

**Panel H48**

## **Africa can solve her youth employment problem: Safaricom's local innovation for skilling youth facing extreme adversities in Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

Youth unemployment is a leading crisis in Kenya. Recent evidence establishes that youth unemployment correlates with gender, geographic location, level of education and household socio-economic status. In some areas in Kenya, over 80 percent of youth from the lowest wealth quintile are unemployed. The lack of access to information exacerbates the situation, especially given that two thirds of youth in rural areas receive information through the word of mouth, and only a third through all the other media combined. Receiving this evidence, Safaricom Foundation, a Kenyan Foundation has established a scholarship programme to counter this crisis. The programme focuses on the most excluded youth, and uses evidence to define these. Among the key markers are a 60:40 gender ratio in favour of female, and at least 5 percent disability target. The program then targets partnerships with two civil society organizations, 12 training institutions and over 100 industry actors to equip 700 youth with skills, train them in life skills and employability competences, place them into internships and link them to industry for employment. The two-year program has developed a digital data and feedback platform, to track the youth over the training period, and into their post-training engagements. This paper proposes to share this Kenyan innovation for youth employment, raising at least four critical questions: 1) What works in linking research evidence to inform and nudge large interventions? 2) Which considerations are necessary in increasing success prospects for cross-sectoral collaborations? 3) What space does the self-agency of youth occupy in driving the success of employment initiatives? 4) How best can one navigate the complexities of systemic bottlenecks, to yield bigger impact and sustainability? The paper will share evidence from two national studies on youth capabilities in Kenya, conducted in 2019, and move to share emerging evidence from the scholarship programme, drawn from the digital platform. It is hoped that this paper and the sharing of the innovation may inspire other locally-generated and locally-funded initiatives to turn the youth bulge crisis into an opportunity for Africa.

**Key Words:** Youth training, Youth employment, TVET, Youth facing extreme adversity

## Introduction

Globally, youth unemployment is a nagging concern to development. Estimates of the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicate that youth aged 15 to 24 are three times more likely than adults to be out of a job, and that for the few youth of this age with a job, most are likely to be underemployed, in part-time or temporary work, and in the informal sector in poor working conditions (ILO, 2012). Later estimates established that in 2019, just over one in five youth were not in employment, education or training (NEET) in Africa, noting the steady rise of joblessness on the continent since 2012 (ILO 2020).

Though there is general agreement that youth unemployment in Africa is a big concern, evidence on both the numbers and effect of youth unemployment is rather disparate. Baah-Boateng (2015) opines that youth unemployment in Africa is masked by the high informality, and that this excludes the many discouraged workers from the statistics of both unemployment and under-employment. The author recommends the adoption of broader concepts of unemployment that captures both the 'discouraged' and 'under-employed' workers.

For instance, ILO (2020) establishes that youth unemployment in Africa is lower than the global average, and that around two in every five young people of working age are in some form of employment with a slight decline of 0.7 percentage point between 2012 and 2018. The over-estimation of the employed youth is caused in part, by the fact that in Sub-Sahara Africa, a vast majority of youth are engaged in 'survival' labour to make ends meet, which is far from the decency and income expectations for decent employment. For instance, Monga et al (2019) found that 70-90 per cent of the labour force in Africa is involved in non-wage employment, working mainly for their households. Confirming this, ILO (2020) determines that around 62 percent of the 'working poor'<sup>1</sup> in Sub-Sahara Africa are youth.

Though some scholars (Fox et al 2019) argue that the effect of a bulging youth population has been overrated, the rising youth demography against static rates of local job creation and failing prospects for youth entrepreneurship on the continent deserve close attention. Monga et al (2019) call for urgent attention to the youth demography, noting that the current Africa's population of 1.2 billion people with a growth rate of 2.6 per cent will yield the world youngest global working force for the next decade and beyond.

