



SOFT SKILLS AND YOUTH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: STUDY BRIEF

In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the youth population is estimated to increase from 195 million in 2015 to 284 million by 2030, with approximately 11 million youth entering the labor market each year over the next decade.¹ This shift creates a demographic dividend that, if harnessed effectively, can stimulate economic development and reduce intergenerational poverty. However, youth—especially young women and those in conflict-affected environments—often struggle to enter the labor market.² To find and engage in productive employment, youth must acquire a range of skills. While employers have traditionally valued academic and technical skills, they are also consistently and increasingly prioritizing soft skills.³

An array of actors, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), fund interventions that provide soft skills and workforce training for youth in SSA. To maximize the effectiveness of these programs, they must be designed and implemented in alignment with the evidence base. However, evidence on what works for soft skills development has generally focused on high-income countries or low- and middle-income countries that are more industrialized than those in SSA. To fill this research gap, USAID under the Research for Effective Education Programming - Africa (REEP-A) Task Order, commissioned this literature review to examine the linkages between soft skills training and youth workforce development outcomes. This study aims to unearth evidence and lessons unique to sub-Saharan African countries and the specific contextual factors that exist within and across them.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an integrative literature review approach, which allows for a comprehensive exploration of the evidence base.⁴ This approach is favorable for the topic of this study because it enables examination of a wide array of literature as opposed to focusing exclusively on primary data sources and experimental studies, which are scarce in the context of youth (ages 15-29) in SSA. This review includes peer-reviewed literature, non-peer-reviewed literature, and grey literature. The research team also conducted interviews with subject-matter experts

RESEARCH QUESTIONS (RQ)

RQ1. How are soft skills defined in the research literature, and what variations of these definitions exist, if any, in and across SSA?

RQ2. What soft skills have the most impact on workforce outcomes for youth in low- and middle-income countries and in SSA, in particular?

RQ3. What are the most effective mechanisms of teaching and nurturing soft skills among youth in low- and middle-income countries and within SSA countries, in particular?

RQ4. How and to what extent and are soft skills included in secondary education and workforce development in SSA countries?

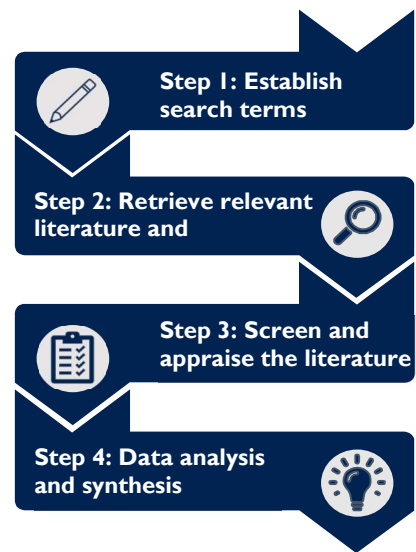
RQ5. How do individual factors (such as gender and socioeconomic status) and contextual factors (such as culture, urbanicity, the presence of conflict, and job sector) influence the specific soft skills for workforce success?

involved in research and implementation of soft skills training in SSA and other LMICs to uncover additional lessons learned and contextual factors to further triangulate the findings. Figure 1 describes the steps employed by the research team to conduct this literature review.

This review faced several key limitations, including varying definitions and measurements of soft skills across contexts, the reliability and validity of tools that measure soft skills in SSA, a lack of studies examining causal links between specific soft skills and workforce outcomes and a lack of external validity of many small-scale, rigorous studies included in the review.

The literature search returned 177 publications that met the inclusion criteria. Of these, 98 articles had a focus on SSA, 30 on LMICs, and 49 covered both SSA and LMICs. Likewise, the publications retrieved included 43 empirical studies, 38 literature reviews, 60 program evaluations, eight policy documents, and 28 documents classified as “other.”

