



Contributions of the Non-Profit Sector to the South African Economy: A Focus on Creating Dignified and Fulfilling Work for the Youth

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ABSTRACT



Youth unemployment represents a critical socio-economic challenge in South Africa, disproportionately affecting marginalised groups. This literature review synthesises existing research to analyse the contributions of the Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) sector in addressing this crisis, with a specific focus on the creation of dignified and fulfilling work. The review establishes that the sector is a significant employer and provides essential pathways to employment through direct job creation, skills development, vocational training, and support for youth entrepreneurship. However, a critical finding is the pervasive lack of consolidated, granular data, which obscures a precise understanding of the sector's scale and impact, particularly regarding employment quality for marginalised youth. The analysis reveals a substantial knowledge gap; while the quantitative outputs of NPO-led initiatives are often documented, the qualitative aspects of job dignity, such as stability, fair remuneration, and opportunities for advancement, remain critically underexplored. Key structural challenges, including funding instability and the precarious nature of many NPO-funded positions, further complicate the sector's ability to deliver sustainable employment. The review concludes that while South African NPOs are indispensable in mitigating youth unemployment, strategic improvements are needed. These include enhancing data collection mechanisms, fostering sustainable funding models, and prioritising the creation of high-quality, dignified work to fully realise the sector's potential in fostering sustainable economic inclusion for South African youth.

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Bhekinkosi Moyo
CAPSI Director

DISCLAIMER

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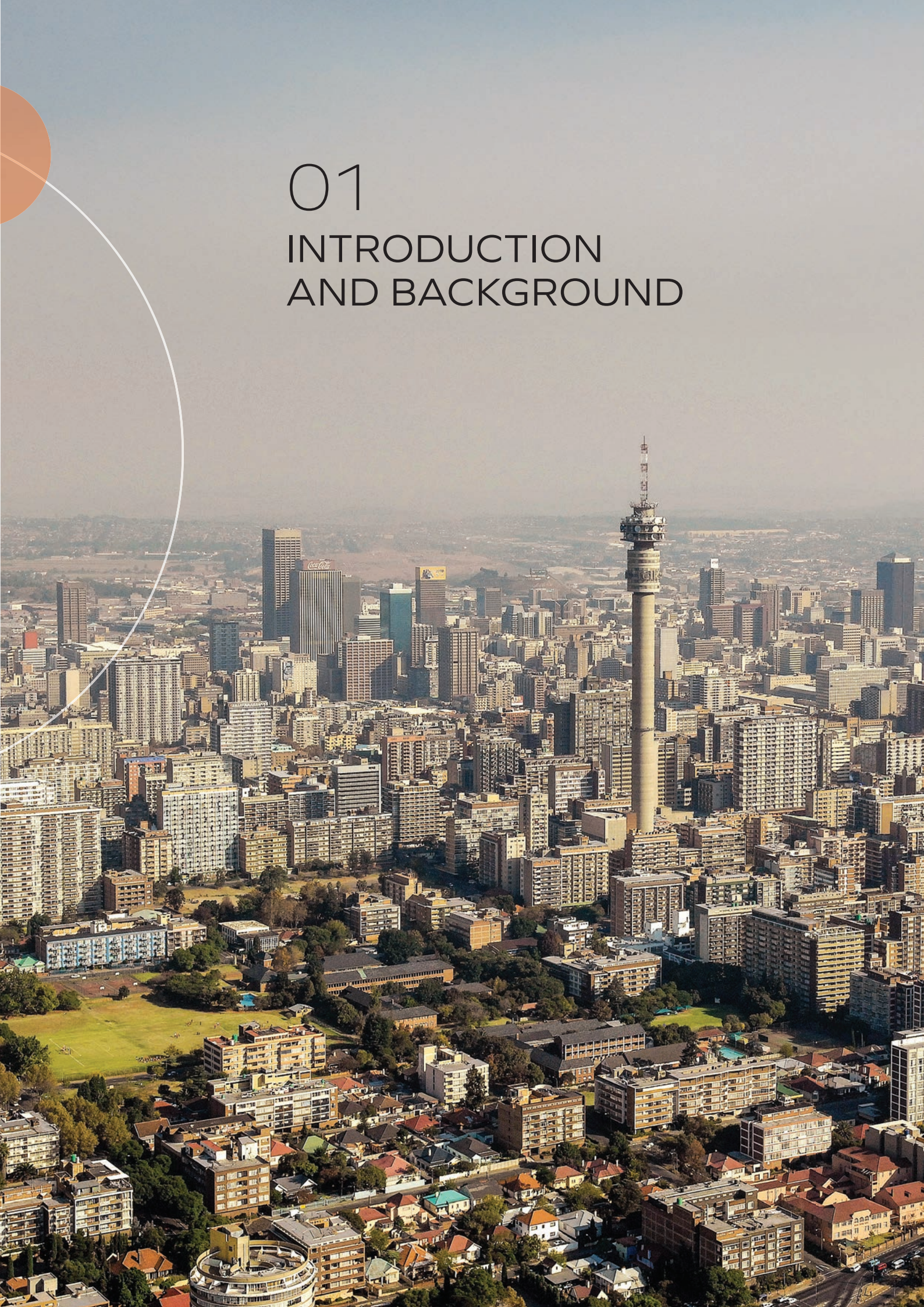


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LIST OF ACRONYMS

APD	Association for Persons with Disabilities
CBOs	Community-based Organisations
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
DSD	Department of Social Development
EPWP	Expanded Public Works Programme
ETDP	Education, Training and Development Practices
ETI	Employment Tax Incentive
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IT	Information Technology
NCPD	The National Council for Persons with Disabilities
NEET	Not in Employment, Education, or Training
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
NPOs	Non-profit Organisations
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SEs	Social Enterprises
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
Stats SA	Statistics South Africa
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
YES	Youth Employment Service

An aerial photograph of Johannesburg, South Africa, showing a dense urban landscape. The Carlton Centre, a tall skyscraper, is visible in the background. In the foreground, there are numerous residential buildings, some with red-tiled roofs, and a large green field. The Johannesburg Tower, a tall, slender structure, stands out prominently in the middle ground. The sky is clear and blue.

01

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Non-profit organisations (NPOs) play a crucial role in promoting socio-economic development across Africa. This is particularly important in the context of high youth unemployment and ongoing social challenges that require innovative solutions (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017). Globally, youth unemployment is an escalating crisis affecting an estimated 65 million young people. The International Labour Organisation reports that youths are three times more likely to be unemployed than adults, with Africa experiencing some of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world (ILO, 2024). In response to this crisis, African NPOs, including social enterprises (SEs), are increasingly acknowledged for their role in creating job opportunities, especially for young people. They contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals by fostering job creation, developing skills, and promoting economic inclusion (Nicholls, 2010; Shaw & de Bruin, 2013).

The country is grappling with a severe youth unemployment crisis, with approximately 4.9 million young individuals aged 15 to 34 years currently unemployed (Stats SA, 2022a).

Youth unemployment in South Africa is deeply rooted in the country's socio-economic history and exacerbated by structural, educational, and market challenges (Wakefield, Yu, & Swanepoel, 2022). The legacy of apartheid, which resulted in unequal access to quality education and spatial segregation, has created lasting skill mismatches that prevent youth from accessing employment opportunities (Shifa, Mabhena, Ranchhod, & Leibbrandt, 2023).

The low economic growth rate has exacerbated the youth unemployment crisis. The country is grappling with a severe youth unemployment crisis, with approximately 4.9 million young individuals aged 15 to 34 years currently unemployed (Stats SA, 2022a). The situation is particularly dire for the 15 to 24 year age group, which faces an alarming unemployment rate of 62.1 per cent as of early 2023. Additionally, about 10.2 million young South Africans are classified as Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET), resulting in a NEET rate of 36.1 per cent (UNDP, 2023).

Despite government initiatives like the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) and the Employment Tax Incentive (ETI), aimed at creating jobs, youth unemployment remains disproportionately high, particularly among marginalised groups such as young women, youth with disabilities, and rural youth (Graham et al., 2019). Disparities are particularly evident among young black African women, who experience higher unemployment rates compared to their male counterparts, even though they are more likely to have completed secondary or tertiary education (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Additionally, people living with disabilities face significant barriers to entering the formal labour market due to inadequate education, healthcare, and accessibility (Commission for Employment Equity, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened the youth unemployment situation in the country (UNDP, 2023).

The role of NPOs in addressing youth unemployment in South Africa is critical, particularly in providing stable, fulfilling, and equitable employment opportunities. While NPOs and SEs have substantial potential, the existing literature lacks a comprehensive synthesis of how these organisations specifically contribute to sustainable employment for African youth. Many studies have highlighted the importance of NPOs in addressing social challenges, but few have focused specifically on their economic contributions, especially in creating decent work for young South Africans (Moreno & Agapitova, 2017; Nicholls, 2010). Furthermore, there is limited data on the long-term impact of NPO-led employment initiatives and the quality of the jobs created. As a result, there is a lack of understanding regarding the sector's potential for sustainable economic inclusion. This literature review sought to address this deficiency and outlined areas for future research. The main aim of this review was to highlight the contributions of the non-profit sector to youth employment. It sought to identify gaps and challenges while drawing attention to areas where the sector can enhance its impact in creating dignified and fulfilling jobs for young people.

