Unlocking Youth Employment in South Africa:

Experiences from Harambee on Creating a National Employment Platform

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CASE STUDY FOCUS	Republic of South Africa Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI) and Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES)
FUNDER	Presidential Economic Stimulus Programme and Jobs Fund, Republic of South Africa
LEAD COUNTRY STAKEHOLDERS	The Presidency of South Africa; South Africa Department of Employment and Labor; National Youth Development Agency
LEAD IMPLEMENTING PARTNER	Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator
YEARS	2020-Present
SCALE	4.4 million young people registered on SA Youth Platform; 1.3 million youth who secured earning opportunities under the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention[1]; over 1 million youth placed in school assistant roles under the Basic Education Employment Initiative[2]
KEY REFORMS Look out for these key reforms throughout the case study	**Reforms sustained by the national government of South Africa** • Scaling up of a national mobile internet platform (SA Youth) to aggregate youth learning and earning opportunities. • Creation of a multi-stakeholder partnership platform dedicated to youth employment (National Pathway Management Network). • Sourcing of more than 1 million unemployed youth for placement as school assistants across 23,000 schools nationwide (since 2020) through the Department of Basic Education and Presidential Employment Stimulus partnership.

A note about this case study

This case study is one of three case studies developed as part of the USAID-funded research study: *Better Youth Workforce Development Outcomes through Sustainable Systems Reform*. This research aims to contribute to the evidence base on how systems approaches can support improved, scaled, and more sustainable youth workforce development (YWFD) outcomes in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

Using systems-aware methodologies, each case study describes and analyzes an initiative which took a systems approach to improving YWFD outcomes sustainably and at scale. In addition to the case studies, this research also produced a synthesis report summarizing findings across all the initiatives and providing recommendations for how to design and implement more effective and sustainable YWFD Activities.

For more information on the methodology and cross-country findings and recommendations, please see the Synthesis Report and other case studies.

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Key Stakeholder and Initiative Acronyms

B-BBEE:	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
BEEI:	Basic Education Employment Initiative
BPESA:	Business Process Enabling South Africa
DBE:	Department of Basic Education
DEL:	Department of Employment and Labour
ESSA:	Employment Services of South Africa
NPMN:	National Pathway Management Network
NYS:	National Youth Service
PES:	Presidential Employment Stimulus
PMO:	Project Management Office
PYEI:	Presidential Youth Employment Intervention
YD CoLAB:	Youth Development Collaboration

OVERVIEW

With a slow-growth economy and a burgeoning youth population, South Africa has been working for years to dismantle the effects of structural inequality, which spans generations, and unleash the potential of young people within the country. In response to a clear consensus that only a comprehensive effort could address the country's stubborn unemployment rates, beginning in 2020 the South African Presidency launched a suite of reforms related to youth employment, including the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES) and the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI), to collectively address supply and demand-side challenges and strengthen coordination within the youth employment ecosystem. In support of these reforms, on South Africa's 2021 Youth Day, the President officially launched **SA Youth, an online platform designed to aggregate learning and earning opportunities and to link unemployed young people to jobs and work experiences free of charge.** Pioneered and operated by Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator (Harambee), a South African not-for-profit social enterprise, SA Youth now serves as a product of the National Pathway Management Network (NPMN), a multi-sectoral initiative under the PYEI committed to supporting young people to find pathways into the economy. Established in 2011 and committed to helping bring about an inclusive economy, Harambee has evolved into a unique player in the South African youth employment ecosystem, bringing extensive data and expertise that fostered a sense of trust among government and private sector stakeholders. **This case study will explore the high-level steps taken to improve South Africa's youth employment ecosystem through a presidential initiative, highlighting Harambee's role in driving and supporting this effort. It will focus on how Harambee contributed to this initiative by coordinating system actors, designing and managing the SA Youth Platform, and using data and human-centered approaches to advocate for inclusive employment.**

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Structural roots of persistent unemployment. Despite 30 years of democracy in South Africa, the structural legacy of apartheid[3] continues with a labor market system that excludes a significant proportion of the youth population. Youth unemployment rates exceeded 53 percent[4] in March 2020, just prior to the pandemic. Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa experienced unprecedented levels of unemployment, with women disproportionately affected. As of mid-2024, the situation continues to be dire. The youth unemployment rate is over 55 percent, 51 percent of youth are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), and the national unemployment rate is 33.5 percent.[5] Spatial inequality, the result of apartheid-era planning, means that young people today often do not live near job opportunities in urban centers and cannot easily access affordable transportation. Other structural challenges like rolling blackouts and limited access to internet connectivity also pose challenges to youth employment. Poor quality of education, another apartheid-era legacy, and high secondary school dropout rates also contribute to a lack of work-readiness skills and joblessness. According to South Africa's Labour Force Survey, "Job creation has been skewed to the tertiary sector [in industries such as information and communications technology, finance, business process outsourcing, retail, and hospitality] and typically requires higher skills than those of the typical or average worker."[6] However, access to the tertiary education system is limited, with only 8 percent of young people aged 15-24 enrolled in a college or university. Finally, South Africa's relatively small informal economy[7] likely contributes to high rates of unemployment.[8]

Erratic school-to-work trajectories. Overall, the South African labor market is described today as one of high "churn" with many young people taking erratic or zigzag pathways as they navigate from school to work.[9] Although youth have diverse experiences in their job search, South African youth — like their counterparts in the Global South — often transition in and out of the labor market, hopping from job to job, with spells of unemployment and education in between. This is exacerbated by high rates of inequality that limit the career opportunities available to the most marginalized youth. In particular, the dynamics of the "Black tax," a term that originated in South Africa for Black workers who feel a sense of obligation to financially support family members, puts a strain on many youth's finances and increases pressure on youth to find employment. Some youth feel they have been "sold false dreams," in that they were told if they attended university, they would easily obtain stable employment and be able to support themselves and their families, but in reality, this is often not the case.[10] Unfortunately, the transition from school to work lacks the security of a smooth progression from education to a stable, well-remunerated job.