The crisis of youth unemployment in Africa has two faces – the demand face and the supply face. First, arguments have been raised, that the main issue in the unemployment challenge is that the economies are not creating enough jobs (Fox et al; Monga et al). Rather static economies with extremely poor import-export balance are unlikely to deliver the promise of job creation for Africa's youth. To circumvent this, governments have turned to the promotion of youth entrepreneurship as way of job creation. However, credible evidence demonstrates that only a tiny portion of young entrepreneurs proves to be successful. The majority remains in subsistence

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as workers whose earnings are below USD 1.9 per day

activities, held back by low levels of education, informality, poor physical infrastructure and limited access to finance (OECD, 2018). This study concluded that, in fact, youth entrepreneurship, on average, is less financially rewarding than wage employment.

On the supply side, there is growing evidence that the youth seeking jobs in Africa largely lack the skills and competences demanded by those positions. Even when some authors have argued that more educated youth are the ones more likely to be unemployed, the difference between general education and skills for employment is something to take note of. The mismatch between available jobs and skills that youth possess is of concern. For example, the skills-matching surveys conducted by Handel et al (2016) established that 40 percent and 25 percent of employed people in Ghana and Uganda respectively, were not using the skills that they possessed on their current jobs (Handel et al., 2016). The non-use of skills was more prominent in the informal sector.

Like cited in other parts of the world, the most used youth unemployment rates in Kenya vary from 7.3 per cent (World Bank, 2020) to 22.8 percent (Statistica, 2020), depending the definitions adopted and the parameters considered. Statistics aside, Kenya's unemployment rates are the highest in the region, driven by a highly informal job market, with 84 per cent labour market share (KNBS, 2020). While jobs available are not enough for the youth, the demand for skills is rising with changing expectations on youth training. One response to the youth unemployment crisis by government has been the titling of attention from academic to technical qualifications, with various policies targeted at rebranding technical and vocational training, and focusing attention from university to TVET. These policies have increased funding and capitation in TVET to benefit more youth, and have witnessed the population of youth enrolled in TVET double between 2012 and 2019.

Despite the gains experienced in transforming the skills supply, few challenges persist, among them the attitude of youth towards TVET (and little desirability of TVET), the poor quality of training and the relatively low transition between training and employment. At the same time, the expansion of TVET and job creation have hardly reached a cross-section of youth, especially female, those from very poor families and those either less educated or of less educated parents. While many studies have been conducted to generate evidence on some of these knowledge deficits, weak connection exists between research, policy and practice.

This paper utilizes evidence to demonstrate the power of non-state sector collaborations to use evidence to inform policy and practice, and improve youth prospects for training and employment. The paper first summarizes findings of two surveys conducted in 2019, and proceeds to demonstrate the use of this evidence to inform the Safaricom Foundation Scholarship Programme. The paper then shares the progress so far achieved by this programme, despite the COVID-19 disruption, and goes on to conclude on the value of evidence for both informing programmes, but also policy to make the systems work, to ameliorate the youth unemployment crisis on the African continent.

## **Evidence on youth, adversity and unemployment in Kenya**

In 2019, Dalberg and Aga Khan University conducted two separate but linked studies on youth, training, employment and skills in Kenya. The study by Dalberg focused on youth aged 15-25 years, those not in employment, education or training (NEET). With the complicated interface between working and being at home, the actual study sample included some youth who were either working intermittently, or who were engaged in various non-wage labour activities. A total of 2361 'youth at home' were reaching, in a random, nationally-representative sample of 250 villages (enumeration areas). These included 51.5 percent male and 48.5 percent female youth.

The study by Aga Khan University targeted youth who were working at entry level jobs, in formal and informal sectors, as well as those in self-employment. A total of 10 sectors were prioritized, which employed youth. A total of 7,055 youth were surveyed, among them 3,267 youth working in the formal sector, 3,095 working in the informal sector, and 693 self-employed youth. Following a quasi-random sample, 58.5 percent of the surveyed youth were male, while 41.5 of those studied were female.