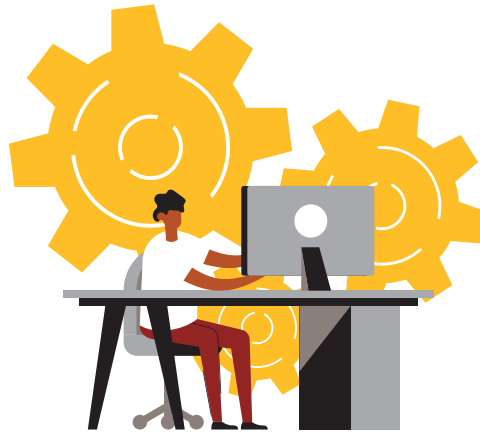
To achieve the goal above, this literature review addressed five key questions:

1. What is the economic contribution of the non-profit sector to youth employment in Africa?
2. How does this sector promote dignified and fulfilling work for African youth?
3. What are the contributions of various sub-sectors within the non-profit sector toward youth employment?
4. What knowledge gaps exist within the sector and its sub-sectors?
5. What future opportunities are available in the non-profit sector for expanding youth employment?

This review is divided into ten sections. Following the introduction and contextual background on youth unemployment in South Africa, the second section focuses on the methodology adopted to conduct the review, while section three defines key concepts, including NPOs, youth, marginalisation, and dignified and fulfilling jobs. Section four examines the economic contribution of the non-profit sector to youth employment in South Africa. In



contrast, section five explores the non-profit sector's role in providing dignified and fulfilling work opportunities for young people in South Africa. Section six addresses sub-sectors that contribute to dignified and fulfilling jobs for various segments of South African youth, and section seven focuses on the potential role of technology and its use by NPOs to enhance youth employment. Section eight addresses the challenges in data collection and the existing knowledge gaps within the non-profit sector. In contrast, section nine provides opportunities for NPOs and SEs to create dignified and fulfilling jobs for young people in the country, and section ten offers a conclusion that provides recommendations on how NPOs can enhance their contributions to youth employment.



02

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH



The study conducted a systematic literature review that employed content analysis to map the research field, analyse and synthesise existing knowledge, compare findings from various sources, identify gaps, and suggest areas for further exploration (Snyder, 2019). This review utilised secondary data sourced from academic literature through search engines like Google Scholar and EBSCOhost, research reports/websites from NPOs that provide research findings with primary and secondary data, government publications, and grey literature. While the review was constrained by its dependence on available secondary data and may not capture the most recent or marginalised perspectives, it provides a structured and comprehensive overview of the contributions and challenges faced by NPOs in promoting youth employment in South Africa.



03

DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS



The following sub-sections provide definitions of NPOs, youth, marginalisation, and dignified and fulfilling jobs in the South African context

3.1 Defining NPOs

In South Africa, NPOs encompass a wide range of entities, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and voluntary associations. These organisations are united by their dedication to serving public interests instead of generating profit (RSA, 1997). According to the NPO Act (Act No. 71 of 1997), an NPO is defined as “a trust, company, or other association of persons established for a public purpose, [where] the income and property of which are not distributable to its members or office bearers, except as reasonable compensation for services rendered” (RSA, 1997, p. 2). Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) classifies these entities as non-profit institutions, characterised by self-governance, institutional independence from government, a non-profit distribution model, and voluntary association (Stats SA, 2014). This definition is consistent with those found in dominant international literature.

The non-profit sector in South Africa is vast and includes entities such as charities, foundations, advocacy groups, and SEs that address varied social challenges (Smith, Stebbins & Dover, 2006). These organisations operate at multiple levels, local, national, and even international, targeting issues like education, skills development, healthcare, and employment, particularly for marginalised groups such as youth. This commitment reflects the sector’s role in tackling the inequalities rooted in South Africa’s apartheid history (Maka, 2023; Van Pletzen, Zulliger, Moshabela, & Schneider, 2014). Despite this diversity, a significant issue remains; the lack of a comprehensive registry of NPOs. The Department of Social Development (DSD) reported 280 329 registered NPOs by September 2023. Registration is voluntary. This leaves a gap in the data that makes it difficult to assess the sector’s size and impact accurately (ETDP SETA, 2020; Kagiso Trust, 2019). The problem with this definition is that it leaves out NPOs that are not registered. It is a common knowledge that across the globe, especially in the developing world, including Africa, most NPOs are not registered. In the main, the definition of NPOs in the South African context is at best a Western perspective.

According to the DSD (2023), most registered NPOs are voluntary associations, followed by non-profit companies and trusts. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the growth of NPO registrations over the past five years, from 2017 to 2022, and their distribution by province from 2017 to 2023, respectively.

TABLE 1: Growth of NPOs registration (2017 to 2022)

Organisation Type	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Non-profit Company	10 738	13 197	15 859	18 708	22 267
Trust	2 768	2 892	2 997	3 082	3 163
Voluntary	177 367	193 188	209 681	219 087	230 782

Source: Adapted from DSD (2023)

TABLE 2 : Distribution by province (2017 to 2023)

Province	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2022/23
Eastern Cape	17 294	19 359	21 339	22 913	24 632
Free State	9 464	10 426	11 494	12 136	12 998
Gauteng	60 508	66 575	72 772	76 638	81 278
KwaZulu-Natal	35 089	37 959	41 103	42 937	45 500
Limpopo	19 407	21 223	22 901	24 195	25 461
Mpumalanga	14 339	15 711	17 129	17 688	18 910
North West	11 255	12 024	13 134	13 975	14 749
Northern Cape	4 036	4 612	5 206	5 493	5 824
Western Cape	19 481	21 388	23 459	24 902	26 860
Total	190 873	209 277	228 537	240 877	256 212

Source: Adapted from DSD (2023)

Funding for South African NPOs comes mainly from government, but includes internal and external sources, both of which are often unstable (Maboya & McKay, 2019). While the country's NPO policy framework is highly regarded internationally, the Directorate for NPO Oversight has faced criticism for its inefficiency. This has affected the stability and effectiveness of NPOs in the country (Kagiso Trust, 2019). Additionally, SEs, a subset of NPOs that blend profit with social purpose, have gained attention for their potential to foster youth entrepreneurship, providing sustainable business solutions alongside social impact (Omura & Forster, 2014; Weerawardena, McDonald, & Mort, 2010).

3.2 Defining Youth

Stats SA defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 34 years. According to the 2022 census, this demographic accounts for approximately 21.6 million people in the country. This definition acknowledges that the challenges faced by young people extend beyond the traditional age range of 15 to 24 years, covering critical issues such as unemployment, education, and health (Mazorodze, 2020; Mncayi & Mdluli, 2019). The National Youth Policy (2020-2030) emphasises that this broader age range reflects the prolonged transition into adulthood experienced by many young South Africans. Factors contributing to this delay include systemic barriers like late entry into the labor market, extended educational requirements, and socio-economic inequalities (Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, 2020).

The definition is broader than that of the International Labour Organisation, which defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 24 years (ILO, 2020). While this narrower definition helps standardise global data, it does not account for the extended dependency periods often seen in African contexts. In South Africa, NPOs adapt these definitions flexibly to meet their programme goals. Some opt for the UN's 15 to 24 year age range for education and career programmes, while others align with the 15 to 34 year age range to better address the needs of young adults transitioning to self-sufficiency (UN, 2013). This adaptable approach enables NPOs to design targeted interventions that respond more effectively to South Africa's socio-economic landscape, acknowledging the diverse challenges faced by youth across this broader age spectrum.



3.3 Defining (Youth) Marginalisation

Leonard (1984, p. 180) defined marginalisation as 'being outside the mainstream of productive activity and/or social reproductive activity'. Marginalised youth can be understood as young people who encounter multiple barriers that prevent them from accessing opportunities available to their peers (Morgan, Parker, & Marturano, 2020). These obstacles may include socio-economic deprivation, cultural discrimination, physical challenges, or exclusion from essential services like education, training, employment, and healthcare. As a result, they face limited developmental opportunities and struggle to reach their potential (Hofman, Zhang, Groom, Reed, & Angell, 2024; Morgan et. al., 2020). After nearly three decades of democracy, South Africa and Johannesburg have become the most unequal country and city in the world (World Bank, 2022). The Gauteng City-Region Observatory's Quality of Life survey, based on a 2018 youth index that includes 29 variables across ten dimensions, such as relationships, housing, and safety, provides a thorough analysis of youth marginalisation in Gauteng (Everatt, 2024). The survey reveals significant gender and racial disparities, with African and coloured youth being disproportionately affected. Only 14.1 per cent of African youth and 22.1 per cent of coloured youth were classified as doing 'fine', compared to 33.3 per cent of white youth and 34.8 per cent of Indian youth.

Young black males consistently demonstrate the highest levels of marginalisation, a trend that has been evident since 1992. While young females perform slightly better on the marginalisation index, they still face significant challenges in the labour market. For instance, in 2022, young women had a school attendance rate of 29.0 per cent, compared to 28.8 per cent for young men. However, by 2024, young women experienced higher unemployment rates of 49.4 per cent, versus 31.9 per cent for young males. This gender disparity can be attributed to systemic barriers, family responsibilities, and skills mismatches (StatsSA, 2024a). These findings highlight the deeply entrenched racial, spatial, and gender inequities in South Africa. This calls for transformative and inclusive policies aimed at addressing youth marginalisation.