Previous national responses to youth unemployment. Given these structural challenges, South Africa's policies and programs to address unemployment actively operate on two time horizons: providing immediate short-term relief while simultaneously working to enhance the long-term creation of decent jobs in response to market demands. South Africa has a large social safety net with several public works employment programs. Longer-term policies, such as the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act of 2003, incentivize businesses to hire, invest in, and increase Black business ownership through preferential public procurement and a scorecard of indicators. In 2018, the Youth Employment

Service (YES) was introduced as an addition to the B-BBEE. This created a public-private partnership involving 2,200 businesses to provide a 12-month, paid work experience in the private sector for disadvantaged, unemployed youth. In the civil society space, the Youth Development Collaboration (YD CoLab) is an emerging network of youth development organizations that connect disparate nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and promote visibility and openness among youth development actors through ecosystem mapping. Despite the implementation of various programs and policies, expectations for rapid change remain sober. In South Africa, many projects and programs aiming to solve youth unemployment have, despite decades of work, shown little progress in changing the situation for young people. Few initiatives worked at the scale required to drive significant impact, and most government departments and civil society initiatives worked in silos. Nonetheless, these policy and programmatic measures represent important precedents and incentives that Harambee has sought to build upon and serve as a starting point for both short-term and long-term solutions.

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A Comprehensive Reform Focused on Youth Employment

Creation of a national reform through a multi-pronged approach. In response to these persistent structural challenges, the South African Presidency, under its 2020-2025 Strategic Plan, launched a suite of reforms related to youth employment including the PES and the PYEI.[11] The PES and PYEI collaboratively address supply and demand-side challenges and strengthen coordination within the employment ecosystem. The two reforms are closely linked in that PES provides funding for several PYEI components, and the PYEI's mechanisms support the implementation of PES programs.[12]

Coordination across the youth employment ecosystem through the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI). President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the PYEI in his February 2020 State of the Nation Address. The PYEI is South Africa's most extensive initiative to tackle youth unemployment. Its aim is to help more young people transition from learning to earning by coordinating, accelerating, and enhancing current programs, while also opening up pathways to employment, training, and youth entrepreneurship. The PYEI focuses on coordination of the youth employment ecosystem and is intended to be a "bold and urgent" response to youth unemployment by transcending isolated programs and creating an "extensive, coordinated, and sustained [cross-sectoral] effort…including a wide variety of stakeholders and decision-makers from the government, the private sector, academia, development partners, and civil society."[13] It is coordinated through a newly created Project Management Office (PMO) that reports directly to the President and provides oversight and strategic direction in the implementation of the reform.[14] Although the PYEI is a governmental initiative, it involves significant participation from the private sector, including B-BBEE incentives for employers to improve their scorecards through the inclusive hiring of youth.

One of PYEI's key components is the NPMN. A network of networks, the NPMN's purpose is

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to provide aggregated information and support to young people in accessing learning and employment opportunities. Its main goals are to improve career guidance, streamline access to opportunities, and better align educational outcomes with job market needs. The NPMN is led by the Department of Employment and Labour (DEL) and includes a coordinating committee with other government agencies and a technical sub-committee with non-government and private sector stakeholders who work on mechanisms for information sharing and facilitating collaboration among partners.[15] An MOU for the Presidency, DEL, and other government departments outlines direct responsibilities and the signatories meet every six months to monitor progress, while the technical sub-committee meets every two months.

Job creation through the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES): Launched in October 2020, the PES builds on learning from previous public employment programs to deliver a job creation and job retention program that recognizes the nonlinear trajectory that many young people face when transitioning from education or unemployment to employment. The PES scaled up public employment programs and launched a bold new initiative: the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI), which places young people as school assistants[16] in over 23,000 schools. This large-scale public employment intervention aimed to confront the devastating economic impact caused by COVID-19 and high rates of youth unemployment, by placing youth in interim school and teaching assistant roles across the country.