FIGURE 1. RESEARCH METHODS



HOW SOFT SKILLS ARE DEFINED

Rooted in different fields, the myriad of constructs used to describe similar behaviors, attitudes, and abilities remains a significant challenge in soft skills research. **No single definition of soft skills serves all countries, cultures, policymakers, and funders.**⁵ This lack of consensus about conceptualizing soft skills limits the ability of researchers to compare the effectiveness of soft skills programming across contexts.

BOX 1. USAID DEFINITION OF SOFT SKILLS

Cognitive, social, and emotional skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that help people to navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals.

USAID generally uses the term “soft skills” in workforce development and other youth programming. Soft skills are often considered complementary to “hard skills” that can be job-specific, easily defined, and easily measured such as writing, math, reading, computer literacy, and machine operations.⁶ Soft skills are generally teachable and malleable throughout the life cycle.⁷ In SSA, various governments and policymakers conceptualize soft skills as an investment in human capital. These actors believe several key soft skills lead to better governance and equitable development, including problem solving, social awareness, and creativity.⁸ Adaptability and resilience in conflict and

crisis contexts are also viewed as essential competencies for citizens in the region. **For youth across the globe, acquiring soft skills is critical for overcoming personal, social, and economic barriers.**⁹

The most common methods of measuring soft skills in SSA tend to suffer from biases. For example, programs often use self-report scales. While programs may succeed in educating youth, self-reported scores of their soft skill development could appear to decrease as youth develop more self-awareness and more accurate perceptions of their skills. However, new tools, including anchoring vignettes and situational judgement items, are being adapted for the sub-Saharan context to ensure that they are culturally relevant, reliable, and valid.

IMPACT OF SOFT SKILLS ON WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES

There is a growing body of research from SSA that demonstrates the impact of soft skills on workforce outcomes for youth. Based on the literature reviewed, five workforce outcome categories were

identified: employment and employability, job performance, wages, entrepreneurship, and financial management. Table I provides an overview of the soft skills that are causally linked to these workforce outcomes.

Increased self-confidence and self-efficacy are linked to improving multiple workforce outcomes (i.e., employment, job performance, wages, entrepreneurship).¹⁰ Goal setting, social skills, work ethic, and time organization can give youth confidence to enter the labor market and enhance their job performance.¹¹ Likewise, communication, teamwork, and conflict management skills improve job performance and increase wages.¹² Lastly, personal initiative (PI) training is an effective approach to develop successful entrepreneurship skills linked to increased earnings and business success for adults. It fosters initiative, innovation, and persistence within a resource-restrained context, which makes it especially promising for youth in SSA.¹³

TABLE I. ILLUSTRATIVE SOFT SKILLS CAUSALLY LINKED TO WORKFORCE OUTCOMES IN SSA

WORKFORCE OUTCOMES	SKILLS
Employment and employability	Self-confidence, self-efficacy
Job performance	Communication, teamwork, responsibility, problem solving, goal setting
Wages	Openness, emotional stability, conscientiousness
Entrepreneurship	Confidence, motivation, creativity, innovation
Financial Management	Leadership, interpersonal communication, personal development

Specific skills linked to workforce outcomes may differ between women and men and across contexts. Furthermore, research shows that women sometimes benefit more from such training.¹⁴ For women, leadership, conflict resolution, negotiation, and management skills have long-term positive effects on self-employment, while decision making is linked to increased savings.¹⁵ Additionally, soft skills training helps women feel increased control over their lives, improved confidence, and stronger peer and familial relationships.¹⁶ These outcomes, coupled with improved opportunities for employment, earnings, savings, and entrepreneurship, are particularly important for their economic and social empowerment. Positive soft skills and workforce outcomes hold the potential for positive spillover effects on women’s families and communities.¹⁷ As such, soft skills and workforce development programming can help to close the gap in workforce outcomes between men and women.

Soft skills training helps conflict-affected youth in SSA increase their confidence, self-efficacy, and resilience in addition to skills such as leadership, decision making, and conflict management. In turn, these skills may deter youth from joining violent groups and lead to better employment outcomes and job performance. Accordingly, soft skills development can be an important tool for promoting the social and economic incorporation of conflict and crisis-affected youth.¹⁸

To learn why investing in soft skills and workforce development is a promising approach to tackling the unique demographic factors in SSA to support improved outcomes for youth, see the infographic on page 5 of this brief.

