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THE NEXT ECONOMY

MID-TERM EVALUATION

Phase II

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

Redacted External-Sharing Version

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Evaluation team

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About this redacted version

This external-sharing edition has been prepared from the final mid-term evaluation report. It preserves the evaluation design, aggregate evidence, core findings, conclusions and recommendations while removing information that is not necessary for external technical review.

- Names and direct identifiers of research participants and key informants have been removed.
- Attributions in selected quotations have been generalised to stakeholder role and location.
- Operational annexes containing participant/key-informant lists, raw supporting files, data-collection instruments and internal exit-planning worksheets have been omitted.
- Non-essential third-party operational details have been generalised where they do not affect the analysis.
- Minor copyediting and visual restructuring have been applied for readability; the substantive findings and aggregate statistics presented here are drawn from the final evaluation report.

Scope of this version

The redacted edition is intended to demonstrate the evaluation approach, analytical depth and evidence generated by the assignment. It is not a substitute for the full internal report and its operational annexes.

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Executive summary

The Next Economy Programme (TNE) is a youth employment and entrepreneurship programme implemented in Mali, Nigeria and Somalia/Somaliland. Phase II (2020-2023) sought to support young people to move from learning to earning through common core life-skills training followed by employability or entrepreneurship pathways. The programme combined skills development, internship and job-placement support, business incubation, coaching, crowdfunding and partnership building.

The central question for the mid-term evaluation was: What can be done in the remaining period of the programme to maximise its impact on the lives of participating young people, up to programme closure and beyond? The evaluation covered Lagos, Abuja and Jos in Nigeria; Bamako in Mali; and Hargeisa and Mogadishu in Somalia/Somaliland. It used a theory-based, utilisation-focused mixed-methods design combining document review, an online participant survey, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), theory-of-change review and a sensemaking/validation session.

Figure 1. Evaluation coverage and respondent profile.

Overall assessment

Output level

TNE was largely achieving its intended output-level results. Participant targets were broadly being met despite implementation disruptions associated with COVID-19.

Outcome level

Progress was more limited at outcome level. Internship, job-placement and business-start-up performance varied substantially by country and, in several cases, remained below programme targets.

Impact level

Survey evidence indicated increases in participant income, but only a minority of respondents reported that post-training income was sufficient to meet basic needs.

Gender and inclusion

The programme admitted equal numbers of male and female participants, but equal participation did not consistently translate into equal employment and enterprise outcomes. The evaluation recommended more deliberate gender-focused analysis and response.

Programme model

The common Core Life Skills entry point followed by a choice between employability and entrepreneurship was consistently valued by participants and implementers and was assessed as a strong feature of the model.

Key recommendations at a glance

- Use monitoring and learning more deliberately to understand the drivers of job placement, business start-up, business growth and decent income outcomes.
- Strengthen strategic partnerships with government, employers, TVET institutions, universities, financial actors and other ecosystem stakeholders.
- Conduct targeted gender-focused inquiry and use the findings to improve outcomes for young women.
- Add or strengthen basic digital/computing and social-media marketing skills in the curriculum.
- Expand ongoing mentoring/coaching and strengthen alumni networks as sources of peer support, information and opportunity.
- Finalise a joint exit and sustainability strategy, strengthen partner capacity and invest in ecosystem mapping, documentation and knowledge sharing.

1. Programme and evaluation context

1.1 The Next Economy programme

TNE is led by SOS Children's Villages and Crosswise Works and funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Local Employment for Development in Africa programme. The programme works with local implementing organisations, private-sector actors and government stakeholders to connect the ambitions and career goals of young people with labour-market and enterprise opportunities.

The programme model starts with common recruitment and Core Life Skills. Participants then proceed through either an employability pathway, which includes employability training and internship/job-placement support, or an entrepreneurship pathway, which includes business training, incubation, coaching and access-to-finance support. Phase II also aimed to strengthen gender outcomes, expand inclusion and alternative delivery, improve the relevance of learning materials and deepen partnerships within employment and entrepreneurship ecosystems.