Harambee's Unique Role in the Youth Employment Ecosystem

Direct service provider driven by data, collaboration, and learning. Founded in 2011, Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator is a South African not-for-profit social enterprise characterized by a passion for data-driven analytics and a willingness to iterate to success.[17] Harambee's philosophy is about "falling in love with the problem, and not the solution," which is exemplified in its culture of innovation, data and applying learning. Harambee focuses on identifying barriers that prevent young people from finding and keeping decent work and implementing solutions that advance inclusive hiring at scale. Before the pandemic, Harambee was primarily a service delivery organization, providing in-person job search support and employability skills training for a limited number of youth at its offices in Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, Pretoria, Buffalo City, and Gqeberha. Since 2020, Harambee has adopted a systems change approach, working with partners to fundamentally shift the labor market to become more inclusive. This approach focuses on unlocking new jobs, reducing labor market barriers, and providing young people with line of sight to access and secure opportunities. This involves identifying key sectors for economic growth and job creation and supporting the recruitment needs of employers to accelerate placement and retention of young job seekers. Through their work, Harambee has identified several barriers experienced by youth seeking employment, including transportation costs, data expenses, and access to childcare.[18] Because of this, developing an accessible and affordable online job search tool is a top priority for Harambee.

Establishing an accessible online platform for young job seekers. In 2019, Harambee began developing its online platform to reach youth at scale, which would later become SA Youth. It allows for job-searching as well as access to career information such as interview and job-searching tips, entrepreneurial opportunities, and

learning opportunities (digital skills resources, etc.), utilizing geo-location information so that jobseekers can find employment opportunities close to home. The SA Youth Platform also employs "inclusive proxies" that provide additional information to employers on youth's learning potential during the recruitment process. Youth can complete short, mobile-friendly questionnaires that assess workplace behaviors and problem-solving abilities, which then inform their suitability for opportunities that they have applied for. By going beyond more traditional hiring criteria, such as educational background, these inclusive metrics particularly benefit job seekers from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as youth who excelled in poorer quality schools, who are often overlooked in more traditional job matching platforms. This approach increases the number of users visible to prospective employers by 20 percent. Harambee also operates the platform through a zero-rated[19] internet website format to improve access for lower-income youth, who are often not able to afford the costs associated with accessing other job websites. Based on these early insights from their experience with the platform, in October 2019, Harambee proposed two solutions to the government which would later inform the NPMN: scale these types of pathway management platforms so they are accessible to all young job seekers and implement a "no-experience-required" policy.[20]

Facilitating ecosystem collaboration. Recognizing that coordination and collaboration among systems actors are essential to systems-level progress, Harambee has been intentional in building collaborative working relationships with other youth employment system actors, including the government, civil society, private sector, and academia. For example, Harambee has played a convening role in the global business services sector by facilitating collaboration between the private sector and other stakeholders to create and scale new jobs and increase inclusive hiring practices. It also provided technical and strategic support to the sector's industry association, BPESA (Business Process Enabling South Africa), to build its organizational capacity to lead coordination within the sector.[21] Harambee also forms partnerships to connect youth with a broader, more holistic range of services than they are able to offer, including partnering with the private sector to provide on-the-job training and with local NGOs to provide diverse skilling opportunities and mental health services. It also hosts an annual "Solutions Exchange" meeting which brings together leading stakeholders from the private sector, government, and civil society, alongside youth themselves, to network and collaboratively identify solutions for advancing inclusive youth employment.[22] Harambee realizes that changes in youth labor market systems do not happen automatically, and thus has played a crucial role in supporting system actors to convene, align objectives, and monitor efforts to properly implement strategic plans.[23] Building on their experience as an ecosystem facilitator, in 2022, Harambee was formally appointed the role of National Pathway Manager, a recognition of its intentional collaboration with public and private sector partners to support the SA Youth Platform. In this role, Harambee receives funding to support the management of the NPMN, though more significantly, it increases Harambee's visibility and signifies to system actors Harambee's value as a collaborative learning organization.

Overall, Haramabee's experience as a direct service provider and ecosystem facilitator, along with its development of the SA Youth Platform, set it up to play a critical role in the implementation of the national youth employment reform.

Implementing the PYEI and PES: Harambee's Contributions to a National Youth Employment Reform

Launching SA Youth with the National Pathways Management Network: As part of the PYEI, in 2020, Harambee collaborated with DEL, the National Youth Development Agency, and other partners to create a national pathway manager system for the NPMN. Initially planned to be physical, in-person sites in five pilot cities, the system aimed to aggregate youth opportunities through an online platform that still utilized a physical labor center for young people in the pilot cities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the launch. Adapting swiftly, Harambee transformed its website prototype into SA Youth, a job-matching mobile platform that directs young people to learning and earning opportunities. In doing so, Harambee also chose to give up sole ownership to the government because the site was seen as a national asset to reach and support young people. In addition to including employment, volunteer, and entrepreneurship opportunities, the site also integrated COVID-19 pandemic-related health information. The call center, originally created to handle outbound calls to youth regarding their SA Youth profiles, transitioned to add inbound inquiries, work readiness content, and mental health resources for jobseekers, along with a corresponding partner platform that was launched for employers to list jobs. The pandemic emergency pushed Harambee to quickly get an omnichannel site up and running, which integrates multiple communication channels such as inbound and outbound voice, WhatsApp, and email to provide a consistent customer-centric experience. Harambee was also able to offer the platform as zero-rated, or free for youth.

The ability to offer the site as zero-rated may have been the result of perfect timing, as during the COVID-19 pandemic the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies issued a directive to the telecoms providers to zero-rate sites with local education and health content, both aspects of SA Youth. While government pressure may have catalyzed this support from telecoms providers, Harambee has since managed to extend agreements with the providers to keep the site zero-rated. The outcome is an accessible, completely free online platform for young people to seek work and learning experiences.