As relates to youth unemployment, five findings could be highlighted from these two studies:

- 1. Female youth, youth with children and those from poorer households more likely to be unemployed*

Youth from poorer families were more likely to be unemployed, than their counterparts from wealthier families. For instance, while on average, 63.1 per cent of the youth at home were unemployed, this ranged from 70.3 percent in low-income to 58.0 percent in high-income households. Youth with children (parents) were more likely to be unemployed than their counterparts without children. This differed in gender also, whereby 76.2 percent of the female youth were unemployed, as compared to 49.3 of the male youth. In addition, youth in arid areas and far-off rural places had less access to employment, while youth who belonging to a social group had around 43 percent more chances of accessing a job.

- 2. Youth with less education are more likely to be unemployed*

Most (91.9) of the youth with no formal education encountered by the youth NEET study were. The education levels formed up a ladder, with this proportion of the unemployed reducing to 61 per cent among those with primary education, 63 per cent of those with secondary education, and 57 per cent of those with tertiary education. In total, 76.7 percent of those working in the formal sector had at least some tertiary education, as compared to 47.1 percent and 47.3 percent of those working in the informal and self-employment sectors respectively.

- 3. Access to technology devices may be facilitating youth to access jobs, but youth accessed information mainly through the word of mouth*

The proportion of unemployed youth was lowest among youth who had both a smart and feature phone (53%), followed by those who had a smart phone (58%). Around 61 percent of youth who

only had a basic phone were unemployed, as well as 76 percent of those who had not phone. That aside, 67 percent of the youth NEET accessed information on job opportunities through the word of mouth. Only 15 percent of them said they accessed information through electronic and print media (TV, radio, newspapers), while another 15 percent accessed through the social media.

#### *4. Access to jobs is through more informal means, aggravating situation for youth NEET*

Youth accessed jobs mainly through social means, than the formal recruitment processes. For instance, 32 percent of the youth working in the formal sector had accessed their current jobs through formal means (advertisements, recruitment agencies and career fairs), as compared to 65.7 percent who had accessed through informal means (cold calling, social networks and referrals). The situation was worse in the informal sector, where only 15 percent had accessed their jobs through the formal means. On average, less than one percent of the working youth had accessed their jobs through partnerships between their training institution and employers.

#### *5. Employers demand also competences other than technical qualifications*

Across all sectors, employers said they were prioritizing the possession of important life skills while hiring, as well as core values and social emotional competences (in that order). The employers in the self-employment sector indicated that they also looked for entrepreneurship skills, as well as marketing and sales. Technical skills were demanded everywhere, but they did not constitute a priority concern in any of the three sectors.

### **The Safaricom Foundation Scholarship Programme, 2020**

Safaricom Foundation is the largest corporate foundation in Kenya, with a focus on building communities and transforming lives. Over the last 17 years, the foundation has impacted more than five million lives through a total of 1,465 community-focused projects. Under the Education pillar of the current strategy (2018-2021), the Safaricom Foundation Scholarship Programme (SFS) seeks to contribute significantly towards Kenya's sustainable development agenda by equipping youth with sustainable skills for the construction and hospitality industries. This evidence-led initiative responds to the need for holistic TVET and employment opportunities, to benefit especially the most excluded youth - from the poorest families, arid and marginalized communities, girls, and youth living with disabilities.

The dream of 'reaching the unreached' is pursued through the offering of scholarships to 700 vulnerable youth in Kenya to take complete artisan courses in four trade areas: Plumbing, Welding, Electrical Installation, and Food & Beverage. The mission is achieved through partnering with Zizi Afrique Foundation as implementing partner, Toolkit iSkills as Life Skills and Technology training partner, and 12 pre-qualified Technical and Vocational Training Centres spread across the country.

## *Conceptual features*

The SFS has three leading conceptual features – evidence generation and use, reaching the furthest behind, and end-to-end solution through agile implementation.