3.4 Defining Dignified and Fulfilling Jobs

Dignified and fulfilling work is a complex concept that includes job quality, personal growth, and respect in the workplace. The ILO (2013) defines dignified work as employment that maintains human dignity, offers fair wages, ensures job security, and provides a safe working environment. This concept also emphasises the importance of respecting workers' rights and allowing them to engage in meaningful activities that contribute to their personal and professional growth. The MasterCard Foundation has expanded this concept by emphasising that dignified and fulfilling work should provide fair income and safe conditions, as well as opportunities for skill development, career advancement, and creative engagement, all in alignment with the worker's values and aspirations (Center for Rapid Evidence Synthesis, 2024). Some scholars argue that such jobs should ensure financial security while also fostering skills, confidence, and long-term employability (Omura & Forster, 2014; Weerawardena et al., 2010).

04

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF NON-PROFIT SECTOR TO YOUTH EMPLOYMENT



South Africa has a vibrant non-profit sector that plays a significant role in community development, poverty alleviation, skills development, and job creation (NDA, 2021; Trialogue, 2024). It contributes approximately two per cent of the nation's employment and adds around R50 billion annually to the gross domestic product (GDP). Furthermore, it implements various projects and programmes that promote socio-economic development across the country (Maka, 2023).

Economic contribution refers to "the positive impact that organisations or sectors have on ... economy, typically assessed by metrics such as job creation, income generation, and overall contribution to GDP (Watson, Wilson, Thilmany, & Winter, 2007, p. 141). For NPOs, this contribution includes both direct and indirect benefits, primarily through employment, skill development, and the provision of services, particularly in underserved communities (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Haddock, 2011). With respect to youth employment, NPOs including social enterprises play a significant role by creating job opportunities, fostering entrepreneurship, and offering essential skills training that enhances young people's employability (Malgas, 2022; Visser, 2011). Given South Africa's high youth unemployment rate, these contributions are crucial as they help alleviate poverty and stimulate local economies by integrating young people into the workforce (NPC, 2012).

The following sub-sections examine the specific economic contributions of NPOs to youth employment in South Africa. This review aligns with findings from the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA) (2020), which highlight the challenges of accurately measuring the economic impact of NPOs due to the diversity within the sector and the lack of a standardised reporting system. Although it is not feasible to evaluate all 200 000 and more NPOs, this study focused on a select few key organisations to illustrate the sector's contributions to youth employment.

4.1 Direct Job Creation and Volunteerism

NPOs play a crucial role in creating job opportunities for young South Africans. While their contribution to youth employment is widely recognised, there is a lack of comprehensive data on the number of jobs generated by the non-profit sector. This gap makes it challenging to assess the true impact of NPOs accurately in providing sustainable employment for young men and women in South Africa. This issue is not unique to South Africa; globally, the scale and quality of jobs created by NPOs often remains unknown (Tice et al., 2013).

Some international studies indicate that the non-profit sector accounts for over 10 per cent of the global workforce, making it one of the largest employers worldwide (Tice, Salamon, Haddock, & Sokolowski, 2013). Dlamini (2019) and PMG (2002) have argued that NPOs in South Africa provide more jobs than key industries, including transport, construction, and financial services. Estimates suggest that NPOs are responsible for over one million jobs globally, although specific data on the number of jobs currently created by NPOs in South Africa is unavailable. The nature of these jobs encompasses both paid positions and volunteer opportunities, thus contributing significantly to job creation and poverty reduction. These roles exist in healthcare, education, and social services, where NPOs play a vital role in supporting local employment.

Organisations such as Conservation SA, Youth@Work, and Afrika Tikkun have played crucial roles in providing employment for youth in the fields of environmental conservation, education, and information technology (IT). They support career development while making a positive impact on the community (Pillay, 2024). The Youth Employment Service (YES) initiative, which is a business-led collaboration, has created over 139 000 job opportunities for unemployed youth by March 2024. This initiative has also injected more than R7.7 billion into the economy through youth salaries and has helped enhance companies' B-BBEE scores (YES, 2024). By partnering with NGOs to implement a localised 'turnkey solutions', YES addresses spatial inequality and provides accessible employment opportunities. This effort particularly benefits women and promotes economic growth in underserved areas (Pillay, 2024).

The Youth Employment Service (YES) initiative, which is a business-led collaboration, has created over 139 000 job opportunities for unemployed youth by March 2024.

The Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator has successfully created employment pathways for over four million young South Africans, placing more than 25 000 individuals in jobs across various sectors and generating nearly R25 billion in income for youth. This highlights the significant economic impact of NPOs (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, 2024a). Similarly, the EOH Youth Job Creation Initiative, launched in 2012, has

supported over 35 000 learners and graduates. Approximately 14 500 of these participants have completed internships or learnerships. Notably, 83 per cent of them have secured full-time employment either within EOH or through its partner networks, demonstrating a strong contribution to sustainable youth employment (Dialogue, 2023).

The RedCap Foundation's JumpStart program is designed to prepare unemployed youth for the workforce through training and job placements. By 2016, the program had successfully trained 10 876 individuals, with 4 266 securing permanent jobs at Mr Price Group outlets. This data highlights the program's effectiveness in promoting stable employment (Dialogue, 2023). Additionally, youth volunteerism is actively encouraged by NPOs as a way to enhance employability. Volunteering allows young people to develop critical skills, build networks, and gain practical experience, all of which can improve their job prospects (Azunna, Botchway, & Botes, 2021).

4.2 Skills Development, Education and Training

Skills development, education, and training are major focus areas for most NPOs. Some existing studies indicate that NPOs in South Africa play a crucial role in equipping young people with the skills needed for the labour market through targeted training and development programmes (Msimango-Galawe & Majaja, 2022; Zwane, Radebe, & Mlambo, 2021). This is particularly vital given the country's high unemployment rate, which is worsened by the fact that more than half of the youth entering the labour force lack the necessary qualifications. Additionally, over 30 per cent of young people are classified as NEET (Stats SA, 2023). The challenge is further complicated by a significant skills mismatch, where young people's qualifications and skills do not align with employers' needs. According to Isaac (2021), South Africa experienced a skills mismatch of more than 50 per cent in 2019, affecting not only technical skills but also soft skills (Wiseman, 2022). In this context, Swiss South African Cooperation Initiative (SSACI, 2024) discussed the difficulties graduates encounter in acquiring and demonstrating soft skills, which have important implications for their employability.

Bate (2021) argued that structural inequalities within the education system have hindered human capital development. A study by the South African Breweries Foundation (2021) supports this claim, attributing the weak development of human capital to systemic failures within government programmes and educational institutions that inadequately prepare youth for the job market. According to Stats SA's Quarterly Labour Force Survey for the first quarter of 2024, only 9.8 per cent of employed youth in South Africa possess a graduate qualification. High unemployment rates and the significant percentage of youth considered NEET are largely influenced by limited educational attainment and various social and economic disadvantages (Stats SA, 2024a). Moreover, young females encounter greater challenges in securing quality employment than their male counterparts, with education playing a vital role in enhancing access to better job opportunities (Stats SA, 2024a).



NPOs implement various initiatives such as job training programmes, internships, and entrepreneurship support. As Kimberlin (2010) noted, these initiatives equip young people with essential labour market skills, thereby improving their employability. Ultimately, these efforts help address the issue of youth unemployment (Kimberlin, 2010). Programmes like business development support enhance entrepreneurial skills, contributing to the success of youth-owned businesses and fostering economic growth (Khoza & Msimango-Galawe, 2021). Additionally, the Siyakha Youth Assets Program develops both technical and soft skills, such as leadership and communication, to increase the market competitiveness of young entrepreneurs (Graham et al., 2019).

As the demand for secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa is projected to double by 2030, non-NPOs are becoming increasingly vital in providing skills training that complements traditional education pathways (INEE, 2020). These initiatives focus on equipping youth with digital, technical, and vocational skills, thereby addressing competency gaps that traditional education often overlooks, such as foundational literacy, digital literacy, and work readiness skills (MasterCard Foundation, 2020). For example, IkamvaYouth supports students in under-resourced areas through after-school tutoring, computer literacy programs, and career guidance, which enhance students' academic and digital skills (Nomsenge, 2014). Additionally, organisations like Empowervate Trust, Activate! Change Drivers, Youth Empowerment Project, and the Raymond Ackerman Academy emphasise the development of soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem solving. Employers highly value these skills but new entrants to the labour market often lack them.

There is a notable mismatch between the demand for and supply of skills among young people in the country.

There is a notable mismatch between the demand for and supply of skills among young people in the country. This issue persists despite many young individuals holding formal qualifications, resulting in a high level of educated yet unemployed youth (Bate, 2021; DHET, 2023). Initiatives like the Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator aim to address this gap by providing targeted training that aligns with employer needs, equipping youth with essential workplace skills. For instance, Harambee's DigiLink initiative offers a 12-month data analysis and software testing training program. This program allows participants to gain practical experience through real client projects (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, 2024a). Additionally, the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) and the Association for Persons with Disabilities (APD) are playing a crucial role in supporting job placements for individuals with disabilities. They offer skills development, job placement, and rehabilitation services. These promote economic inclusion and foster independence (DISA, 2024).