Key reform: *In 2020, Harambee collaborated with DEL, the National Youth Development Agency, and other partners to create a national pathway manager system for the NPMN.*

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Serving the Basic Education Employment Initiative. Harambee also scaled SA Youth in 2020 when it was selected by the DBE to manage the recruitment function of its Presidential Employment Stimulus-funded BEEI under the PES. By all measures, the initiative was massive: recruitment of approximately 250,000 unemployed youth per year for five years, for placement as stipended school and teaching assistants in 23,000 schools nationwide. The initiative involved multi-level collaboration in that the national government provided financial and coordination support, but decision-making was located at the level of the school that selected and trained the youth assistants. School and teaching assistants served various roles: providing psychosocial and academic support to students in math, reading, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT); supporting teachers with classroom management and compliance with COVID-19 health protocols; and maintaining school infrastructure. The youth assistants were widely seen as valuable contributors to the schools: a Presidency report from 2023 notes that 94.6 percent of teachers surveyed wanted the program to continue and believe that it strengthened learning outcomes.[24] Youth assistants also reported participating in the program helped prepare them for future employment opportunities, as they gained confidence and self-esteem, as well as public speaking and organizational skills.[25] While the assistant positions were term-limited, the initiative nevertheless provided unemployed and discouraged youth[26] with a sense of purpose and mission, while also allowing them to build skills and career awareness to set them up for further employment. Harambee's use of the SA Youth Platform was a critical contribution to the BEEI. It is estimated that SA Youth's geo-location matching function contributed to an average transport cost saving of $12.80 (R236) per month for very cash-strapped youth, and equaled over $53.4 million (R1 billion) in savings over the program's four phases.[27]

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SA Youth's geo-location matching function

BEEI School and Teaching Assistants Programs

$12.80
Average transport cost saving per month for youth resulted in:

$53.4 m
Savings over the program's four phases

Building data system interoperability and strengthening technology collaboration. Harambee has also been working to improve interoperability between various actors and data systems in the NPMN so stakeholders have improved visibility into learning and earning opportunities and a more seamless online user experience. For example, Harambee worked for over two years with DEL to build interoperability between their two platforms (Employment Services South Africa and SA Youth), an investment which ultimately resulted in application programming interfaces (APIs) that can be used by public and private sector stakeholders to link to SA Youth. As a result, Pick n Pay, one of South Africa's largest retail employers, used the interface to link its human resource hiring functions to SA Youth, demonstrating proof-of-concept for the API technology and a commitment to the inclusive hiring of youth in its own recruitment processes. Additionally, Harambee's position as the National Pathway Manager provides it with unique visibility into existing data systems in the NPMN to identify synergies and avoid duplications of efforts related to technology and data. For example, Harambee decided not to build local ecosystem maps once they discovered that a consortium of academic and civil society organizations were developing Youth Explorer, a platform that already provided this service.[28] Invested in supporting the youth employment ecosystem, Harambee instead uses Youth Explorer to refer youth to services in their communities and discussions within the PYEI working committees about creating interoperability with SA Youth are underway. However, many challenges with building interoperability among data systems remain. For example, strict data privacy laws make it challenging to adhere to protection of personal information[29] while responding to requests by youth, employers, and service providers to see a full portrait of youths' learning-to-earning journeys. Additionally, many organizations, including government agencies and the NGO sector, do not have the necessary technology workforce capacity to do this IT infrastructure work because of a digital skills shortage in South Africa. To address this skills shortage, Harambee, along with other partners, is exploring training youth as IT technical support specialists to help build their skills for future employment.

Key outcome: *As a result, Pick n Pay, one of South Africa's largest retail employers, used the interface to link its human resource hiring functions to SA Youth, demonstrating proof-of-concept for the API technology and a commitment to the inclusive hiring of youth in its own recruitment processes.*

Advocating for Inclusive Employment Outcomes. While Harambee's work has evolved from providing direct, in-person services to youth, it continues to utilize data and human-centered approaches to advocate for inclusive youth employment. Harambee's objective is to convince public and private sector employers of the benefits of inclusive hiring, both to employers' operations and bottom line, and to the broader nation's efforts to address inequality. It is able to do this using its own data, which demonstrates that inclusive hiring is a good business strategy. For example, Harambee has found many of its private sector partners who have prioritized inclusive hiring (such as by using SA Youth's "inclusive proxies") have seen effectiveness and retention rates of marginalized youth exceeding the rates of those hired through regular pathways.[30] With higher retention rates among marginalized youth, Harambee has demonstrated that companies can benefit from reduced turnover costs, including lower recruitment and training expenses.

