Tanzania, “having an ongoing common performance measurement system motivated the centers to invest in improvements to their services, and they began to strive for improved youth outcomes in learning and employment.”⁵⁷ Many projects (Jordan, Uganda YLA, Via, Rwanda, South Africa) noted that it was important to cultivate a culture of experimentation, learning, tolerance for failure, and continuous iteration among partners. This learning was supported by data management, such as activating real-time data tracking systems to facilitate rapid response and open data dashboards to support transparency and learning.^{58, 59, 60, 61}

Systems change efforts were supported by the intentional creation of platforms for learning and networking—with and by local actors.^{xviii} In Jordan, the Millions Learning Real-Time Scaling Labs facilitated learning among FEP partners.⁶² In South Africa, Harambee hosted learning and networking events for different stakeholders “to further build the ecosystem and influence systems change.”⁶³ RisiAlbania organized partner exchanges between businesses to encourage copying and crowding in of proven models; for example, companies reported that attending a workshop on social inclusion led to increased hiring of female employees.⁶⁴ In Algeria, career center stakeholders found that regular monthly meetings and annual workshops instilled a spirit of friendly competition and gave them opportunities to exchange ideas.⁶⁵ GOYN convenes several communities of practice to generate learning on common topics such as diverse financing for youth employment, digital opportunity, entrepreneurship, health careers, and policy channels for youth issues.⁶⁶

^{xvii} The [Maya Declaration](#), launched in 2011 by members of the Alliance for Financial Inclusion, is a global initiative aiming to achieve financial inclusion in efforts to reduce global poverty. In 2016, the Central Bank of Jordan committed to nine specific targets under the Maya Declaration, including increasing Jordan’s youth access to finance by 25 percent annually by 2020, and finalizing the draft of Jordan’s National Financial Inclusion Strategy.

^{xviii} A recent USAID-funded learning brief argues that “programs should shift the locus of learning from being only program-focused to systems focused.” See: MarketShare Associates, [Shifting the Locus of Learning: Catalyzing Private Sector Learning to Drive Systemic Change \(Washington, D.C.: USAID, 2022\)](#).

Almost all the initiatives facilitated scaling of YWFD outcomes by expanding the availability of labor market information.

Addressing information frictions have shown to improve outcomes for jobseekers,^{xix,xx} and it holds promise to sustain youth WFD outcomes over time by increasing the flexibility of the labor force and making the workforce system more equitable and resilient to market shifts.^{xxi} Conversely, the lack of labor market information makes it difficult for policymakers to measure and track the scaling effects of their employment goals, including the “indirect impacts of interventions beyond direct project beneficiaries.”^{xxii} With over 3.5 million job seekers supported to date, Harambee manages what is believed to be “the largest dataset on youth employment in South Africa,” and is currently using big data solutions and machine learning algorithms to match candidates to jobs.⁶⁷ In Albania, the RisiAlbania project used a “media systems change” strategy to increase the role of media as a provider of labor market information in a sustainable way.⁶⁸ Among the other ways that programs expanded labor market information channels, examples included: a government-run Labor Market Observatory (Morocco); the use of TV, radio, and social media information campaigns (Jordan); a virtual career center (Morocco); building the capacity of municipal-level actors to collect labor market data (Rwanda); and a youth volunteer network which supports community-based peer mentoring (Tanzania and Uganda). GOYN found that a critical first step for its initiative was mobilizing local stakeholders to collect data on its target youth segments—young people ages 15 to 29 who are out of school, unemployed, or working in informal jobs—because few local institutions disaggregate data for this specific youth segment. Primary data suggests that USAID staff and implementing partners involved in workforce development programs consider labor market information an important learning priority;^{xxiii} meanwhile, a recent World Bank literature review found a dearth of evidence around labor flexibility and labor market information.^{xxiv} USAID and its partners in LMICs may benefit from implementation research on how different ways to address information frictions could magnify YWFD outcomes over time.



WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS?

Programming Implications for Improving YWFD Outcomes at Scale: The list below summarizes the overarching considerations for implementing YWFD systems change efforts in low- and middle-income countries.