### Evidence generation and use

The Programme utilized evidence generated from various studies to adopt a youth adversity framework and identify critical employment areas in need of artisan-level skills. Various datasets were explored including the Dalberg (2019) study of Youth NEET, the Aga Khan University study (AKU, 2019) of working youth, the African Population and Health Research Centre study (APHRC, 2019) of skills production in TVET, as well as the Economic Survey (KNBS, 2019), and other related analyses on youth, training and employment. Secondly, the Programme conducted a rapid assessment of 24 vocational training centres across 19 counties in the country, to evaluate levels of quality training, indicated through training infrastructure, technology application, staff capacities, student satisfaction and efficiency in training to employment transitions. This process yielded the pre-qualification of 12 training centres spread across 10 counties. Lastly, a combination of various indicators including wealth, marginalization and prior investments from the Safaricom Foundation pointed to the 11 geographies in the country where the youth beneficiaries would be drawn from. The evidence also pointed to the communication, information flow and mobilization methods suitable for reaching the youth at the bottom of the pyramid. Likewise, the implementation process of the Programme includes the deliberate use of data to guide decisions, and generation of evidence to inform decisions in the TVET sub-sector in Kenya.

### Youth Furthest Behind

Using the evidence, the Programme adopted a 4-pillar youth adversity model. First was gender, recognizing that demand for TVET was significantly lower for female than male youth, and that employment rates among youth were far much lower for women than for men. Female youth with children were also more disadvantaged, and so were those married off early. There was also massive under-representation of women in the key employment sectors, construction among them, with female youth mostly avoiding such courses as plumbing and welding. To address this, the SFS targeted a 60:40 beneficiary ratio in favour of female youth, with the deliberate inclusion of youth with families who had missed out on education and training opportunities through either teen pregnancy or early marriage.

Second was education levels. Evidence confirmed that youth who had no primary education were most unlikely to access training and employment, and that this category of youth sustaining a vicious cycle, recycling unemployment and poverty to downstream generations. At the same time, youth who had just completed primary, and those that dropped out of secondary school faced immense disgruntlement in accessing training and work opportunities. To address this, SFS negotiated access to training for youth who had no school certificate, alongside those that had

dropped out. At the same time though, SFS also opened door to youth who had secondary school completion but with such poor grades, that they would have difficulty in finding entry to tertiary training.

Third was poverty. Using evidence from various studies, the Programme identified the various characteristics of the bottom wealth quintile, including the possession of household assets, parental occupation, income and education levels, and such other characteristics. Subsequently, SFS did the most possible to reach youth at the bottom wealth quintile, and laid down the requisite conditions to ensure that these would be retained to complete training and transit to employment.

Lastly was disability. Evidence confirmed that disability added a layer of adversity on top of gender, education and poverty levels. Youth with disability missed out on many life opportunities, and were the least likely to access training opportunities, get and retain jobs. To address this, the Programme targeted a five percent disability ratio, with well-laid down strategies for recruitment, assessment and support.

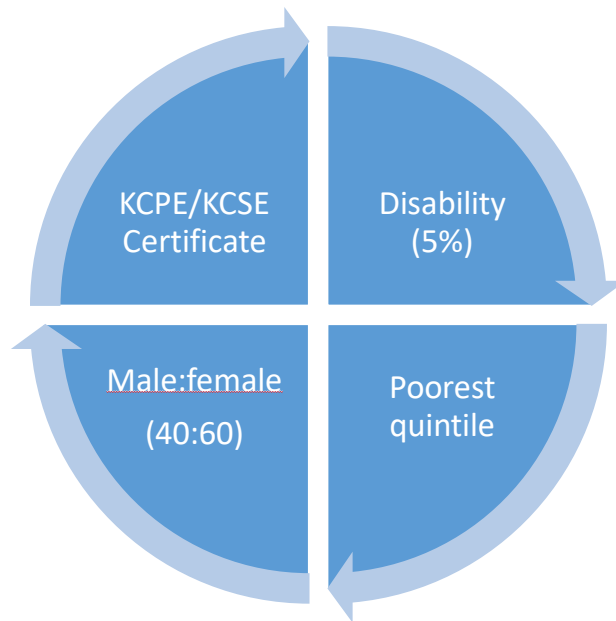


Figure 1 – The SFS youth adversity framework

#### End-to-end solution through agile implementation

The Programme conceptualized four key processes for the achievement of this dream: a robust, on-ground mobilization, participatory admission process, Life Skills training and mentoring, training support and follow-up, and collaboration with industry for internship and transition to work.