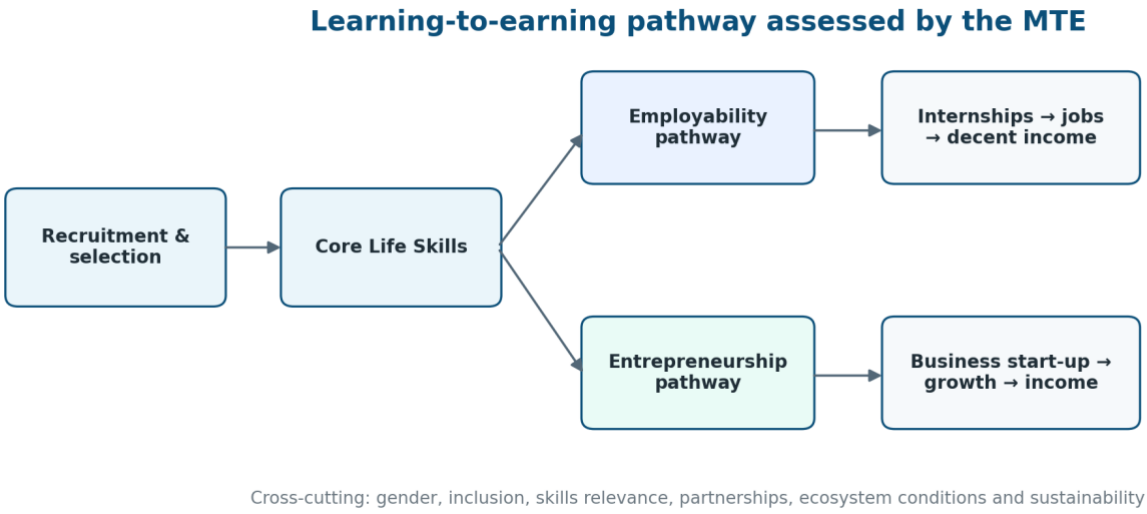

Figure 2. Simplified learning-to-earning pathway assessed by the evaluation.

1.2 Country contexts

Mali. The employment and entrepreneurship ecosystem included government employment and vocational-training institutions and a large informal SME sector. Programme delivery in Bamako shifted to online and hybrid formats during the pandemic, with an alternative delivery model also introduced outside Bamako.

Nigeria. Youth employment policy was framed through the Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan, organised around Employability, Entrepreneurship Development, Employment Creation and Equal Opportunity. TNE was implemented in Abuja, Jos and Lagos using online, hybrid and in-person approaches at different points during the pandemic.

Somalia/Somaliland. National policy frameworks emphasised youth employment, self-employment, skills development, internships and stronger links between education/training and labour markets. Programme implementation in Mogadishu and Hargeisa also shifted between online and physical delivery in response to COVID-19 conditions.

1.3 Purpose and scope of the MTE

The MTE assessed results achieved since 2020, considered likely results during the remaining implementation period, reviewed influence on employment and entrepreneurship ecosystems, and generated practical recommendations on programme improvement, transition and sustainability. The evaluation covered all six main programme locations and considered selected alternative delivery locations through desk review and stakeholder consultation.

2. Evaluation approach and methodology

2.1 Evaluation questions

1. What results has TNE achieved at output, outcome and impact levels among young people, and how equitable and inclusive is the programme?
2. To what extent and how does TNE influence actors in the employment and entrepreneurship ecosystems?
3. What improvements can be made during the remaining programme period to increase impact on the lives of young people?
4. How can the programme strengthen sustainability beyond 2023, including exit, partnerships and institutional uptake?

2.2 Approach and methods

The evaluation used a theory-based and utilisation-focused approach. TNE's theory of change served as the analytical starting point, while regular check-ins, a theory-of-change review and a sensemaking session supported learning and use of findings during the evaluation process. The international evaluation team combined local expertise in Mali, Nigeria and Somalia/Somaliland with cross-country analysis.