Addressing Young Job Seekers Needs. Harambee also maintains touch points with youth which helps ensure its advocacy efforts continue to be grounded in youth's needs and experiences. For example, to counterbalance the shift to

online communication with SA Youth, Harambee created a call center with 150 trained "guides," who facilitate what Harambee calls authentic or meaningful conversations on work-seeker's interests, goals, and current productive activities. In contrast to the scripted conversations typical of retail commerce, guides listen empathetically and provide practical guidance on a wide range of job-seeking topics. For example, if a young person shares that they do not have professional attire to wear to an interview, the guide can invite them to SmartWorks, Harambee's donated career clothing center for Cape Town- and Johannesburg-based youth. Call center guides are also trained to refer youth to additional support, including mental health services, as needed. These guides engage in 65,000 monthly calls with young job seekers, and a recent analysis found a 105 percent increase in job seekers' engagement on the SA Youth Platform after interacting with a call center guide. Harambee analyzes caller data to identify barriers for youth and better advocate for solutions on behalf of youth to private sector employers and the government. For example, it found youth living in townships need jobs close to them, but private sector employers in ICT sectors cite lack of internet and mobile infrastructure as a barrier. Harambee has been advocating for expanded access to broadband internet in excluded communities through streamlined regulations and increased funding availability and collaborating with local stakeholders to establish township-based work-from-home opportunities in the global business sector. Harambee also often advocates for earlier and more frequent salary payments by private sector employers, particularly within a young person's first month of work, given its research which shows youth tend to lack a cushion of savings.

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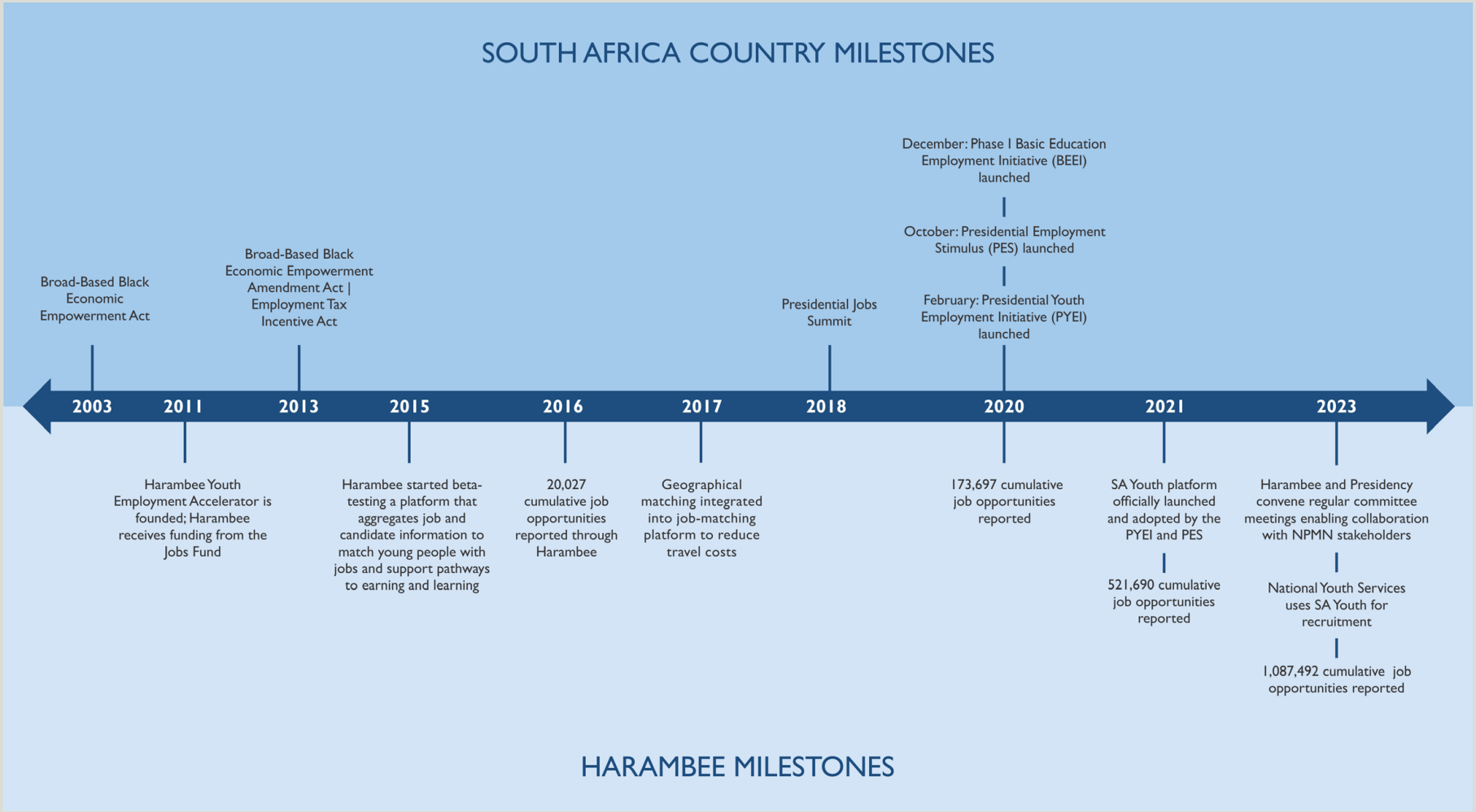
Timeline


SOUTH AFRICA COUNTRY MILESTONES
Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act
Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Amendment Act | Employment Tax Incentive Act
Presidential Jobs Summit
December: Phase I Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) launched
October: Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES) launched
February: Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI) launched
2003
2011
2013
2015
2016
2017
2018
2020
2021
2023
Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator is founded; Harambee receives funding from the Jobs Fund
Harambee started beta-testing a platform that aggregates job and candidate information to match young people with jobs and support pathways to earning and learning
20,027 cumulative job opportunities reported through Harambee
Geographical matching integrated into job-matching platform to reduce travel costs
173,697 cumulative job opportunities reported
SA Youth platform officially launched and adopted by the PYEI and PES
521,690 cumulative job opportunities reported
Harambee and Presidency convene regular committee meetings enabling collaboration with NPMN stakeholders
National Youth Services uses SA Youth for recruitment
1,087,492 cumulative job opportunities reported
HARAMBEE MILESTONES