First, consultation was made with the local administration in the 11 counties to identify geographies in which youth facing extreme adversities and the most unreached were



concentrated. This led to the identification of one sub-county in each county, and four villages in the selected sub-county. The local administration also nominated a suitable young person to lead the mobilization exercise, following given criteria. The youth mobilizers attended training at the Safaricom Centre in Nairobi, and were equipped with the necessary tools for mobilization. Posters were supplied to the local social points in each village, including religious centres, shopping centres and other points of youth convergence. An interview panel constituting of the youth mobilizer and local leaders interviewed the youth who applied, and made a shortlist from each village. The documents were then taken to a selection panel at the Sub-county level, constituting of a fair cross-section of local leaders, among them religious leaders, educators and the business community. The panel confirmed that the youth met all the given criteria, and made a report to accompany the list of selected youth. A total of 452 youth submitted complete applications, of which 333 were recommended and 119 rejected by the local selection panels. The last verification was conducted by a national panel, and picked a total of 208 youth who met all the qualifications for the 'furthest behind'. A later process in Nairobi recruited 100 youth, following the same process but sensitive to the urban milieu.

Second, documents of the 308 youth were tabled in a joint admission committee, constituting of representatives from all the 12 training centres. This admission panel ensured fair admission, considering training institution of preference, gender, education and disability status. The committee also ensured balance in the distribution of the youth across the training centres, and the areas of training. At the end, all the youth were placed in the various institutions, and communication made to all the youth. Owing to the COVID-19 disruption, this exercise was completed through a series of online meetings.

Third, the admitted youth were on-boarded onto a WhatsApp platform, to first test access to a smartphone. During the first round, a total of 73 youth were enjoined on the platform, leaving out...youth. Youth animators were engaged to run the platforms, sharing information and responding to the various questions that the youth would have. Next, the youth not on WhatsApp were contacted through calls and on-ground tracing, and reasons established for non-enrolling. There were two main reasons to this, lack of a smartphone, and lack of access to internet. As first level, smartphones by were issued out by Safaricom. This raised the number of youth on the WhatsApp platforms to 212. As last step, Safaricom loaded the phones with internet bundles, using registration to the Life Skills training platform as condition for receiving the internet support.

Fourth, Toolkit iSkills created an online learning platform, to train youth on Life Skills over the COVID-19 period. The platform registration form picked details of the youth, and ensured proper protection of personal data. The training curriculum included areas like digital skills, self-awareness, communication and collaboration, as well as career awareness and training and work safety among others. Riding on the Safaricom smartphones and internet bundles, at least 60 percent of the youth have so far accessed the online training in readiness for joining the

institutions. The life skills training also served as a mechanism to sustain contact and interest, to minimize attrition prior to joining of training.

Lastly, the Programme engaged an expert recommended by the Kenya Institute of Special Education to assess the 16 admitted youth with disabilities. A combination of tele- and video-based assessment, with few physical visits was used to assess and produce reports on all the youth with disabilities.

There were four main disabilities that the assessor came across. These were the Physical disability; Visual Impairment; Hearing Impairment and learning/mental disabilities.

Based on a number of factors including but not limited to the person's ability to communicate and perform activities of daily living such as self-feeding, bathing and bathroom use, four of the assessed have been categorised as having profound disabilities and have been recommended to be taken to specialised TVETs while for the 11 others, it has been concluded that they can fit in the regular TVETs with some adjustments and capacity building of the institutions on how to manage persons with disabilities.

In terms of gender, nine of them were male and 6 females. The numbers are as indicated in the table below.