Method	Primary purpose
Document review	Programme design, monitoring data, implementation records and contextual documents
Online participant survey	Quantitative evidence on training experience, internships, employment, enterprise, income and support systems
Key informant interviews	Programme managers, implementing partners, employers, government/education actors, donor and other ecosystem stakeholders
Focus group discussions	Current participants and alumni across employability and entrepreneurship pathways
Theory-of-change review	Testing pathway logic, assumptions and expected changes
Sensemaking/validation	Presentation and discussion of preliminary findings at the programme annual meeting

2.3 Data collection and respondent profile

Country/area	Locations	Survey	KIIs	FGDs	FGD participants
Nigeria	Lagos, Abuja, Jos	356	11	12	96
Mali	Bamako	139	11	4	32
Somalia/Somaliland	Hargeisa, Mogadishu	488	17	8	64
Netherlands	Programme/donor stakeholders	-	11	-	-
Total		983	50	24	192

2.4 Limitations

- FGD participants and several other respondents were identified through programme implementers, creating potential selection bias.
- Online survey response rates were comparatively low in Mali and Nigeria; respondents may therefore over-represent more active or engaged participants.
- The tight data-collection timeline limited coverage of some stakeholders, particularly host companies and government/partner actors in parts of Nigeria.
- No financial information was provided to the evaluation team; efficiency and value for money were therefore outside the evidence base of the MTE.

3. Findings

3.1 Validity of TNE's theory of change

The theory-of-change review focused on three pathways: young people accessing decent income through employment; young people developing viable businesses; and ecosystem actors contributing to an environment that supports youth employment and entrepreneurship.

Employability pathway

Stakeholders and participants strongly validated the logic of offering young people a choice between employment and entrepreneurship after common life-skills training. Employers interviewed in the evaluation generally considered TNE-trained young people to have useful workplace skills. Participants also highlighted the importance of family and friends, mentors and coaches, but these influences were not always explicit in the programme logic. The evaluation therefore recommended clarifying assumptions between training, internship, job placement and decent income.

Entrepreneurship pathway

The pathway from training to viable enterprise was also broadly considered valid. Hub support, coaching and mentoring were valued, while crowdfunding played an important role in start-up financing. The MTE noted that access to finance was partly treated as an assumption rather than a programme-supported change and recommended clearer expectations and stronger links between entrepreneurs, alumni, mentors and financing networks.

Ecosystem pathway

The ecosystem component was assessed as less clearly defined. TNE was engaging government, employers, universities, TVET institutions, investors and other actors, but the programme's intended contribution to systemic change was not consistently articulated. The evaluation recommended a clearer distinction between changes TNE can influence directly and broader conditions beyond the programme's control.

Theory-of-change conclusion

The employability and entrepreneurship pathways were broadly valid, while the ecosystem pathway required greater clarity. The MTE also recommended using monitoring data and learning to update the theory of change periodically rather than treating it as a static proposal-stage document.

3.2 Results for young people

Participants across the three countries overwhelmingly described the employability and entrepreneurship training as useful. Focus groups also indicated that the training improved participants' understanding of job search, workplace expectations, business start-up and personal confidence. However, the conversion from training into internships, jobs, business start-up and adequate income was uneven.