NPOs enhance youth employability by promoting entrepreneurship education and training. They empower young people to create their own economic opportunities and foster innovation. For example, the Durban University of Technology, in collaboration with various NPOs, incorporates entrepreneurship training into its curriculum. This initiative promotes self-employment and ultimately helps reduce youth unemployment (Musariwa & Tinonetsana, 2023). By equipping graduates with essential skills to navigate economic challenges, these programmes enable them to become job creators. Such initiatives not only prepare youth for the workforce but also contribute to community resilience and economic growth (Maka, 2023).

4.3 Vocational Training and Job Placement

NPOs play a crucial role in creating employment opportunities for South African youth by providing vocational training, job placement resources, and alternative pathways to enter the labour market. Some scholars argue that CSOs are the primary providers of training outside the formal post-secondary education system and are actively engaged in supporting youth as they transition into the workforce (Graham et al., 2019). This support is essential, especially considering the high dropout rates among South African youth. According to Stats SA (2022a), 29.3 per cent of 18-year-olds and 46.3 per cent of 19-year-olds are out of school. Consequently, many young people lack the qualifications necessary for formal employment. Additionally, there are noticeable gender disparities; more females exit school due to family commitments (Cowling, 2024).

For youth classified as NEET, NPOs focus on providing vocational and technical training. This type of training prepares them for practical, job-specific roles that are crucial in sectors that depend on skilled trades and intermediate-level positions (ILO, 2013). Such training addresses the skills mismatch that many graduates face by equipping youth with essential skills, including literacy, numeracy, and technical expertise (Habiyaemye, Habanabakize, & Nwosu, 2022; Mseleku, 2021). Vocational training acts as a bridge between education and employment, enhancing the readiness of both school dropouts and graduates for the job market.

The Amy Foundation, Go for Gold, and the Artisan Training Foundation are excellent examples of successful vocational training programs in South Africa. The Amy Foundation acts as a bridge between secondary education and employment, having placed over 800 alumni in jobs or supported them for self-employment since 2014 (Amy Foundation, 2020). Go for Gold prepares youth for employment through a structured program, particularly in the construction sector, which enhances participants' readiness for the labour market (Trialogue, 2023). The Artisan Training Foundation supported by organisations like the MasterCard Foundation, focuses on industry-specific training and promoting sustainable livelihoods for youth. These initiatives contribute to economic resilience (Artisan Training Foundation, n.d.).

Afrika Tikkun's Career Development Programme improves youth employability through information and communication technology (ICT) and job readiness training, career guidance, and job placements. However, this programme faces scalability and funding challenges, especially in rural areas (Afrika Tikkun, 2024). NPOs also facilitate job placements for youth lacking employable skills by providing access to networks and mentorship (Choto, Iwu, & Tengeh, 2020). The SA Youth Platform by Harambee connects 3.8 million youth to local opportunities using geo-mapping, reducing transportation barriers (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, 2024c). The EOH Youth Job Creation Initiative has facilitated over 35 000 internships and learnerships since 2012. It is reported that 83 per cent of its beneficiaries have secured full-time employment. It has been observed that in the long-term, the sustainability of this programme would depend on partnerships with the private sector (Trialogue, 2024). Similarly, JumpStart, a RedCap Foundation programme, has trained over 10 000 matriculants. Out of these, it had placed 4 266 beneficiaries in permanent positions at Mr Price by 2016 (Trialogue, 2020). NCPD and APD provide job placements and support for youth with disabilities. This promotes economic inclusion and independence.

4.4 Policy Advocacy and Influence on Youth Employment

In addition, NPOs in the country play a vital role in shaping policies that promote youth employment, skill development, and economic inclusion. They achieve this through advocacy, research, and partnerships with government and private sectors. NPOs advocate for inclusive labour laws, support small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and create platforms for youth voices by addressing systemic barriers to accessing the labour market. Their efforts contribute to a more equitable economic landscape (Ligthelm, 2008; Patel, Flisher, Hetrick, & McGorry, 2007). The impact of NPOs goes beyond direct job creation; they also work to tackle educational inequality, limited access to capital, and challenges faced by marginalised groups through public mobilisation and policy reform. These contributions are emphasised in the 'Enhancing Civil Society Participation in the South African Development Agenda' report (Kagiso Trust, 2019; NDA, 2016). Key areas of contribution for NPOs include policy advocacy, educational reform, entrepreneurship support, economic inclusion, social justice initiatives, and research focused on youth. Through these activities, NPOs drive systemic changes toward a more inclusive economy.



NPOs engage in policy advocacy to create a supportive environment for youth employment. An example of this is the YES initiative, which collaborates with the government and private sectors to promote tax incentives and regulatory changes that encourage the hiring of young people. Programs like the Employment Tax Incentive (ETI) make it financially feasible for companies to employ youth, contributing to a reduction in youth unemployment (Ranchhod & Finn, 2016).

In South Africa, NPOs also focus on skills development and educational reform to bridge the gap between the potential of youth and the demands of the labour market. For example, the Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator advocates for changes in education and promotes skills-based hiring practices. It encourages companies to prioritise skills assessments over work experience, making job opportunities more accessible for young applicants (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, 2021). Similarly, Equal Education aims to improve school resources by advocating for essential learning tools such as libraries and internet access, which are crucial for equipping youth for success in the workforce (Equal Education, 2022).

Other crucial roles played by NPOs in South Africa include the promotion of entrepreneurship and economic inclusion as solutions to youth unemployment. For example, the Raymond Ackerman Academy offers entrepreneurial training to disadvantaged youth. Similarly, the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation provides scholarships, leadership programs, and mentorship to empower young people to start their own businesses and stimulate local economies (Allan Gray Orbis Foundation, 2025). In addition, the non-profit sector advocates for the rights of youth living with disabilities and offers them vocational training and job placement services. They also address social stigma and work to combat the exclusion of people living with disabilities (Hanass-Hancock & Mitra, 2016).

Social justice and systemic advocacy are integral to the work of organisations like the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, which addresses structural inequalities that limit employment for black and rural youth. The institute promotes affirmative action and rural employment policies, advocating for a labour market that provides equitable access for marginalised groups (IJR, 2022). In addition, research that focused on youth and data are crucial for effective policymaking. NPOs such as JET Education Services conduct research on youth employment trends, skills gaps, and workforce readiness. They provide policymakers with essential data to design targeted employment policies that align with market needs, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of youth employment initiatives (JET Education Services, 2022a, 2022b).

4.5 Support for Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment

Youth entrepreneurship is vital for job creation and economic growth in South Africa, where formal employment opportunities are limited (Naudé, Szirmai, & Goedhuys, 2011). NPOs play essential roles in supporting young entrepreneurs by providing mentorship, funding, and business development resources. This support promotes self-employment as a sustainable alternative to traditional jobs (Rogan & Reynolds, 2016). By focusing on entrepreneurship, NPOs create an important pathway for economic inclusion and resilience, addressing the gaps left by the formal job market (Zwane et al., 2021).

NPOs play a vital role in equipping young people with essential business skills, while SEs combine social missions with commercial objectives, contributing to youth employment and fostering self-reliance (Littlewood & Holt, 2018; Ndebele, Ndlovu, Mlambo, & Thusi, 2022). However, youth-led businesses face several challenges, including limited access to capital, inadequate skills, and high failure rates, particularly in the informal sector, which often lacks adequate support (Hutchinson & de Beer, 2013; Urban & Gaffurini, 2018). SMEs account for approximately 60 per cent of employment and 57 per cent of South Africa's GDP. Nevertheless, they are vulnerable to economic challenges, as evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (SEDA, 2023).

NPOs in South Africa support youth entrepreneurship through targeted initiatives like training, mentorship, networking, and funding access. Programs like the Entrepreneurship Development Programme foster collaborative growth, while the Jobs Fund's incubation model aids small businesses with mentorship and financial support, successfully creating jobs. For example, A2Pay created 2 868 jobs against a target of 3 128, and SBU exceeded target by creating 294 jobs as against 157 (Allie-Edries & Mupela, 2019; Choto et al., 2020).

Additional initiatives supporting youth entrepreneurship in South Africa include the business development support programme, which enhances operational skills for business sustainability. For its part, the Raymond Ackerman Academy trains disadvantaged youth to foster economic growth within their communities (Msimango-Galawe & Majaja, 2022). The Allan Gray Orbis Foundation provides scholarships and leadership training to promote entrepreneurship as an alternative to traditional employment. Additionally, organisations such as Y

outh in Business South Africa and the Youth Employment Initiative South Africa advocate for supportive job creation policies (Allan Gray Orbis Foundation 2025; Van der Westhuizen, 2023).

In conclusion, NPOs in South Africa have been instrumental in fostering youth entrepreneurship, addressing barriers faced by young entrepreneurs, and providing essential resources for their success. Although challenges persist in the SME sector, NPO-led initiatives empower youth-led businesses to contribute to economic growth and job creation. Sustaining support through partnerships, funding access and ongoing mentorship is crucial to maximising their impact. Additionally, the sector's gender dynamics, often offering women opportunities in traditional roles, should be re-evaluated to prevent reinforcing stereotypes (Baines, Cunningham, Campey, & Shields, 2014). By strengthening these efforts, NPOs can help youth-led enterprises thrive, thereby reducing unemployment and enhancing economic stability.