Findings and Implications

Systems change efforts are multi-faceted; they involve the contribution of various system actors over time, working across diverse domains. To analyze these processes, this case study utilizes the categories of systems change described by the Youth Systems Framework℠ (see the Synthesis Report for more detail). These categories include **domains** (fields in which change occurs) defined as **policy; services and practice; norms and mindsets; and resource flows**—as well as **enablers** (actions taken to nudge the system to change) defined as **stakeholder collaboration; vision and goals; system mapping; capacity development; and data, learning and evaluation.** Each finding below is marked with an icon designating the predominant domain or enabler from the Youth Systems Framework,℠ with recognition that most involve other domains and enablers as well.

Vision and Goals; Policy

Progress on improved youth employment and inclusive hiring in South Africa has required a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder high-level initiative that includes national policies and resource commitments to perform at scale. Having a national level vision, supported by policies and funding, has been essential to this work. The power of a coordinated and funded initiative is that it can set a compelling vision for change and motivate and enable government line ministries—together with civil society and the private sector—to coordinate, collaborate, and share data in new ways. For example, Harambee already had the prototype for the inclusive hiring platform SA Youth and was able to scale through the support of the PYEI and PES initiatives led by the Presidency of South Africa to reach more marginalized youth with employment opportunities. Employers have also used SA Youth's "inclusive proxies" to implement more inclusive hiring practices and have seen improved business outcomes. While not all high-profile initiatives achieve their loftiest aspirations, the youth workforce development (YWFD) ecosystem benefits from the impact of a national vision articulated through policy and committed to through funding.

Implications

International partners can support the efforts of national governments that aspire to reform their YWFD ecosystems through bold new initiatives, laws, and policies that consider scale from the outset, rather than pursuing their own activities irrespective of government strategies, which can often lead to siloed approaches. In the case of South Africa, key elements or entry points include initiatives that can show impact, have a footprint at the national level, are open to innovation, and have the potential for sustainability.

Resource Flows

Unlocking sufficient funding for youth employment efforts is a key catalyst for systems change, though it looks different across initiatives and actors. This initiative is supported by various resources from the public and private sectors, which enables the scaling of inclusive hiring practices. To achieve this, the government first provided funding to support the multi-pronged reform initiative with COVID-19 pandemic relief funding that enabled programs like the BEEI to operate at an unprecedented scale. This "surge" funding provided a window of opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of a new program, with the aim of setting a standard for the scale of programming needed, along with accompanying funding and supportive policy frameworks. Harambee was well positioned to take advantage of these funding opportunities, as it had worked for years to build trust and legitimacy with the government by using its core funding to test and iterate proof-of-concept projects, like SA Youth, which had the potential to be scaled as a public asset. The SA Youth Platform was ultimately scaled only when the government (at the office of the Presidency) recognized its value and allocated sufficient funding for its development, ongoing refinement, and maintenance. With government pressure,[31] telecoms companies initially agreed to cover data costs to make the platform free for youth, something these companies have continued to do based on government pressure and their extended agreements with Harambee. The private sector has also contributed significantly to SA Youth through non-financial inputs and contributions to ensure that the platform meets their hiring needs.

Implications

International donors can support promising local organizations to develop, test, and research innovative YWFD interventions to become evidence-based models, which can unlock government and private sector funding. Conducting cost analyses of these interventions can be useful in providing partner governments with data on the costs of sustainability planning. Events like massive government pandemic spending are once-in-a-generation and unpredictable. There are ebbs and flows in government resources, so "preparing the soil" through smaller investments that yield data on effectiveness will increase the likelihood that larger investments are used wisely. Additionally, donors can consider covering core costs until government and local stakeholders have the resources, will, and capacity to build on the proof-of-concept models and sustain such interventions.

Stakeholder Collaboration

High demand for youth employment opportunities and services requires new partnerships around shared assets and infrastructure to meet that demand at a feasible cost. Harambee's collaborative spirit and recognition that it can't do everything to address youth unemployment in South Africa has guided it to lean into its role as an ecosystem facilitator. Harambee has played an essential role in advancing stakeholder collaboration around a shared objective in this reform by facilitating coordination among various systems actors through the NPMN and sharing ownership, platforms, and data. For example, Harambee gave up its sole ownership of the

platform that became SA Youth to create a shared national asset jointly owned and utilized across diverse public and private sector stakeholders. This entailed moving away from direct attribution of results to Harambee as an organization and being sensitive and responsive to the politics of ownership. On the government side, establishing partnerships of their own has also been essential to fostering a collaborative ecosystem to meet the high demand for youth employment opportunities. For example, a new partnership between the DBE and PES enabled the leveraging of the large, distributed network of schools across the country with the opportunity for stipended employment experiences for over 1 million youth, while also contributing to the alleviation of human resource gaps within schools.

