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#Education Matters

Our Challenges



Site where Tullow Company is set to extract oil in Turkana County. Oil is one of the booming sectors. [File, Standard]

Youth need technical skills to reap from booming sectors

Technical and vocational education key for Kenyans to fully benefit from surge in foreign direct investment.

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Kenya continues to attract high-value foreign investments. However, there are doubts that many Kenyans, especially the youth, can benefit from the international ventures due to lack of appropriate education and skills. Kenya is among the four countries in Africa that attracted the highest foreign direct investments (FDIs) last year, alongside South Africa, Nigeria and Morocco.

According to the latest report by Ernst & Young, a global financial services firm, the four nations pulled in at least 58 per cent of the continent's total FDI projects. The trend is expected to continue in the short- and long-term as investors target lucrative sectors like energy, mining and infrastructure in the country.

However, despite the enormous opportunities presented by the growing foreign investments, many of the country's youths do not have the required technical and vocational skills needed to get well-paying and sustainable jobs in those ventures. This has undermined the direct impact of foreign investments in reducing youth unemployment.

This has left many investment operations with no choice but to rely on expensive expatriate labour, leaving Kenyan youth to make do with low-paying and unreliable jobs.

A few others have resorted to the laudable but costly strategy of establishing facilities to train Kenyans for the specialised expertise that their operations require.

However, the fundamental and well-known issue remains that the country's higher education institutions, especially the Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET), continue to suffer the costly and historical malaise of not imparting the skills needed in the market.

This is especially so in the emerging sectors that attract huge investments,

including oil and gas, renewable energies, construction and mining.

Lack of skills is what has traditionally undermined the capacity of youths graduating from local educational institutions, including TVETs, from fully exploiting the opportunities within the domestic economy, including establishing their own businesses.

TVET institutions continue to face many challenges in adapting quickly to the dynamic requirements of the labour market despite the frequent and well-publicised rhetoric by politicians.

The institutions remain grossly underfunded, lack appropriate human and technical resources, while their curriculum is not responsive enough to emerging market realities, including the skills needed in large-scale investment ventures.

"Lack of skills has undermined the capacity of youths graduating from local educational institutions from exploiting economic opportunities."

Fortunately, some initiatives have emerged in response to the issue of youth skills gap to enable Kenyans gain more fully from the opportunities provided by foreign investment operations as well as emerging local ones.

For instance, German International Development Agency (GIZ) is working with TVET institutions and the private sector in the country to enhance relevant training of youths with a focus to sectors with significant employment potential, including agriculture, construction, infrastructure and the textile sector.

The programme, dubbed "Employment for Sustainable Development", also offers internships for graduates from vocational colleges and unskilled employees, thereby significantly increasing their employability in the



Joseph Wachira, a student of Jeremiah Nyagah Technical Institute of Building and Civil Engineering in Embu during the second Kenya Association of Technical Training Institutions TVET fair and Robotics Contest on May 11. Technical skills are essential for new jobs created through foreign investments. [Kipsang Joseph, Standard]



The Principal Secretary for TVET at the Ministry of Education, Dr Dinah Mwinzi (centre), launches the Kenya Skills Show in Nairobi recently. The capacity of TVET institutions should be increased to enhance their usefulness. [File, Standard]

emerging sectors.

Such programmes need to be scaled up by the government and other stakeholders to reach more youths who need such critical support.

Highly industrialised and wealthy countries like Germany continue to exhibit leadership in the economic and technological fronts as a result of substantial investments in technical and vocational education, something that Kenya needs to emulate.

Private sector firms that offer skills training and technology transfer to Kenyans should also be considered for tax breaks to support their operations and provide incentives for others to conduct such training to enhance the human resource level and capacity of the country. In addition, TVET institutions need to scale up their capacity to assess and anticipate market needs in terms of skills required so as to enhance their usefulness in the lives of the graduates and the general economy.

Also, there is a need for enhanced investments in TVETs to boost their capacity to provide cutting-edge skills needed for a dynamic economic environment, including enhancing training of the teaching staff, scaling up the curriculum and access to technology and equipment.

The move to establish a regulatory authority for TVET institutions in the country to enforce minimum standards and nurture growth of the sector is laudable. The authority must push ahead with reforms and professionalisation of the TVET sector since that lies at that heart of economic development of the country.

Moreover, strategic public awareness initiatives are needed to change the deep-seated negative attitudes of many Kenyans towards TVET, which is wrongly perceived to be inferior and meant for poor performers in national examinations in primary and secondary school levels.

Failure to do so means the country's youths will continue to suffer high-rates of unemployment and under-employment despite increasing investments in the country, both from foreign and local investors.