HOW TO TEACH AND NURTURE SOFT SKILLS

Disadvantaged youth in SSA often lack access to opportunities through school and other activities to develop key soft skills for workforce success. As a result, it is especially important that soft skills programming target marginalized groups including out-of-school youth, young women, conflict-affected youth, displaced youth, and youth with disabilities. Diverse mediums should be employed to successfully target and recruit youth from these groups. Some strategies that appear effective include partnering with trusted community leaders

to promote trainings, utilizing a range of forums to publicize the training such as radio, SMS, flyers, and alumni from the programs, and addressing barriers that prevent youth, particularly women and youth with disabilities from attending trainings. These socioeconomic and sociocultural barriers may include the high cost and long distances associated with attending training and cultural norms around women interacting with men and pursuing work outside the home.

Evidence from SSA suggests that **best practices for teaching soft skills significantly overlap with best practices for teaching core academic skills**, like reading and math. As such, effective interventions use participatory activities and interactive teaching methods to support soft skills development such as positive self-concept, communication skills, and social skills.¹⁹ Furthermore, experiential learning techniques grounded in real-world scenarios have proven especially effective for strengthening social skills as well as for developing and enhancing entrepreneurship skills.²⁰

The purposeful cultivation of safe spaces, stipends, strong relationships with facilitators and mentors, and social networks encourage youth to attend soft skills interventions.²¹ Likewise, community-level mobilization and peer support can help youth to overcome the socioeconomic barriers to participate in soft skills training.²² Innovative methods aimed to increase inclusivity within programs, such as providing transportation support for students with disabilities, are beginning to gain traction among various implementing partners.

SOFT SKILLS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE TRAINING IN SSA

In SSA, several countries have recently undergone education curriculum reform to better equip youth for the global economy, including shifting from knowledge-based to competency-based curricula and focusing on cultivating technical and transferable skills (MasterCard Foundation, 2017). In particular, secondary education and technical and vocational education and training institutions increasingly recognize the need to include 21st century skills to prepare youth from SSA for the changing labor market.²³ From the literature, seven SSA countries' experiences emerged to offer lessons about integrating soft skills into education systems.

First, **curriculum design and implementation present windows of opportunities for governments to integrate soft skills** into multiple levels of the formal education system. As governments across SSA shift to competency-based frameworks, or as other curriculum reforms take place, advocates can leverage these opportunities to integrate successful models of work readiness and soft skills programs into formal education systems, as in the cases of Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda.

Governments have developed policies and curricula for integrating soft skills at different levels of formal and informal education, **yet less is known about how effectively they are implemented** and what gaps exist to improve effectiveness. One challenge to implementing soft skills curricula includes teacher and student attitudes. In some countries, teachers and students have been hesitant to cover or enroll in entrepreneurship or soft skills training if it is not assessed. They may be more likely to shift their mindsets toward accepting soft skills training if national assessments are used to measure their progress, as in the cases of Rwanda and Uganda.

To scale up existing soft skills training and ensure sustainability, governments must engage with a variety of actors, implementers, donors, researchers, and the private sector. Technical working groups give opportunities for a variety of actors to collaborate, voice their input, and take ownership over initiatives. Likewise, as in the case of the Akazi Kanoze activities in Rwanda, cultivating local champions of soft skills initiatives that are embedded in different sectors, including different levels of government, helps to leverage resources, foster ownership, and facilitate sustainability and scale.²⁴

Why Soft Skills are a Promising Investment to Address Sub-Saharan Africa's Youth Bulge

In sub-Saharan Africa:

YOUTH POPULATION
ESTIMATED GROWTH



This shift creates a unique opportunity that, if harnessed effectively, can stimulate **economic development**, **reduce intergenerational poverty**, and **reduce inequities** for marginalized populations.