- 1. Start with the whole system in mind, and design for scale by engaging a diverse group of actors from the beginning.** Improving YWFD outcomes at scale requires a diversity of stakeholders in visioning, co-design, and implementation. As the evidence illustrates, multi-stakeholder collaboration in YWFD requires the participation of government, the private sector, public and private service providers, and youth and their families. It requires moving from a “project” mindset to a “systems thinking” mindset. Much literature on systems thinking describes the importance of a systems analysis or mapping process to create an understanding of the dynamics between diverse actors, although to date there are few documented examples of such analyses

^{xix} Carranza, Eliana, Robert Garlick, Kate Orkin, Neil Rankin (2020). Job Search and Hiring with Two-Sided Limited Information about Workseekers’ Skills.

^{xx} Wheeler, Laurel E and Garlick, Robert and Johnson, Eric and Shaw, Patrick and Gargano, Marissa, LinkedIn(to) Job Opportunities: Experimental Evidence from Job Readiness Training (September 11, 2019). Economic Research Initiatives at Duke (ERID) Working Paper No. 289, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3452249> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3452249>

^{xxi} Cunrow, Christina, and Rob Calderón (2021). Supporting Labor Market Resiliency and Future-Readiness: The Case for Measuring Skill Demand in Real Time.

^{xxii} World Bank. 2024. World Bank Support to Jobs and Labor Market Reform through International Development Association Financing: A First-Stage Evaluation. Independent Evaluation Group. Washington, DC: World Bank.

^{xxiii} (a) USAID Data and Evidence for Education Programs (DEEP) (2022) Partner Survey Results: USAID DEEP Youth Workforce Development Learning Agenda Refresh. (b) USAID DEEP (December 2022). Youth Workforce Development Learning Agenda Mission Consultations Report.

^{xxiv} World Bank. 2024, pp. 29, 36, 47, 96.

in a YWFD context.^{xxv, xxvi, xxvii} Scaling at the systems level also often involves a commitment that goes beyond a typical five-year project life span. Importantly, successful YWFD efforts have occurred when they tapped into the will and interests of select champions—a government ministry that seeks to implement a national reform effort, a municipality that has local youth employment targets to meet, a group of lead firms that want to perform better within their markets, or a group of young leaders with the will to seek meaningful change in their communities.

2. **Plan and prepare for long-term financing of innovations from the outset.** Work with numerous and diverse stakeholders to develop and test innovative approaches, identify co-investment strategies, conduct cost analyses, and continually adjust and readjust service delivery models (informed by data) for cost-effectiveness. Use technology strategically to lower administrative and monitoring costs and to drive data-informed adaptations.
3. **When starting a YWFD systems change effort, take time to identify and work through a credible local entity that is positioned to serve in a facilitative backbone role across the system.** If select local partners are not fully ready for this role, invest in strengthening the capacity of local bodies such as nongovernmental organizations, public-private alliances, or other collaborative infrastructures, to serve in a systems facilitation role. If no such local entity exists, consider a credible international organization to serve this role temporarily, and establish an explicit plan to transition this function to a local entity.⁶⁹
4. **Invest in robust systems for data collection, monitoring, evaluation, learning, and adaptation—**especially by and among local civil society and non-state actors. Important monitoring, evaluation, and learning investments are those that “shift the locus of learning” to local actors,⁷⁰ including harmonizing performance metrics among local service providers, funding qualitative evaluation by local actors, and investing in regular forums for learning and networking between and among stakeholders. Because systems change is nonlinear, “access to timely information on the status of different changes is crucial to decision-making and course correction.”⁷¹ Sharing evidence of success is also important in mobilizing the support of other stakeholders, especially government decision-makers. In addition to quantitative performance data, donor-funded systems efforts keep track of the intended changes by different actors, including qualitative shifts in mindsets, attitudes, and behaviors.
5. Given the vital importance of labor market information systems in scaling YWFD outcomes, **invest in local stakeholders’ efforts to generate and disseminate labor market information.** As the case studies illustrate, labor market information collection and exchange can happen through several different channels—government agencies, public/private collaboration mechanisms, media outlets, community-based organizations, or youth peer networks—and at all levels (national, subnational, local).