Implications

To promote effective collaboration, governments and international donors should look to maximize existing infrastructure, networks, and prototype innovations as they seek to scale youth employment support to meet the needs of entire youth cohorts. This can be done by identifying and supporting local organizations already playing the role of ecosystem facilitators and investing time and resources specifically for relationship building. Multiple partnerships across systems actors will be needed and should include large government agencies as part of the solution. It is also important to recognize the importance of the politics of "ownership" of an initiative. By allowing government and other local stakeholders to establish ownership, as done with Harambee, donors may be able to secure the buy-in from these stakeholders necessary to achieve scale.

Photo credit: YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation

Data, Learning, and Evaluation

Promise is high for large online data and information systems to support youth employment, but the actual implementation of such systems requires significant human, financial, and technological investment. Systems actors - including the government, private sector, civil society, and youth and their families - need to access and share data to address youth unemployment in an effective, coordinated way. This includes data on the employment and training opportunities available to youth, as well as data on what happens to youth as they navigate their education to employment pathway. However, data sharing is quite challenging given the diversity of public and private system actors required to share data to accomplish the complex set of tasks involved in the school-to-work trajectory. For the larger South African youth employment ecosystem, there has been progress, but interoperability of data systems across multiple governmental, private sector, and civil society actors, including youth themselves, remains a challenge because of data privacy needs, organizational ownership of data, and costs for data management. Sufficient and available ICT talent is also a concern. Harambee's efforts to build interoperability between SA Youth and other data systems have begun to address some of these barriers, but limited data sharing remains an outstanding challenge for systems change.

Implications

New governance and investment models are needed to allow stakeholder collaboration on distributed data sharing that works to optimize the offerings of the youth employment field. These approaches must be grounded in what is feasible in the local context and developed with sustainability in mind. The availability and cost of the human talent needed to set up and maintain these tools should not be underestimated.

Services and Practices

Human-centered practices are at the core of youth employment work, even when it is scaled and technologically enabled. Harambee has found that providing big technological solutions that work with youth within their actual circumstances means paying close attention to micro-level human experiences. For example, Harambee utilizes the geo-location functions in the SA Youth Platform to address identified job search barriers for youth related to travel time and costs. Meaningful voice and chat conversations between call center guides and youth help offset the tendency of technology to dehumanize end users by overlooking the individual at the receiving end of the technical solution. Harambee also continues to work with employers to rethink minimum hiring requirements, such as language skills or level of education, to promote a more inclusive, human-centered hiring ecosystem. Operational know-how and a close ear to the lived experiences of youth are critical for youth employment solutions.

Implications

In the rush to embrace technology, youth service providers should reflect carefully on the critical touch points they need with youth to be able to serve them well. International donors, partners, and governments have a role to play in supporting blended approaches that balance the promise of technology with the need for authentic human contact and connection. Underinvestment in the human elements can result in a lack of impact, and it is important to design a sustainable business model that takes into account both the technological and human perspectives. Experimentation and data collection must be part of this design process, along with the presence of an enabling environment that keeps youth needs at the forefront.

Norms and Mindsets

In contexts where the demand for jobs by youth outstrips the supply of decent jobs generated by the private sector, some key mindset shifts are required to balance short-term and long-term solutions. The first shift is from the search for silver bullet interventions to an iterative problem-solving approach that is willing to pilot and test new programs with a focus on learning over the long term. Harambee's philosophy embodies a problem-solving approach which allows for analyzing program data to understand barriers to job creation and reducing labor market churn through innovative and adaptive solutions that are context-specific and can be tested immediately, like the SA Youth Platform. A second mindset shift involves not allowing the perfect to get in the way of the good. In South Africa, there is broad recognition of the human cost of people not having work of some kind. While there is aspiration for every young person to secure stable, long-term employment, the reality of job scarcity necessitates creating meaningful opportunities through shorter-term learning programs that lead to occupational qualifications. For example, by connecting youth to short-term opportunities as school and teaching assistants, the BEEI provided over 1 million youth with tangible opportunities to grow professionally. Even the "hustle" (a common term for self-employment in South Africa) has its value when it comes to preventing youth from feeling stuck, and can provide more flexibility and autonomy over resources and encourage young people to continue their employment search. A collective mindset shift is required to overcome the stigma around these non-traditional work opportunities and support youth who are interested in pursuing them. Keeping youth in South Africa learning and hopeful is an important social good worth investing in.

Implications

Without abandoning the goal of growing enough decent jobs for the current youth population, international partners should adapt their expectations around employment impacts to fit a country's economic context, both in the short and long term. The focus should be on iterative problem-solving to remove barriers to employment and job creation, while simultaneously supporting the government to find creative approaches to providing youth education and employment opportunities at scale.

Looking Forward

Since so much of its vision for youth employment systems change requires active collaboration among multiple private and public sector partners, Harambee calls for the development of new governance and information-sharing infrastructure to support this work. For the National Pathway Management Network and the next generation of SA Youth users, a platform or distributed network is needed where youth have a universal profile, own their own data, and can easily control how employers and service providers access it. The work of many smaller NGOs should be more closely linked to the effort, as well as to enterprises in high-growth sectors where jobs may be created. While this aspirational vision is held by many stakeholders and the technology is available, creating an enabling governance for this form of deep collaboration is an ongoing effort.