Table 1: Youth with disabilities

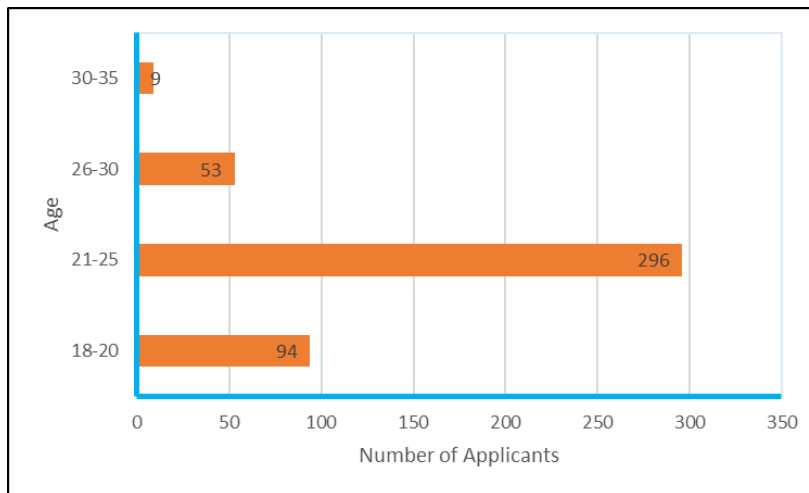
Disability	Occurrence
Physically disabled	5
Visually Impaired	4
Hearing Impaired	3
Learning Disabilities	3

## Profile of the youth admitted to the Programme

Table 2 – Gender and disability status

	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Total</b>
Total Applicants	271 (60%)	181 (40%)	452
Shortlisted	184 (55.3%)	149 (44.7%)	333
Admitted	95 (45.7%)	113 (54.3%)	208
With disability	9	6	15

Figure 2: The age of the applicants



### Youth with children

Out of the total applicants, 101 (22%) were parents, with at least one child. Of these, 73 (16%) were female, while 28 (6%) were male. A larger proportion of them were unmarried (57%), while 43 percent of them were married. Majority of the youth with children came from Kitui and West Pokot counties, with the least proportions in Kirinyaga and Isiolo counties.

Figure 3: Distribution of youth with children



### Education background

Around a third (30.3) of the mobilized youth had not secondary school certificate (KCSE), while nearly a fourth of them had only a primary school certificate (KCPE)(16.6%) or none at all (6.6%).

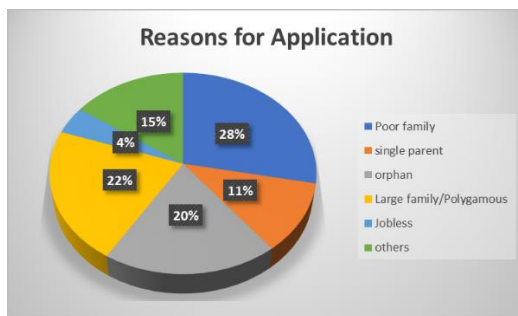
Table 3 – Education levels of the mobilized youth

	Male	Female	Total	Percentages
Primary dropout	18	12	30	6.6%
KCPE	46	29	75	16.6%
Secondary dropout	19	13	32	7.1%
KCSE	188	127	315	69.7%

### Family background

Many applicants cited family history as one of the major predicaments hindering their academic success. In particular, over 28 percent of the applicants cited poor family as one of the major setbacks for not getting tertiary education. The analysis reveals that 23 percent of the SFS applicants had either one or no parents alive. One interesting observation is that only a few youth mentioned joblessness for self or parents as a setback.

Figure 1: Reasons youth failed to join the next level of Education



## Trades of interest

The analysis indicates that about 40 percent were interested in electrical installation, and ... in Food and Beverages. while only five percent were interested in either plumbing and Welding. The interests were highly gendered, with Food and Beverages dominated by female youth, and the rest of the courses by male youth. A similar proportion of male youth were interested in food and beverages, as was that of the female youth interested in electrical installations.