Implications for Future Research: Overall, this desk review revealed a clear need for USAID- and donor-funded YWFD projects to enhance reporting, research, and learning around scaling and systems change efforts. Most of the data used for this desk review were generated through the handful of intentional learning agendas and/or studies whose primary aim was to capture systems-level changes in YWFD.

To fill the evidence gaps, two learning networks have raised several questions about scaling and systems change related to youth workforce development: (1) Youth Systems Collaborative, which has developed a learning agenda “to build understanding of how youth systems support young people in low- and middle-income countries;”⁷² and (2) the Scaling

^{xxv} Ignatowski et al. (2021) describe informal mapping processes within youth workforce development.

^{xxvi} Klassen et al. (2023) describe a systems mapping process undertaken for a TVET system in Cambodia, although the analysis appears to be general and not specific to youth learning outcomes. See Mike Klassen, Sandra Rothboeck, and Ailsa Buckley, “Adapting Inclusive Systems Development (ISD) to Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Skills Development,” in *Systems Thinking in International Education and Development: Unlocking Learning for All?*, ed. Moira V. Faul and Laura Savage (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 158–182.

^{xxvii} Walls and Savage (2023) describe how an education systems diagnostic have helped international donors and national governments understand and address the system dynamics that are causing literacy challenges among primary school learners. See Elena Walls and Laura Savage, “Can Systems Thinking Tools Help Us Better Understand Education Problems and Design Appropriate Support? Reflections on a Test Case,” in *Systems Thinking in International Education and Development: Unlocking Learning for All?*, ed. Moira V. Faul and Laura Savage (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 204–221.

Up Community of Practice,⁷³ whose 2020 Youth at Work learning series paper recommended several areas of exploration.⁷⁴ Based on the information in these two documents and the findings from this evidence brief, USAID should consider incorporating the following fundamental learning questions into its activities:

- What are examples of system-level efforts that have led to improved YWFD outcomes, sustainably and at scale, in low- and middle-income countries? For each example, what were the levers or drivers of change, the system-level actions that were taken, and the actors or champions involved (including governments, the private sector, and youth) that led to those improvements?
- To what extent have local entities (youth-serving organizations, public/private alliances, industry associations) effectively served in a backbone role to drive changes in a YWFD system in low- and middle-income countries? What outside support or actions were needed, if any, to magnify their efforts?
- What are the different ways expanded access to data and labor market information can help drive systems changes in YWFD and lead to better youth education and employment outcomes? What are the cost-effective, sustainable mechanisms by which diverse system actors generate and share labor market information?
- In the scaling of efforts, were other scaling strategies considered? What were the conditions that made that particular scaling strategy appropriate?
- What is the appropriate role of USAID (and other donor-funded efforts) in supporting YWFD systems efforts by local actors at the local, subnational, and national levels? How can USAID best capture and communicate its investments in YWFD systems change to better understand its role in relation to others, and to convey successes and challenges to its stakeholders?