4.6 Research and Information Sources

NPOs play a vital role in shaping youth employment policies and programmes by conducting evidence-based research, publishing reports, and analysing trends in youth employment. This approach is grounded in the understanding that informed decision-making relies on empirical evidence and rational analysis (DPME, 2014). By providing valuable data, NPOs offer economic insights that assist policymakers, business leaders, and community members in making informed choices. Additionally, NPOs contribute to the development of policies by conducting needs assessments through direct engagement with communities. This engagement allows them to design projects that address specific local challenges (Anbazhagan & Surekha, 2017; Issaka, 2016). Their involvement encompasses all stages of research, from promoting the practical application of findings to setting priorities and translating knowledge into actionable strategies.

Examples of NPOs' contributions to youth employment policy include JET Education Services, which conducted research to identify skills gaps and has produced reports assessing the labour readiness of young people. Similarly, the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit has examined the transition of youth from school to work, focusing on issues of youth unemployment and support for those who are considered NEET (JET Education Services, 2024; Mlatsheni & Leibbrandt, 2015). Collaborations, such as those between the Desmond Tutu TB and HIV Centre and various universities, have improved our understanding of how youth health intersects with employment opportunities. Organisations like YES, Equal Education, and the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation researched employment outcomes, educational reforms, and entrepreneurship. Their findings offer valuable policy recommendations to promote youth inclusion and foster economic development (Allan Gray Orbis Foundation, 2025; YES, 2021).

In addition to conducting formal research, some NPOs engage in public awareness campaigns focused on youth unemployment. For instance, Youth Capital runs data-driven campaigns that highlight the challenges of skills mismatches and youth unemployment while advocating for systemic reforms. Through these initiatives, Youth Capital not only informs public discourse but also empowers young people by providing them with a platform to express their concerns. The advocacy enhanced public understanding and generated broader support for solutions aimed at improving youth employability (Youth Capital, 2024). In conclusion, NPOs in South Africa significantly contributed to youth employment through their research, data provision, and advocacy efforts. They have played a vital role in shaping effective and targeted policies by publishing reports and offering data-driven insights.



05

CONTRIBUTION OF
NON-PROFIT SECTOR
TO DIGNIFIED AND
FULFILLING WORK



The previous section explored the non-profit sector's contribution to youth employment and demonstrated that the sector in South Africa plays an increasingly vital role in addressing socio-economic challenges by providing employment opportunities for young people. However, it should be noted that simply having a job is not enough to ensure worker well-being and satisfaction. In this review, it is argued that it is not enough for youth to be employed; jobs should be dignified and fulfilling. Among others, this means that jobs must ensure stability, respect, satisfaction, and opportunities for personal growth in their roles. It is however, important for the review to include whether or not NPOs have contributed to dignified and fulfilling jobs. This is the subject of this section.

This review has demonstrated the crucial role that NPOs play in South Africa's socio-economic development. They primarily provide employment opportunities for young people who are often marginalised in the formal job market. NPOs are recognised as key drivers of social support and positive societal contributions, filling critical gaps left by both the public and private sectors. They offer essential services and promote social value (Omura & Forster, 2014; Weerawardena et al., 2010). The non-profit sector employs approximately one million people, making it the second-largest employer in South Africa, after the government. This employment includes both full-time and part-time positions, as well as volunteer opportunities (Choto et al., 2020; Trialogue, 2020). However, it is important to note that this figure is an estimate due to inconsistent data collection and the temporary or informal nature of many NPO jobs, particularly those reliant on short-term funding and grant cycles (Berg, 2013).

Despite existing statistics, much of the literature does not investigate whether jobs in NPOs provide or promote long-term stability and personal growth, characteristics of dignified and fulfilling work. South African employment literature strongly emphasises quantitative employment metrics, such as job creation rates, often overshadowing important qualitative dimensions like job satisfaction, personal growth, and job security (Theron, 2010; Webster, & Kally, 2019). Consequently, the qualitative aspects defining 'dignified' and 'fulfilling' work remain underexplored. This oversight creates a gap in the literature concerning whether youth employment in the non-profit sector in South Africa promotes dignity and long-term stability for young people (Barchiesi, 2011). This review addresses these gaps by evaluating the qualitative impact of NPO employment on youth, underscoring the need for clear benchmarks and a broader focus on experiential aspects within employment literature.

One key factor influencing the ability of NPOs to provide stable and dignified employment is their financial instability. They often rely on donor funding, which is currently declining. This situation renders them vulnerable to financial shocks and reduces their autonomy (Maboya & McKay, 2019). Insufficient funding forces these organisations to depend on temporary positions, volunteers, or low-wage jobs that offer few opportunities for professional growth, thus failing to meet the standards of dignified work (Cunningham & James, 2014). As a result, many positions in NPOs consist of part-time or temporary contracts with limited benefits, illustrating precarious employment. This scenario adversely affects young workers' mental well-being, job satisfaction, and career development (Cunningham & James, 2014).

Entrepreneurship is one approach to addressing the problem of high youth unemployment rates. However, the involvement of young people in entrepreneurship remains notably low, and SMEs experience a high failure rate (Ngek & Van Aardt Smit, 2013). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor report reveals that early-stage entrepreneurial activity among South Africans aged 25 to 34, a crucial demographic for entrepreneurship, has decreased by over 40 per cent since 2015. In 2016, this age group recorded the lowest entrepreneurial activity rates compared to those aged between 18 and 24 years. Their participation was less than one-third of the African average, with South Africa ranking 58 out of 65 economies in this aspect. Moreover, male youth are more likely to engage in entrepreneurship than their female peers, underscoring the gender disparities within the sector (CSP Research Unit, 2020).

5.1 Role of NPOs in Facilitating the Transition from Informal to Formal Dignified and Fulfilling Jobs for Youth

In South Africa, the distinction between formal and informal employment plays a significant role in shaping demographics related to age, race, gender, class, and citizenship. The formal sector typically provides more stable job opportunities compared to the precarious conditions found in informal employment (Chen, 2012). High youth unemployment rates compel many young South Africans, particularly black individuals affected by historical inequalities, to seek work in the informal sector (Bhorat et al., 2019). Additionally, women, non-citizens, and individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds are disproportionately represented in low-paid informal jobs, facing further barriers to accessing formal employment (Crush & Tawodzera, 2014; Leibbrandt, Woolard, Finn, & Argent, 2010).

The informal sector in South Africa plays a significant role in the economy, employing over 2.5 million people, which constitutes about 20 per cent of the workforce. This sector contributes approximately 5.1 per cent to the country's GDP (Stats SA, 2022b; Rogan & Skinner, 2017). Informal food businesses, in particular, generate R87 billion annually and are crucial for ensuring food security and alleviating poverty in low-income areas (Skinner & Haysom, 2016). In 2015, 75 per cent of the working poor in South Africa were in the informal sector. Among these workers, just over 50 per cent were women, and 90 per cent were African (Yu, 2019). Key activities in the informal sector, such as street vending and spaza shops, provide essential services to marginalised communities. However, these workers often lack social protections, underscoring the sector's dual role as a survival strategy for many and a target for formalisation efforts by NPOs (Rugutt, 2017; SEDA, 2023). Through advocacy and support, NPOs and SEs play a crucial role in helping marginalised workers transition to more secure, formal employment, thereby promoting inclusivity in the job market.

5.2 Transitioning from Informal to Formal Employment

Some scholars contend that the informal sector is essential for job creation and economic growth, offering flexibility and entrepreneurial opportunities (Burger & Fourie, 2019). However, informal employment is often unstable and lacks job security and legal protections, making workers susceptible to fluctuating income and sudden job loss without recourse (Bargain & Kwenda, 2011). This insecurity can perpetuate cycles of poverty as workers struggle to meet basic needs and invest in their future. Additionally, informal jobs typically provide lower wages than formal positions, exacerbating economic disparities and restricting upward mobility opportunities (Davies & Thurlow, 2010).

Data from Stats SA (2024b) highlighted the vulnerability of informal jobs during economic shocks, emphasising the need to formalise youth employment. For example, during South Africa's strict lockdown in the second quarter of 2020, informal employment declined by 29 per cent year-on-year, while formal jobs saw an eight per cent reduction (Cele & Tshikovhi, 2023). This significant difference underscores the stability and protections that formal employment offers, especially in times of crisis. It reinforces the necessity for structured pathways to formalise youth employment in South Africa.

Formal sector employment is characterised by adherence to government regulations, including labour laws, tax obligations, and social security contributions. These regulations enforce standards related to wages, working hours, and employee rights (Ulysea, 2010). Transitioning from informal to formal employment is essential for addressing socio-economic challenges, particularly in countries like South Africa that face high unemployment rates. Formal sector jobs provide critical social protections, such as health insurance and unemployment benefits, contributing to economic stability (RSA, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored these advantages, as formal sector employees could access financial aid through the Unemployment Insurance Fund, while informal workers lacked similar protections (RSA, 2023).

Transitioning from informal to formal employment is essential for addressing socio-economic challenges, particularly in countries like South Africa that face high unemployment rates.