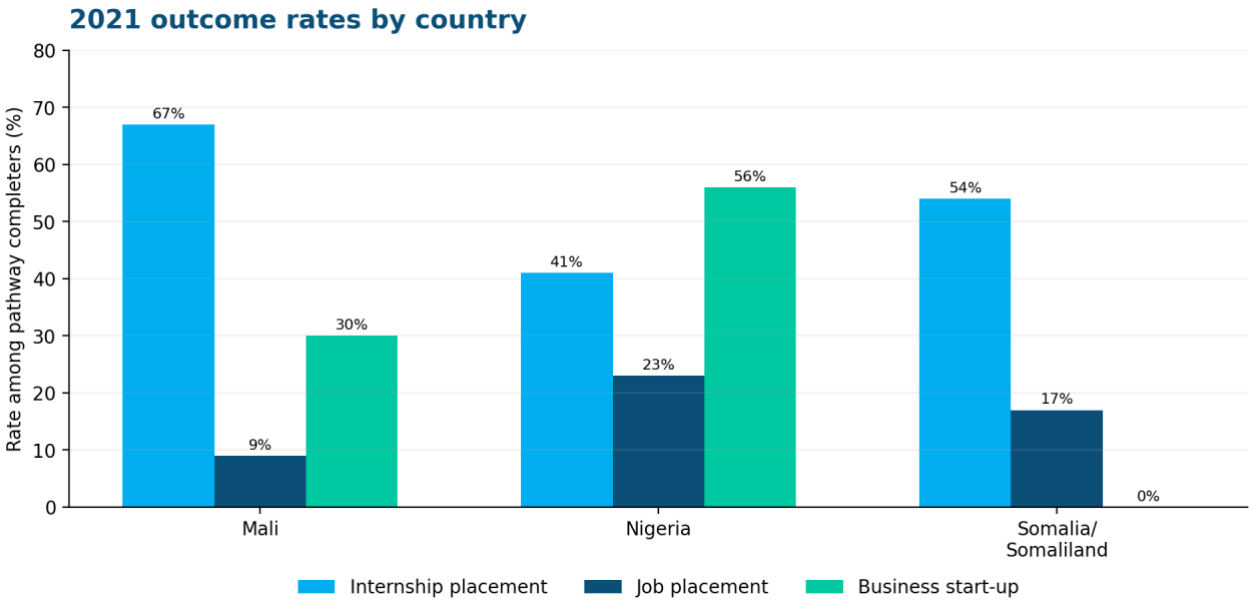

Figure 3. Selected 2021 programme outcome rates by country.

Internships and jobs

Monitoring data showed that 67% of employability completers in Mali, 41% in Nigeria and 54% in Somalia/Somaliland secured internships. Job placement rates were lower: 9% in Mali, 23% in Nigeria and 17% in Somalia/Somaliland. Nigeria showed the strongest conversion from internship to job among the three country portfolios, while all countries remained below their job-placement targets.

Business start-up

Among participants who completed entrepreneurship training in 2021, monitoring data recorded business start-up rates of 30% in Mali and 56% in Nigeria, while no start-ups had yet been recorded in the Somalia/Somaliland results framework at the reporting point. Survey responses collected later were more positive, suggesting that business formation continued after the monitoring cut-off and reinforcing the importance of timing when interpreting outcome indicators.

Income and basic needs

Survey data indicated upward movement in reported income distributions after training. The share of respondents in the lowest reported income band fell substantially in each country, although the thresholds were country-specific and therefore should not be compared as equivalent monetary values. Even with these improvements, only about two in ten respondents in Mali, one in ten in Nigeria and three in ten in Somalia/Somaliland reported that their income was sufficient to meet basic needs.

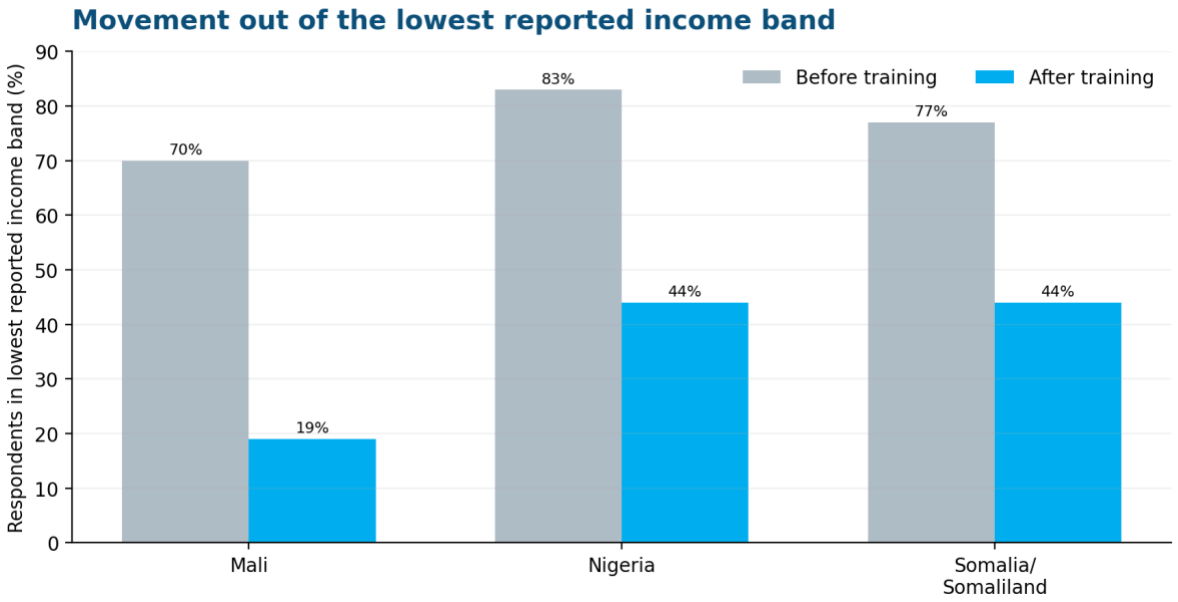

Figure 4. Change in the share of respondents in the lowest reported income band before and after training.