ANNEX I. SELECT YWFD SYSTEMS CHANGE EFFORTS IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES

Country	Name of Program	Funder(s)	Lead Implementer	Funding Amount (Dates)	Reported Impact
Scaling Pathway: Institutionalization					
Jordan	Financial Education Program	Various	INJAZ	funding details not available (2014–present)	Introduced and scaled nationwide a compulsory financial education class for all secondary school students in grades 7 through 10, and as an optional elective for students in grades 11 and 12.
Morocco	USAID Career Center (UCC) program	USAID	FHI 360	\$23.7 million (2015–2020)	Created a network of Career Centers, serving 242,521 youth during the project period, and an additional 1.3 million online visits to the virtual career center with 71,664 registered users.
Mozambique & Tanzania	Via: Pathways to Work	Mastercard Foundation	International Youth Foundation	\$19.7 million (2015–2021)	Integrated life skills training and career support services into TVET centers across two countries, to reach 500,000 youth per year (22,000 directly through the project).
Scaling Pathway: Attractor Model					
Algeria	Youth Employment Project	U.S. Department of State Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)	World Learning	\$3.2 million (2015–2019)	Created ten Youth Employment Centers in public TVETs, serving 9,500 job seekers, and establishment of a national association of career centers.
Rwanda	Akazi Kanoze/ Akazi Kanoze II/ Huguka Dukore Akazi Kanoze	USAID, Mastercard Foundation	Education Development Center	\$40 million (2009–2021)	Introduced work readiness training and employment support directly to 91,000 vulnerable youth through a network of private providers, and served an additional 275,000 students per year with soft skills instruction through 438 upper-secondary and TVET schools.
South Africa	Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator	Various	Harambee	funding details not available (2011–present)	Connects South Africa’s employers with first-time job seekers through an online job-matching platform. Since 2011 the platform has supported over 3.5 million job seekers with 1 million opportunities among 1,000 employers, and has generated \$958 million in income for youth.
Tanzania	Learner Guide Program	Various	Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED)	(details not available)	Life skills curriculum and mentorship for adolescent girls and young women, delivered by volunteer female secondary school graduates serving in secondary schools. The program operated in 821 government schools in 33 districts, serving 143,019 students directly, and another 731,868 through its network of alumnae and partners.
Uganda	Educate! Experience	Various	Educate!	funding details not available (2012–present)	Improve educational outcomes through business training, peer educators, and entrepreneurship clubs. As of 2021, 40,200 youth were served in Uganda, with evidence of a 95% increase in earnings, 44% increase in business ownership, and 50% increase in employment.
Global	Results-based financing for YWFD	Various private investors (see	Various	Various funding levels	Results-based financing is a mechanism by which investors contract implementers to achieve predetermined results, with payment based directly on the achievement of those outcomes. Also known as “outcomes

Country	Name of Program	Funder(s)	Lead Implementer	Funding Amount (Dates)	Reported Impact
		endnote 81 below)			funds” or “payment-by-results,” results-based financing for YWFD outcomes first appeared in Colombia as a social impact bond, and later in Morocco, South Africa, and Nepal. ⁷⁵
Scaling Pathway: Youth-Inclusive Market Systems Development					
Albania	RisiAlbania	Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation	Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation	\$13.3 million (2013–2021, Phases I & II) (Phase III in process for 2021–2025)	Developed the market systems to boost job demand, skills supply, career guidance, and job intermediation for youth ages 15 to 29. Boosted investments in key sectors by \$7.2 million, supported job matching services for 87,000 youth, placed 5,400 youth in jobs, and developed the skills of 9,700 youth. Catalyzed media outlets to create job information programs reaching 110,000 job seekers, families, and employers.
Uganda	DYNAMIC	Mastercard Foundation	GOAL Uganda	\$21.3 million (2015–2020)	Targeted 126,000 out-of-school youth ages 15 to 24 to build skills and provided support for youth to secure employment or self-employment in agriculture value chains.
Uganda	Feed the Future Uganda Youth Leadership for Agriculture (YLA)	USAID	Chemonics	\$21.5 million (2015–2020)	Increased economic opportunities for 359,638 youth in agriculture-related fields, including: networks accessed by 160,107 youth; market-driven technical skills accessed by 185,969 youth; and agricultural input markets accessed by 11,873 youth.
Scaling Pathway: Collective Impact					
Global	Global Opportunity Youth Network (GOYN)	Various	Global Youth Opportunity Network (Aspen Institute)	funding details not available (2020–2030)	Creates positive outcomes for 280,000 youth by catalyzing place-based systems shifts in cities and districts through the creation of multiple, sustainable economic opportunities that increase income and assets for opportunity youth.
Kenya	Kenya Youth Employment and Skills program (K-YES)	USAID	Research Triangle Institute (RTI)	\$27 million (2015–2020)	Enhanced the skills and employability of 100,620 youth ages 18 to 25, with 52,116 youth reporting new or better employment. Nine counties established County Youth Employment Compacts, which led strategy for county skills training reforms and programs, and mobilized \$5.7 million in new revenue for youth programming.
Philippines	Mindanao Youth for Development (MYDev) ; USAID Opportunity 2.0	USAID	Education Development Center	MYDev: \$11 million (2013–2018) Opportunity 2.0: \$37.5 million (2020–2025)	Improved life skills and employment and civic engagement opportunities for 22,000 and 180,000 out-of-school youth, respectively. Mayors’ offices in 22 municipalities have formed public/private coordination mechanisms, known as Youth Development Alliances (YDAs), which align strategies and have leveraged \$2.7 million in local resources for out-of-school youth at the local level.

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