Photo credit: YouthPower2: Learning and Evaluation

Endnotes

1. From Harambee website dashboard, accessed 8/8/24: https://www.stateofthenation.gov.za/presidential-youth-employment-intervention/tracking-progress-and-facilitate-learning. Since 2012, Harambee has served 3.8 million work-seekers, linked 1.25 million youth with reported work opportunities, and supported 1,386 employers, which altogether has generated $1.28 million in income for youth.
2. The Presidential Employment Stimulus: Building a society that works. February 2024. https://pres-employment.openup.org.za/img/February_2024_Update.pdf
3. Apartheid was a system of institutionalized racial segregation that existed in South Africa from 1948 to the early 1990's. The authoritarian political system ensured that the nation's white minority population controlled political, social, and economic activities.
4. Statistics South Africa (2019). Quarterly Labour Force Survey.
5. Media Release, Quarterly Labour Force Survey—Q2: 2024. The figures reflected account for youth aged 18-34 years old.
6. Ibid.
7. South Africa's informal economy as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product is at 29%, the fifth smallest in Africa. https://www.worldeconomics.com/Informal-Economy/South%20Africa.aspx. While the informal economy is often plagued by poor job quality, it nonetheless does offer easy entry and exit and entrepreneurial opportunities for young people, and a lower bar for finding employment. This ease of entry means that informal employment may not be counted in national statistics.
8. De Lannoy et al, 2018, "What Drives Youth Unemployment and What Interventions Help. A Systematic Overview of the Evidence and a Theory of Change."
9. Neil Rankin (2019) The Porous Nature of the Youth Labour Market in South Africa. Unpublished report commissioned by Harambee.
10. Youth perspectives shared during a system modeling workshop. February 2024.
11. Francis, Kate. March 2024. South African Literature Review: Youth Workforce Development Case Study, unpublished working paper, Making Cents International, p. 25.
12. The PYEI Fact Sheet. https://www.stateofthenation.gov.za/assets/downloads/pyei/v3/june23_General_Info_Factsheet.pdf.
13. "Introducing the PYEI. An Overview." https://www.stateofthenation.gov.za/assets/downloads/pyei/v4/Overview-digital_Aug23.pdf.
14. The PYEI Fact Sheet. https://www.stateofthenation.gov.za/assets/downloads/pyei/v3/june23_General_Info_Factsheet.pdf
15. "Introducing the PYEI. An Overview." https://www.stateofthenation.gov.za/assets/downloads/pyei/v4/Overview-digital_Aug23.pdf.
16. Youth with a high school diploma (called matric in South Africa) qualified for the role of Education Assistant, while youth without a matric qualified for the General Assistant role to support school maintenance, security, food gardens, and after-school care. This opportunity was for one academic year.

17. For more on Harambee's origins, see the Harvard Kennedy School Case 2254.0, April 2023. Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator: A Model for Reducing Unemployment in South Africa.
18. Youth Capital (a South African youth advocacy campaign) found in 2023 that youth in their study spent up to R1,467 (about $80) in the combined costs of internet access, transport, and application fees monthly to seek work.
19. SA Youth was first established as a data-free platform in South Africa, which means reversible mobile data costs, so youth can access a website on their phones and the costs are billed to the youth service organization. Harambee has used a company (now called Datafree Technologies) for this reversed billing service. In contrast to data-free, zero-rated means that telecommunications providers have agreed to completely cover the costs for youth usage of the internet site. The employer portal of SA Youth is not subsidized, meaning that employers must pay for data costs associated with accessing the portal. The site has since transitioned from data-free to zero-rated.
20. Harambee, Oct. 2019. Breaking Barriers: Quarterly Employment Report, p.3.
21. Genesis Analytics. August 2020. The Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator approach: growing the economy inclusively through ecosystem facilitation and sector intermediaries.
22. https://harambee.flockplatform.com/ep/?event=Solutions-Exchange-2023
23. Genesis Analytics. August 2020. The Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator approach: growing the economy inclusively through ecosystem facilitation and sector intermediaries. https://www.harambee.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Harambee-Approach-A-toolkit-and-case-study-for-growing-sectors-inclusively.pdf
24. "Spotlight on the Basic Education Employment Initiative" 2023.
25. Harambee notes that understanding what happens to young people after interacting with the SAYouth platform and undertaking job opportunities is ongoing and challenging work in progress for Harambee and its partners. This data can help better understand trends around job retention, expectations around the role, and challenges that youth face in their path to obtaining decent jobs.
26. In the definition used for labor market information: discouraged means those who are of legal working age who want to work but have given up seeking a job due to poor job prospects.
27. Harambee. November 2023. Breaking Barriers.
28. Youth Explorer maps the physical location and details of a number of services available to young people. These include education institutions, employment offices (e.g. Department of Labour and National Youth Development Agency hubs), health clinics, libraries, post offices, police stations, public transport stops, etc.
29. Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act). https://popia.co.za/
30. Harambee. Breaking Barriers Quarterly Report: June 2023. https://www.harambee.co.za/youth-month/
31. Africaportal. May 2020. COVID-19: Implications for the 'digital divide' in Africa. https://africaportal.org/feature/covid-19-implications-of-the-pandemic-for-the-digital-divide-in-africa/

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