Beyond individual security, formal employment contributes to broader economic growth by generating tax revenue, funding public services, and enabling businesses to attract skilled labour and adopt sustainable practices (World Bank, 2019). Moreover, formalisation improves the tracking of employment data, supports more effective policy interventions, ensures safer working conditions, and creates opportunities for skill development through structured training programmes (Trialogue, 2023)

NPOs play a crucial role in helping youth transition from informal to formal employment; however, there is limited research on the effectiveness of these efforts. Current data on job creation by NPOs often fails to clarify whether the positions are formal or informal, making it challenging to assess their long-term impact. Various barriers to formalisation, such as regulatory fees, complex procedures, and a lack of capital, highlight the need for NPOs to support young people in securing formal employment (Maduku & Zerihun, 2022). Strategies for NPOs to enhance this transition, drawing on successful models from other contexts, are as follows:

Enhanced job readiness programmes: NPOs can enhance job readiness programmes by developing structured career pathways that provide youth with both soft and hard skills tailored to specific industries. Research shows that comprehensive training, like practical skills, digital competencies, and workplace etiquette, improves youth

employability (Cunningham & Villaseñor, 2016). For example, the Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator's DigiLink programme offers targeted technical training, helping young people acquire the skills necessary for entry-level and specialised roles in sectors with high potential for formal employment (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, 2024c).

- *Formalising informal skills and experience:* For youth with informal work experience, NPOs can play a crucial role in enhancing and formalising these skills through programmes that validate and certify informal expertise. One effective approach is the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) framework. Countries like Australia and New Zealand have successfully implemented such programmes, which assess and certify informal skills, enabling workers to meet formal employment qualifications (Harris, Van Kleef, & Wihak, 2014). Collaborations between South African NPOs, educational institutions, and industry bodies could help establish similar RPL programmes, providing credentials that improve formal job prospects for young individuals. 
- *Supporting small businesses in formalisation:* NPOs can help small, informal businesses transition to the formal sector by assisting them with registration, meeting legal requirements, and adopting standardised workplace practices. These efforts to formalise businesses not only protect workers, but also enhance the resilience of the businesses themselves (McKenzie & Sakho, 2010). Organisations such as the Awethu Project and Siyakha Youth Assets in South Africa offer mentorship, financial literacy training, and support with registration. These enable young entrepreneurs to formalise their businesses and create formal job opportunities (Graham et al., 2019). 
- *Public-private partnerships for formal employment pathways:* NPOs can leverage partnerships with the private sector to create formal employment pathways through sponsored internships, apprenticeships, and entry-level placements. The YES initiative in South Africa collaborates with businesses to offer 12-month work experiences, equipping youth with essential skills and facilitating economic inclusion (YES, 2024). Models from countries like Germany, where government-supported apprenticeships lead to long-term employment, could be adapted for the South African context through similar NPO-led partnerships. 
- *Targeted advocacy for youth employment policies:* NPOs also support youth employment by advocating for policies that make formal employment more accessible and inclusive. They advocate for tax incentives for businesses that hire young workers, expanded social protections, and support for skills development. Advocacy efforts, such as those of Equal Education, which focus on improving educational quality, are crucial for enabling smooth school-to-work transitions (Equal Education, 2022). Such initiatives foster economic security. 

In conclusion, NPOs in South Africa play a crucial role in bridging the gap between informal and formal employment for young people, acting as intermediaries and offering job placement services, skill-building programmes, and partnerships with employers. Programmes like YES and Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator exemplify this impact, which has collectively created thousands of job opportunities for youth in the country and made significant contributions to economic development. By supporting youth in structured pathways from education to employment, NPOs make a meaningful contribution to developing a skilled workforce that aligns with the needs of the formal sector. This fosters long-term stability and employability for young South Africans (Trialogue, 2023; YES, 2024).



06

CONTRIBUTIONS OF
NON-PROFIT SECTOR IN
ECONOMIC SUB-SECTORS



The 2020 research report by the ETDP SETA (2020) revealed the complexities involved in assessing the scope and impact of NGOs, particularly those focused on the education sector. The absence of a standardised classification or registration system complicates the tracking of NPOs since they register under different governmental bodies, based on their legal and organisational structures. For example, trusts are registered with the Master of the High Court, while public benefit organisations register with the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission. Voluntary associations do not have any mandatory requirements (ETDP SETA, 2020). Table 3 shows the distribution of NPOs by sector over five years, from 2017 to 2023.

TABLE 3: Distribution by Sector (2017 to 2023)

Classification	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2022/23
Business and Professional, Associations, Unions	2 038	2 304	2 585	2 757	2 910
Culture and Recreation	12 666	14 396	16 504	17 676	19 262
Development and Housing	44 134	50 414	57 600	63 040	70 060
Education and Research	10 536	10 865	11 179	11 332	11 530
Environment	2 044	2 211	2 365	2 460	2 559
Health	13 353	13 793	14 236	14 566	14 882
International	116	96	102	104	107
Law, Advocacy, and Politics	4 365	4 735	5 033	5 255	5 506
Philanthropic Intermediaries and Voluntarism Promotion	1 608	1 719	1 769	1 821	1 864
Religion	26 501	29 442	32 284	33 708	35 155
Social Services	73 512	79 302	84 887	88 158	92 377
Total	190 873	209 277	228 544	240 877	256 212

Source: Extracted from DSD (2023)

The various categorisations of NPO activities among different agencies and within the sector itself makes it difficult to clearly understand their impact. The 2008 National Development Agency Review of CSOs found that the majority of NPOs operate across multiple development areas instead of focusing solely on one. This finding is supported by Trialogue's (2018) research, which revealed that NPOs typically engage in an average of 3.2 operational sectors. This blending of activities, such as economic development and skills training, complicates the measurement of NPOs' contributions to the economy. Given these limitations in data and categorisation, this literature review focused on sectors with high potential for youth employment. It suggests that NPOs could maximise their impact by strategically leveraging opportunities in these areas to create dignified and fulfilling jobs for South African youth young people (ETDP SETA, 2020).

The contribution of the non-profit sector in South Africa to creating dignified and fulfilling employment opportunities for young people is significant. This sector encompasses various areas that hold potential for youth employment and development. According to the latest data from the ETDP SETA (2020), registered NPOs primarily operate in the following sectors: social services (48 per cent), development and housing (18 per cent), religion (15 per cent), education and research (six per cent), culture and recreation (six per cent), and health (three per cent) (DSD, 2023).

These categories include a diverse range of activities. However, as previously mentioned, limitations in data and classification frameworks make it challenging to gain a comprehensive understanding of NPOs' impact on youth employment (NDA, 2008; Trialogue, 2018). A literature review analysis of various NPO websites, presented in Table 4, summarises the activities that NPOs are undertaking to employ, prepare, or enable youth across different sub-sectors of the economy.

The blending of activities, such as economic development and skills training, complicates the measurement of NPOs' contributions to the economy.

TABLE 4: NPOs role in different sub-sectors of the economy

Sector/Sub-sector	NPOs Role and Activities	NPOs
Social Services	Providing safe spaces, poverty alleviation programs, skills development, employment in caregiving roles, and holistic support for youth in transition.	SOS Children's Villages, Youthzones, Afrika Tikkun, Siyabonga Africa, YES.
Health	Offering caregiving jobs, addressing youth mental health, providing adolescent-friendly healthcare services, and training youth in health education.	Hospice South Africa, Lungelo Youth Development, Mamelani Projects.
Education and Research	Delivering tutoring, mentorship, and life skills training, promoting access to higher education, fostering creativity, and preparing youth for the workforce.	IkamvaYouth, Ukhanyo Foundation, MOT South Africa, Junior Achievement South Africa, Afrika Tikkun.
Agriculture	Training youth in sustainable farming practices, agribusiness management, and life skills for rural development.	Harambee Roots Agripreneurial project, African Farmers' Association of South Africa, Siyazisiza Trust, Buhle Farmers' Academy, Future Farmers Foundation, Siyavuna.
Green Energy	Training in renewable energy technologies, providing advocacy for green skills, and preparing youth for careers in solar and wind energy.	GreenCape Foundation, Earthlife Africa.
Technology	Offering coding boot camps, digital skills training, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs, and opportunities to bridge the digital divide.	GirlCode, Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator.
Entrepreneurship	Providing mentorship, access to funding, and entrepreneurial skills development to promote self-reliance and youth business creation.	AccelerateHer, National Youth Development Agency, Youth zones, Junior Achievement South Africa.
Construction	Delivering vocational training in construction-related skills like project management and engineering for public infrastructure projects.	YouthBuild South Africa.
Religion	Offering life-skills and job-skills training, leadership development programs, sustainable development initiatives, and job placement schemes. These programs focus on holistic youth empowerment, addressing education, unemployment, and community development.	Youth for Christ International, Life Community Services, Christian Youth Development Program, HOPE Africa.
Culture and Recreation	Engaging youth in cultural and recreational initiatives to foster social cohesion, identity, and personal growth.	Khulisa Social Solutions, Arts and Culture Trust, Youth development through sport, South African Youth Development Organisation .
Development and Housing	Supporting stable living conditions for youth through housing initiatives and transitional support programs.	Mamelani projects
Creative Economy	Reducing informality, providing mentorship, and connecting youth to formal networks in arts, design, and other cultural industries.	BASA's creative futures training program.
Tourism	Providing training for SMMEs in financial management, marketing, and operational skills to enhance competitiveness and job sustainability.	Tourism Empowerment Network, Uthando (Love) South Africa.
Environment	Promoting youth participation in environmental conservation, sustainability projects, and ecological awareness initiatives.	African Youth Development Fund, Conservation SA.
Law, Advocacy, and Politics	Empowering youth through advocacy programs, promoting social justice, and reintegrating young offenders into society.	Khulisa Social Solutions, National Institute for Crime Prevention And Rehabilitation of Offenders.
Business and Professional Associations	Supporting youth-led organisations through capacity-building programs, promoting social cohesion, and developing professional skills.	National Agency.