Gender equality and inclusion

TNE admitted equal numbers of male and female participants. However, equal access did not consistently translate into equal outcomes. Female job-placement rates were lower than male rates in Mali and Somalia/Somaliland, broadly comparable in Nigeria, and business start-up outcomes varied sharply by context. Nigeria was a notable exception in the 2021 entrepreneurship monitoring data, where the recorded start-up rate among female completers substantially exceeded the male rate.

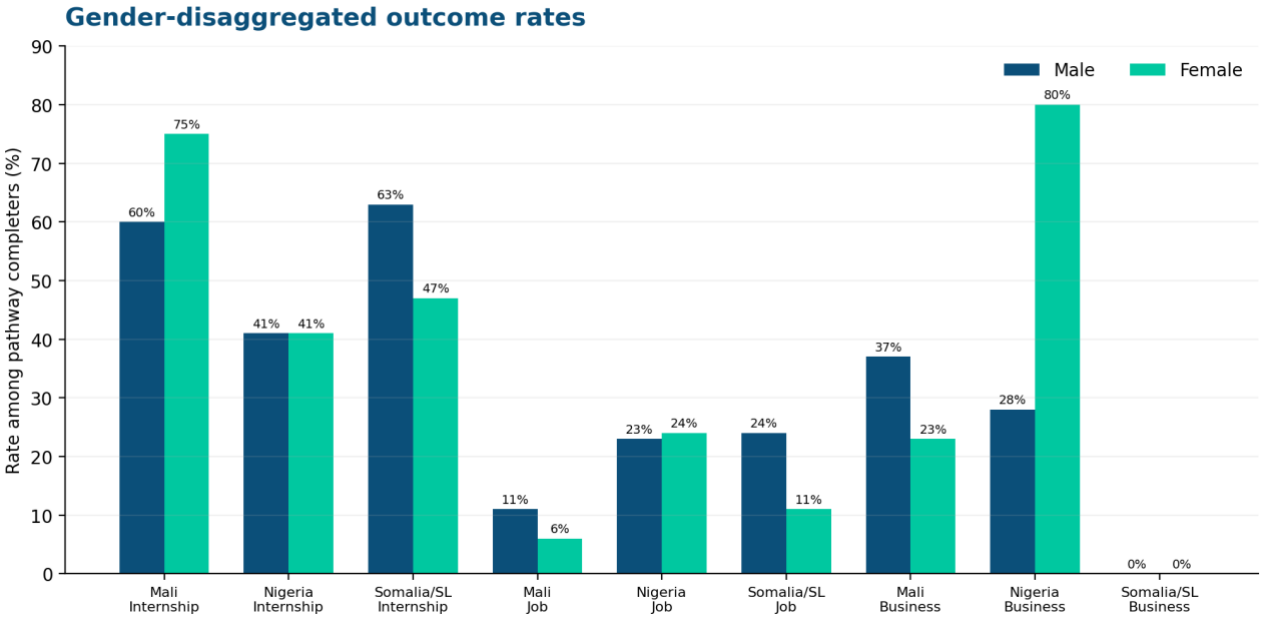

Figure 5. Gender-disaggregated outcome rates from 2021 monitoring data.

The evaluation also identified broader inclusion issues. Survey respondents were predominantly highly educated and urban, suggesting that programme reach was stronger among young people with post-secondary education and relatively greater household assets. Alternative delivery models in rural and vocational settings offered a pathway for broadening inclusion. The survey also recorded a comparatively high proportion of respondents identifying as persons living with disabilities in Somalia/Somaliland.

Gender finding

The programme's 50/50 participation approach was a strong foundation, but the MTE recommended more deliberate gender-focused inquiry and adaptation to understand why women's employment and business outcomes differed across contexts.

Additional outcomes

Participants described changes in mindset, self-confidence and job-search practices as important additional outcomes. Alumni networks and the large pipeline of applicants were also identified as underused assets for mentoring, information sharing, employer outreach and future programme delivery. Crowdfunding was reported to contribute not only financing but also confidence, pitching experience and business validation for young entrepreneurs.