However, **youth unemployment** is high at 13% compared to 6% for the total population, and a **large informal sector** accounts for two-thirds of all employment in the region.



Soft skills training can equip youth with invaluable skills to support their successful transition into the labor market.



Soft skills help **youth to identify and secure employment**.

Akazi Kanoze youth in Rwanda **improved their confidence** to find work by 20% and this was linked to a **12.7% increased likelihood of being employed**.

(Alcid & Martin, 2017)



Soft skills are linked to **increases in wages**.

Ugandan youth who completed soft skills training and passed evaluations of five different soft skills **earned 19% more** than participants who had one or more failing grades. This was equivalent to the **increase in earnings** associated with **2.5 additional years of education**.

(Bassi & Nansamaba, 2021).



Soft skills training increases youth **propensity for and success in entrepreneurship**.

- Participants who completed Personal Initiative training in Ethiopia and Togo recorded **30% higher profits** one year after training.
- Personal Initiative training helped women in Ethiopia to **respond better** to unfamiliar situations and **gain confidence** to become entrepreneurs.

(Alibhai et al., 2016; Campos et al., 2014)



Women are more likely to benefit from soft skills training, leading to improved equity across multiple outcomes.

Ugandan women who participated in Educate! Training:

- **increased their income by 244%**, and business ownership and employment rates almost doubled. (Salem et al., 2016)
- were **7.9% more likely** to have completed secondary school four year later, and were **25% more likely** to enroll in university.
- saw a **decrease** in the likelihood of **past pregnancy**, and of being a **victim of inter-partner violence**.

(Chioda & Gertler, 2020a)



Investments in soft skills training can improve employment, education, health and well-being for youth, and especially women, which can lead to **positive intergenerational spillover effects** that support communities on **their journey to self-reliance**.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING AND RESEARCH IN SSA

DEFINING SOFT SKILLS IN SSA

- Explicitly define which soft skills to target during program design and use assessment tools that specifically measure these skills, which enables researchers and policymakers to compare programs and youth outcomes more easily. If resources allow, utilize measures that reduce bias and encourage monitoring observable behaviors over time.

IMPACT OF SOFT SKILLS ON WORKFORCE OUTCOMES

- Combine soft skills and technical training with job placement support to improve workforce outcomes.
- Incorporate PI training into programs for youth to improve soft skills and entrepreneurship skills.
- For conflict-affected youth, target building confidence, self-efficacy, resilience, leadership, decision making, and conflict management in workforce development training.
- For women in SSA, target skills that lead to improved entrepreneurship and earnings, among other positive workforce and well-being outcomes. Soft skills include leadership, conflict resolution, and self-confidence.
- Analyze causal mechanisms linking soft skills and workforce outcomes for youth in conflict-affected regions, women, and youth with disabilities in SSA.

TEACHING AND NURTURING SOFT SKILLS

- Evaluate targeting and recruitment methods to determine causal links between strategies and youth retention, soft skills development, and workforce outcomes.
- Embrace interactive pedagogy that provides youth with ample opportunities to practice soft skills.
- Create safe spaces, build community relationships, and expand social networks to promote soft skills interventions and convey the role of soft skills in workforce success in SSA.
- Determine potential or existing obstacles that may affect participation and mitigate them.

SOFT SKILLS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE TRAINING IN SSA

- Identify successful, contextually relevant, and scalable soft skills and workforce development models to reach both out-of-school youth and youth in the formal education system.
- Governments in SSA that have policy frameworks, help ensure successful implementation through curriculum reform, training, and materials for teachers. In the absence of policy frameworks, advocacy efforts should prioritize the establishment of a life skills framework.
- Establish working groups early in implementation to share innovative approaches, cultivate local ownership, and leverage local champions to advocate for future programming and curriculum reform.
- In SSA countries that have adopted and scaled up soft skills training, conduct research on the effectiveness of their instruction to identify gaps in teacher knowledge and skills.

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