Source: Extracted from NPOs' websites

Despite data limitations, several key sectors in South Africa show potential for engaging youth. It is important to acknowledge that traditional sectors, such as mining, manufacturing, retail, and public services, which were once major sources of employment, now offer limited job opportunities for young people. This decline is attributed to factors such as industry saturation, increased automation, and economic constraints. As a result, there needs to be a strategic emphasis on emerging sectors and innovative job creation approaches that align with the changing labour market dynamics and the skills of the youth. Sectors where NPOs can significantly contribute to creating dignified and fulfilling jobs for South African youth are detailed in the following sub-sectors.

6.1 Agriculture

Agriculture, although its contribution to South Africa's GDP is declining, remains a vital source of employment, particularly in rural areas where it provides jobs for unskilled and semi-skilled workers. In the fourth quarter of 2021, while sectors such as manufacturing and construction faced job losses of 85 000 and 25 000 jobs respectively, agriculture generated an additional 38 000 jobs. This underscores the resilience of the agricultural sector and its capacity to absorb labour (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, 2024b). Notably, participation among young women in agriculture has increased significantly, rising from 27.9 per cent in 2014 to 32.26 per cent in 2024. This trend not only highlights the sector's potential for job creation but also its role in enhancing food security and supporting household incomes (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, 2024b). An example of this potential is the Harambee Roots Agripreneurial Project, launched in September 2023, in partnership with organisations such as the FirstRand Empowerment Fund, Umgibe, and Kwanalu. The project aims to train young women in farming, agribusiness, and life skills. With 72 per cent of its 130 participants being female, this initiative illustrates a commitment to promoting gender equity and empowering women in agriculture, a field that has traditionally been male-dominated (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, 2024b; Meyer, 2019).

6.2 Technology and Entrepreneurship

Both technology and entrepreneurship in South Africa present significant potential for youth employment, despite considerable challenges. Similar to trends observed in India and Nigeria, strategic investments in STEM education and digital skills can foster economic growth and innovation. However, in South Africa, particularly in rural areas, high data costs and inadequate infrastructure impede the broader adoption of digital opportunities (Ngoto, 2024). Entrepreneurship can also serve as a viable pathway to employment, with an increasing number of young South Africans turning to self-employment due to the lack of formal job opportunities. Nonetheless, access to external funding remains a significant obstacle, with only 15 per cent of young entrepreneurs receiving financial support (Bowmaker-Falconer & Meyer, 2022). Initiatives like Seed Academy's AccelerateHer programme play a crucial role in promoting gender equity in entrepreneurship, especially in empowering young women to establish impactful businesses (SeedAcademy, 2024). In rural areas, the lack of mentorship exacerbates inequalities, underscoring the necessity for non-profit sector-driven support to provide young entrepreneurs with business knowledge and mentorship. This support is vital for bridging critical gaps in funding, guidance, and resources (Masha, Shava, Mambiravana, & Bwowe, 2022).



6.3 Tourism

Tourism has significant potential for creating youth employment due to its accessibility and capacity to generate jobs. However, small tourism enterprises often struggle with financial management and operational skills, highlighting the need for capacity building to ensure sustainable job opportunities (Ntlangani, 2021). The creative economy, particularly within cultural and creative industries, also shows promise, with 6.94 per cent of the workforce engaged in cultural employment. This includes 379 000 youth, who comprise 35 per cent of the sector. However, many young people in cultural and creative industries work informally, with 47.2 per cent in informal employment compared to 33.6 per cent in other sectors. Additionally, young women are underrepresented in this field, making up only 29.2 per cent of female cultural workers compared to 38.4 per cent of males (Ntlangani, 2021). NPOs can play a crucial role in addressing these challenges by offering skills training, mentorship, and formal employment networks. This support is particularly essential in areas like visual arts and design, where a significant number of young cultural workers are concentrated. By implementing such initiatives, NPOs could help reduce informal employment and facilitate the transition to formal jobs, promote gender inclusivity, and create stable job opportunities for youth in both urban and rural areas (Hadisi & Snowball, 2022).

6.4 Business Process Outsourcing

South Africa's business process outsourcing industry has strong potential for job creation, especially for young people in roles such as customer service, finance, and IT. By focusing on leadership development and improving employee experiences, the sector is well positioned to provide diverse employment opportunities. However, challenges like high labour costs and a shortage of specialised skills need to be addressed to realise this sector's potential fully (Johnston, 2024).

6.5 Construction and Infrastructure Development

In addition, the construction and infrastructure development sectors are experiencing significant growth due to ambitious targets and increased public investment. This growth creates valuable opportunities for young people to gain skills in project management and engineering. The expansion of these sectors is expected to boost youth employment, thereby contributing to economic stability and long-term skill development (3SMedia, 2023).



construction and infrastructure
project management and engineering.

6.6 Sustainable/Green Energy

As South Africa embraces sustainable energy solutions, the emerging green energy sector presents significant opportunities for youth employment. NPOs can play a crucial role in this sector by offering training programmes tailored to the industry's specific needs and equipping young people with knowledge and skills for roles in solar, wind, and other renewable energy technologies (Geza, Ngidi, Slotow, & Mabhaudhi, 2022). The sector's appeal is further enhanced by its focus on social impact, as young people increasingly seek dignified and fulfilling work that contributes to environmental conservation (World Economic Forum, 2020). In alignment with the United Nations Development Programme's recommendations, this supports three core actions to expand youth entrepreneurship in green and technology industries: (i) raising awareness and building expertise in green business models, (ii) creating investment opportunities such as crowdfunding and impact funds, and (iii) providing business support through startup challenges, social innovation programs, and incubation facilities to nurture talent and promote sustainable enterprises (Dhliwayo, 2023).





07



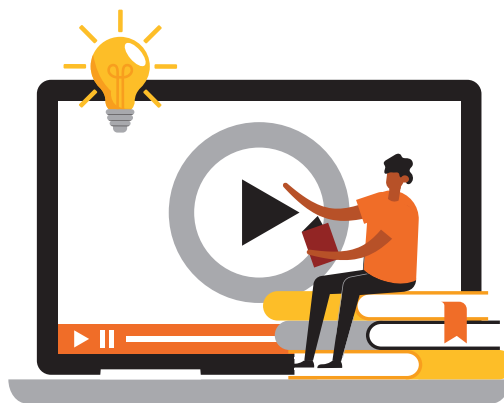
POTENTIAL ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY AND ITS USAGE BY NPOs

The integration of technology offers significant opportunities for job creation in South Africa's evolving digital economy. NPOs can use technology to train young people in high-demand skills such as digital marketing, software development, and data analysis, opening pathways for employment in various digital fields (Kew, Turton, Herrington, & Christensen, 2013). Technology plays a crucial role across multiple sectors; however, its application within the non-profit sector remains largely underexplored. Digital tools can help NPOs enhance communication, streamline administrative tasks, improve data management, and strengthen community connections (Honmane, 2013). By incorporating these tools, NPOs can expand their outreach and efficiency, creating a more diverse and robust sector that offers increased employment opportunities (Saxton & Wang, 2014).

NPOs have begun utilising technology to provide flexible and accessible online training, which is particularly beneficial in rural areas with limited resources. Initiatives such as Africa Code Week and YES equip disadvantaged youth with coding and IT skills, preparing them for opportunities in the digital economy. E-learning platforms also support young entrepreneurs by helping them acquire business, financial, and marketing skills at their own pace, allowing them to balance their studies with other commitments (Moshabela, Gitomer, Qhibi, & Schneider, 2013). Furthermore, social media and digital marketing enable NPOs to reach a wider audience, offering career guidance, job matching, and fostering collaborative networks among aspiring entrepreneurs (Sibisi & Makka, 2021).

However, challenges remain. The digital divide restricts internet access, especially in rural areas, which limits youth participation in online programmes and can exacerbate existing inequalities (Singh Martins, & Tefera, 2022). Additionally, NPOs often encounter budget constraints that have an impact on their ability to invest in or maintain technological initiatives. This financial instability poses a risk of discontinuing valuable programmes (Krafft & Rizk, 2021).

To address these challenges, collaboration among NPOs, the government, and the private sector is crucial. Such partnerships can facilitate resource sharing, enhance funding, and improve access to technology for marginalised youth. Corporate social responsibility initiatives, for example, can provide the financial support necessary for NPOs to sustain technology-driven programs (Msimango-Galawe & Majaja, 2022). Involving local communities in programme development ensures that initiatives are customised to meet the specific needs of young entrepreneurs, thereby increasing their impact and sustainability.



08

CHALLENGES IN DATA COLLECTION AND EMERGING KNOWLEDGE GAPS WITHIN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR



Understanding the scope of youth employment created by NPOs in South Africa is hampered by several data and knowledge gaps. An analysis of the relevant literature leads to the inference that the fragmented nature of South Africa's NPO sector prevents the collection of consolidated national data on specific issues like youth employment, despite its significant economic role. This is evidenced by reports such as the NPO Register and the NDA Annual Report, which are designed to provide sector-wide overviews rather than granular analysis, as they rely on voluntary, non-standardised submissions (DSD, 2023; NDA 2024).