3.3 Influence on the wider ecosystem

TNE influenced employers, training institutions, implementing partners and, in some locations, government actors. Employability implementers organised job fairs and worked with prospective host companies; entrepreneurship implementers organised matchmaking, product fairs and investor-facing activities. In Somalia/Somaliland, engagement with government contributed to stronger internship and employment policy relationships. In other locations, government influence was more limited or less systematic.

The evaluation found that partnership-building activities were useful but often fragmented. A key recommendation was to move from isolated events and bilateral relationships towards a more strategic country-level ecosystem approach linking employers, government, TVET institutions, universities, financial actors, hubs and youth-serving organisations.

Ecosystem finding

TNE had credible examples of stakeholder influence, but the programme lacked a consistently articulated strategy for how partnership activity would strengthen the wider environment for youth employment and entrepreneurship.

3.4 Improvements during the remaining programme period

Several practical improvements emerged from the cross-country evidence. Stronger collaboration between implementing partners was a recurring theme, particularly during recruitment and pathway allocation. The Somalia/Somaliland model of joint recruitment and coordination was identified as a useful reference for Nigeria and Mali.

- Increase mentoring and coaching beyond one-off sessions and link participants to sector-specific mentors until employment or enterprise milestones are reached.
- Use participant, alumni and employer feedback to adjust curricula, delivery modes and post-training support.
- Provide more hands-on learning and, where feasible, more in-person delivery when this improves engagement and practical application.
- Strengthen basic computing skills and social-media marketing/management, which participants and implementers identified as labour-market-relevant gaps.
- Deepen collaboration with government employment bodies, employers and private-sector networks to improve internship and job-placement opportunities.
- Explore feasible mechanisms to reduce participation costs associated with unpaid internships and improve post-training transition support.

Skills relevance

The programme's life-skills curriculum was valued, but the MTE identified basic computing, digital communication and social-media marketing/management as important additions for both employment and entrepreneurship pathways.

3.5 Sustainability beyond 2023

Stakeholders used the terms "exit" and "sustainability" in different ways. For some, sustainability meant continuing services without donor funding; for others, it meant institutional uptake, continuation through local partnerships, retention of staff capacity, or integration of programme tools and learning into future initiatives. The evaluation therefore recommended establishing a shared definition and joint vision for exit and sustainability.

Key sustainability themes included: early planning; ecosystem and partnership mapping; partner organisational capacity; curriculum handover and adaptation; diversified funding; stronger private-sector relationships; alumni networks; and systematic documentation of learning. The MTE also highlighted the potential for TVET institutions and universities to take up elements of the employability curriculum and for hubs to continue entrepreneurship training using adapted business models.

Sustainability finding

The programme had already begun several useful transition activities, but sustainability would depend on joint planning, institutional ownership, stronger monitoring capacity, diversified partnerships and clear choices about which services should be continued, adapted, handed over or discontinued.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Results and inclusion

The integrated model of common life-skills training followed by a choice between employability and entrepreneurship was a clear programme strength. TNE was largely achieving output-level targets and showing evidence of progress towards internships, jobs, businesses and higher incomes, but outcome and impact results were more difficult to achieve and varied considerably by country. The evaluation concluded that reaching decent-income outcomes required stronger post-training transition support and better understanding of the contextual factors influencing employment and enterprise performance.

The programme was a good fit for many urban, post-secondary-educated young people, but stronger adaptation would be needed to reach less educated, rural and marginalised youth. Gender parity in participation did not automatically translate into equitable results, making gender-responsive analysis and programme adjustment essential.

4.2 Ecosystem influence

TNE had credible influence on employers, implementing partners, training institutions and selected government actors. However, ecosystem engagement was often activity-based rather than guided by a coherent strategy. More deliberate collaboration among ecosystem players was needed to improve access to internships, employment, enterprise finance and supportive institutional conditions.

4.3 Programme improvement

The strongest practical opportunities for the remaining programme period were to strengthen implementer collaboration, improve recruitment and pathway allocation, expand mentoring/coaching, add relevant digital skills, increase employer engagement, use alumni more deliberately and apply rapid research to understand differences in outcome performance across locations and gender groups.

4.4 Sustainability

The early attention given to exit planning was a positive feature. Nevertheless, the programme needed a jointly owned exit strategy and clearer decisions on what should be institutionalised, handed over, adapted, financed differently or concluded. Long-term sustainability would depend on stronger partner capacity, diversified resource mobilisation, institutional relationships, curriculum uptake, monitoring and learning, and systematic documentation of experience.