Figure 5: Trades of interest (gender)

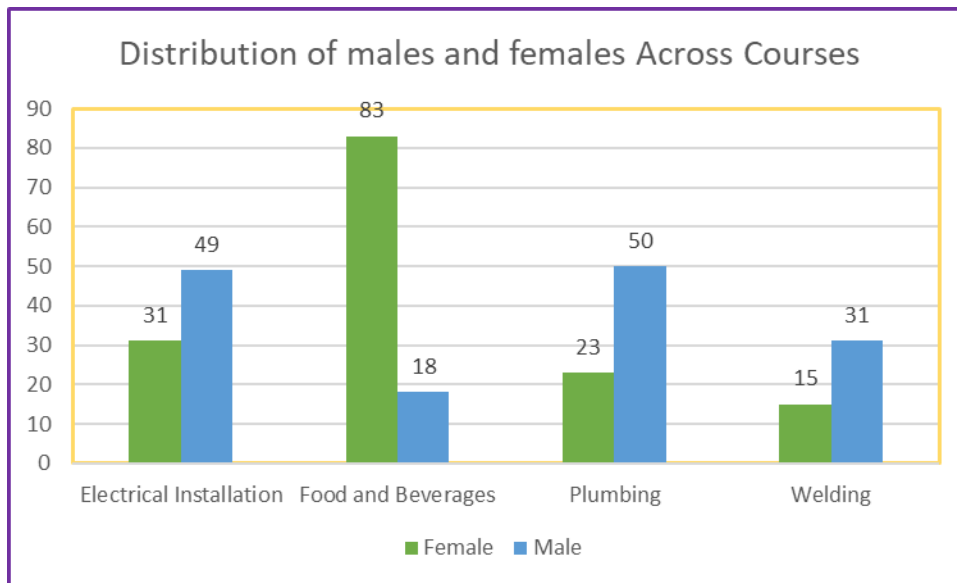


Table 5: Gender and choice of training courses

GENDER OF THE STUDENT	TVET COURSE OF STUDY				Total
	Electrical Installation	Food and Beverage	Plumbing	Welding	
Male	49 (61%)	18(18%)	50(69%)	31(67%)	148(49%)
Female	31(39%)	83(82%)	23(31%)	15(33%)	152(51%)
Total	80	101	73	46	300

## Conclusions and Key Lessons

Safaricom's intervention has demonstrated a working link between research and practice. Rather than sink resources into more research, large interventions could use existing evidence, through partnership with researchers and research institutions. Same way, such application may work for a research-policy link, whereby decision makers in government utilize existing evidence to drive policy.

Reaching the furthest behind is possible, but requires both commitment and investment. The willingness and ability to fill in gaps is necessary, and so are resources to provide the needed facilitation and flexibility to ensure that every youth is taken along. Since not much is documented, an adaptable and nimble process is key, to allow for accommodations along the way. Requisite is also a learning posture, implemented through proper information generation and management, and building in points and spaces for deliberate learning and iteration.

Related to the above, committing to gender and disability inclusion has few ramifications. Married women, and those with young children might need to study near home, to achieve the balance between family and training. Youth who were married early off, and indeed those that dropped out of school lack useful exposure and personal skills. Efforts to create exposure and build confidence might increase retention and completion rates. The type and severity of disability have several implications. While some youth with disability may fit in inclusive settings, some of them may only benefit from specialized institutions. At the same time, certain disabilities, like blindness, may expose youth to accidents and exposure in certain courses such as electrical installation, necessitating proper assessment and consultative career decision making with the youth, families and training institutions.

Adversity could lead to innovation. The COVID-19 experience has yielded useful innovations that were not part of the original programme design. Enrolling the youth on WhatsApp has resulted into energetic engagement and socializing among the youth; online training of life skills has extended reach to youth far off in remote places; online training of instructors and trainers has added efficiency and reduced the cost of training. Though no evaluation has been done yet, equipping the youth who never have been to school with smart phones, facilitating internet access, and carefully nudging and on-boarding them onto technology platforms, is likely to deliver a myriad of benefits, including the raising of self-esteem, improving literacy, and opening up frontiers for skills acquisition and work. The social connection to peers in far off locations may deliver lasting networks for life-long growth and support. Only time can tell.

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