This absence of specific data highlights a broader issue in data collection across the sector, as general labour market reports, such as those from Stats SA (2022a, 2022b, 2024a, 2024b), provide limited youth-focused employment statistics.

A significant gap exists in understanding the role of the informal sector in youth employment. Mlatsheni and Rospabe (2002) noted that informal employment is crucial for young people, yet it often remains unrecorded in employment statistics. Similarly, emerging sectors such as technology and innovation frequently lack alignment between skills training and the actual demands of the industry (NPC, 2012). Kadzamira and Kazembe (2015) observed that while agriculture is a major employer of labour, especially in rural areas, there has been limited scholarly focus on youth participation in this sector. Consequently, there are few targeted interventions aimed at promoting dignified and fulfilling job opportunities for young people within agriculture.

There is a notable gap in the effectiveness of volunteerism within NPOs as a pathway to employability. Research on how volunteer roles contribute to skills development, career advancement, and the transition to formal employment is scarce (Swilling & Russell, 2002). Additionally, the quality of jobs created by NPOs, especially regarding job security, benefits, and opportunities for advancement, has not been thoroughly evaluated. This raises concerns about the sector's ability to provide dignified and fulfilling jobs.

The concept of dignified and fulfilling work for South African youth is not clearly defined, particularly given the country's unique socio-economic and cultural context. While characteristics like fair income and job security are acknowledged, it is important to understand what South African youth prioritise, such as community impact, income stability, or other values (ILO, 2020). Tailoring the conceptualisation of dignity and fulfilling work to local contexts and cultural considerations is crucial in addressing these specific priorities and enabling NPOs to create more effective youth employment programmes (Cheruiyot, 2025).

This literature review identified a gap; absence of longitudinal studies. Existing research indicates that most NPOs produce independent short-term reports that primarily focus on immediate outcomes. However, there is limited attention given to long-term career growth and economic stability for participants. Therefore, there is a need for longitudinal studies to assess whether the programmes offered by NPOs lead to sustainable employment or career advancement for young people.

The quality of jobs created by NPOs, especially regarding job security, benefits, and opportunities for advancement, has not been thoroughly evaluated.



Some scholars, including Bate (2021), Isaac (2021), and Wiseman (2022), emphasised that structural inequalities in the education system and a lack of essential skills for the job market create significant barriers to youth employability. However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding whether the skills training provided by NPOs aligns with current job market demands.

In terms of marginalisation, understanding the biases in research and programme implementation between urban and rural areas is crucial to ensuring that both urban and rural youth can access available programmes equally. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened job insecurity. However, few studies have investigated its specific effects on youth employment in South Africa or evaluated the long-term outcomes of employment initiatives led by NPOs. This gap limits the sector's ability to develop effective strategies for the post-pandemic era (World Bank, 2019).

Currently, there is no centralised database for NPOs in South Africa. This lack of a unified resource hinders data sharing and collaborative learning among organisations. Establishing a shared platform for research, insights, and best practices would enhance coordination across the sector. This would enable NPOs to learn from each other's findings and improve youth employment initiatives.



Few studies have investigated its specific effects on youth employment in South Africa or evaluated the long-term outcomes of employment initiatives led by NPOs.

09

POCKETS OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR NON-PROFIT AND SE SECTORS



To increase youth employment in South Africa, a comprehensive strategy is necessary to address the country's economic, educational, and social challenges. The non-profit and SE sectors have a unique opportunity to address these critical issues by implementing targeted initiatives that create dignified and sustainable job opportunities. This is the subject of this section.

9.1 Economic Growth and Structural Transformation

For NPOs, promoting inclusive economic growth through skills development and alignment with industry needs is crucial. The World Bank (2019) noted that while economic growth is important, it must be inclusive to benefit historically marginalised communities. NPOs can advocate for and participate in skills-based programmes within growing sectors such as IT, renewable energy, and agriculture, which often provide resilience and opportunities for individuals with lower skill levels (Saniei-Pour, 2015). By aligning their efforts with objectives aimed at structural transformation, these organisations can help create a more equitable distribution of employment opportunities.

9.2 Educational Disparities and Labour Market Mismatch

Addressing the educational and skills gap is crucial for NPOs to help create dignified and fulfilling employment opportunities for South African youth. According to the McKinsey Global Institute (2012), aligning educational outcomes with labour market needs is crucial for reducing unemployment. NPOs and SEs have the opportunity to collaborate with academic institutions to design skill-specific training that meets industry requirements, especially in high-demand fields like ICT and renewable energy (Baloyi, 2020). Programmes that provide practical and industry-aligned skills can help bridge the divide between education and employability. This will enhance youth competitiveness in both informal and formal sectors and facilitate their transition to the latter.



9.3 Entrepreneurship as a Sustainable Pathway

The promotion of entrepreneurship among youth is another promising opportunity; especially as formal employment opportunities remain limited. Although challenges such as limited access to finance and an unfriendly regulatory environment impede entrepreneurial growth (Naudé, 2010), NPOs can play a crucial role by providing mentorship and business development services, as well as facilitating access to capital. These support systems are critical to helping youth-led enterprises to thrive. This would be even more crucial in underdeveloped communities (Naudé, Szirmai, & Goedhuys, 2011), particularly in rural and impoverished urban areas. Successful entrepreneurship will not only create jobs, but also stimulate local economies, making it a powerful tool for job creation and community resilience.

9.4 Leveraging Technology for Employment Creation

The growing digital economy presents a significant opportunity for NPOs to equip young people with the digital skills needed in today's job market. Programmes that focus on digital literacy, coding, and data analysis create pathways to employment in digital marketing, software development (Kew et al., 2013), and other areas of artificial intelligence. With the right support, NPOs can assist young South Africans to overcome the digital divide, thereby fostering remote work and freelance opportunities. Furthermore, digital tools can improve the operational efficiency of NPOs, enabling them to engage more youth through streamlined processes, and expand their reach (Honmane, 2013).

9.5 Formalising Informal Skills and Experience

RPL frameworks will offer young people with informal skills a pathway to transition into formal employment. These frameworks assess and certify informally acquired competencies, creating a bridge for youth who lack formal qualifications but possess valuable trade or technical skills (Dhliwayo, 2023). NPOs can collaborate with government and industry stakeholders to facilitate RPL programmes, enabling marginalised youth to secure formal jobs with recognised credentials (Harris et al., 2014). The formalisation of informal skills will thus provide an opportunity to elevate underutilised talents into the formal economy. This will ultimately enhance job stability and income security.

9.6 Policy Advocacy and Institutional Frameworks

There is considerable potential for NPOs in South Africa to engage in policy advocacy that promotes inclusive labour laws and reforms, thus supporting SMEs to boost youth employment. By collaborating with government bodies to address bureaucratic inefficiencies and promote transparent governance, NPOs can help create an environment conducive to youth employment (NPC, 2012). This involvement should include strengthening institutional frameworks that facilitate job opportunities for young people while simultaneously addressing structural inequalities in the labour market.

In summary, the non-profit and SE sectors offer unique opportunities to promote youth employment through targeted interventions, support for entrepreneurship, skills development, the integration of technology, and advocacy for policies. By leveraging these opportunities, these sectors can make important contributions to creating an inclusive and resilient employment landscape for young South Africans.

10 CONCLUSION



This review shows the important role that the non-profit sector in South Africa plays in addressing the problem of youth unemployment. The sector contributes through direct job creation, vocational training, skills development, and promoting volunteerism. The sector, as the second largest employer after the government, not only increases the number of jobs available, but also aims to enhance the quality of youth employment. NPO-led programmes, such as Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, YES, and Afrika Tikkun, create pathways to employment across various sectors. They strive to bridge the skills gap and help young people enter the formal workforce. Additionally, non-profits support marginalised groups, including women, youth with disabilities, and individuals in underserved areas, through targeted initiatives designed to improve employability and generate income. However, despite these contributions, the sector faces several challenges, such as limited data, inconsistent funding, and a lack of standardised reporting mechanisms. These issues hinder the ability to assess the economic impact of NPOs in the country fully.

Similarly, this review reveals that little scholarly attention has been devoted to the contribution of NPOs to creating dignified and fulfilling employment opportunities. Consequently, little is known about the quality of jobs created and facilitated by NPOs. The question, thus, remains whether the non-profit sector is contributing to the creation of stable jobs, offering fair wages and opportunities for personal growth, and commanding respect. The literature suggests that while NPOs are committed to creating employment opportunities, many roles lack clear pathways for career progression, long-term security, and adequate remuneration, partly due to the sector's reliance on temporary funding and volunteer-based roles. Efforts to transition youth from informal to formal employment also reveal that structural barriers, such as regulatory complexities and limited formal recognition of informal skills, continue to hinder young people's access to stable employment.

Lastly, advocacy by NPOs aimed at promoting inclusive labour policies and improving access to resources for youth has shown some success, but it remains inconsistent. Rural and marginalised youth are often underrepresented in these efforts. Addressing these gaps requires a stronger data infrastructure, standardised reporting, and an increasing amount of comprehensive research focusing on job quality and long-term outcomes. Additionally, leveraging digital skills training, fostering partnerships, and aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals are effective strategies to expand the sector's impact. With targeted improvements, NPOs can promote sustainable livelihoods more effectively, contributing to economic resilience and social stability among South Africa's youth.



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