5. Recommendations

1. Strengthen evidence use and adaptive learning

- Conduct rapid assessments of the factors affecting internships, job placements, business start-up/growth and decent-income outcomes.
- Use monitoring data for learning and service adaptation, not only output tracking.
- Integrate more qualitative evidence, alumni feedback, employer feedback and case studies into programme learning.
- Conduct targeted gender-focused assessments to identify practical actions that improve outcomes for young women.

2. Build strategic partnerships for outcomes

- Create structured country-level partnership networks involving employers, government, TVET institutions, universities, NGOs and financial actors.
- Use collaborative roundtables and employer engagement to expand internships, jobs, business linkages and access to finance.
- Strengthen the role of partnership builders and align their work more closely with implementing partners.

3. Improve skills relevance and post-training support

- Add or strengthen basic computing, digital communication and social-media marketing/management.
- Expand ongoing coaching and mentoring, including sector-specific mentors and alumni support.
- Use feedback from employers and participants to adjust curricula, training duration and delivery modes.

4. Put young women and men at the centre

- Use successful alumni as role models and mentors.
- Expand access to programme resources beyond the immediate participant cohort through online learning and alumni communities.
- Adapt delivery for additional target groups, including rural and vulnerable young people, based on evidence from alternative delivery models.

5. Strengthen pathways to finance and enterprise growth

- Retain useful crowdfunding elements while testing more localised and sustainable financing options.
- Engage financial institutions, investor networks and informal business-angel networks where appropriate.
- Build the capacity of hubs and young entrepreneurs to develop and manage viable financing strategies.

6. Finalise and operationalise the exit strategy

- Develop a joint exit strategy that reflects stakeholder roles, priorities and realistic timelines.
- Prioritise activities based on sustainability potential, complexity and resource requirements.

- Conduct ecosystem mapping, strengthen implementing-partner business models and diversify funding sources.
- Invest in documentation, knowledge sharing, curriculum handover/uptake and monitoring capacity so that useful services continue beyond programme closure.

Annex: Consolidated evidence tables

The following tables retain selected aggregate evidence from the full evaluation report. No participant or key-informant identifiers are included in this redacted edition.

A1. Internship placements, 2021 monitoring data

Country	Employability completers	Actual internships	Total rate	Male rate	Female rate
Mali	264	177	67%	60%	75%
Nigeria	487	199	41%	41%	41%
Somalia/Somaliland	301	162	54%	63%	47%

A2. Job placements, 2021 monitoring data

Country	Employability completers	Actual jobs	Total rate	Male rate	Female rate
Mali	264	23	9%	11%	6%
Nigeria	487	114	23%	23%	24%
Somalia/Somaliland	301	50	17%	24%	11%

A3. Business start-ups, 2021 monitoring data

Country	Entrepreneurship completers	Actual start-ups	Total rate	Male rate	Female rate
Mali	60	18	30%	37%	23%
Nigeria	108	61	56%	28%	80%
Somalia/Somaliland	86	0	0%	0%	0%

A4. Reported income distribution before and after training

Country	Monthly income band	Before	After
Mali	<50,000 CFA	70%	19%
Mali	50,000-100,000 CFA	17%	43%
Mali	101,000-200,000 CFA	7%	15%
Mali	201,000-300,000 CFA	4%	12%
Mali	>300,000 CFA	3%	12%
Nigeria	<NGN50,000	83%	44%
Nigeria	NGN50,000-100,000	14%	40%
Nigeria	NGN101,000-200,000	3%	12%
Nigeria	NGN201,000-300,000	0%	2%

Country	Monthly income band	Before	After
Nigeria	>NGN300,000	0%	2%
Somalia/Somaliland	<USD100	77%	44%
Somalia/Somaliland	USD100-200	12%	25%
Somalia/Somaliland	USD201-300	6%	12%
Somalia/Somaliland	USD301-400	3%	10%
Somalia/Somaliland	>USD400	2%	9%

End note

This redacted external-sharing version omits the original report's operational annexes, participant/key-informant list, raw supporting files and internal planning tools. The full final evaluation report dated 29 September 2022 remains the source document for all aggregate evidence presented here.