Dynamics of Youth Unemployment: Case Studies on Public Policy Frameworks and the Gig Economy in India, South Africa and Nigeria

A country-specific investigation into institutional frameworks and critical research gaps surrounding the digital gig economy.

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ABSTRACT

The country-specific investigation dives into the structural challenges of youth unemployment across India, South Africa and Nigeria. It undertakes critical analysis of policies like PMKVY, PYEI and N-Power of respective nations to highlight the implementation gaps, structural mismatches and post- program "transitional cliff". Further, the gig economy despite offering alternate livelihood opportunities creates a regulatory safety vacuum which requires structural policy actions. The study emphasizes on reorientation of policy architecture towards demand-driven ecosystem, private sector participation and digitally inclusive policies to tackle youth unemployment problem in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Youth unemployment, Active Labour Market Programs (ALMPs), structural mismatches, Global South, Skill development

INTRODUCTION

India is in the middle of demographic transition. More than 65% of the total population is under 35 years of age. According to the Annual Report of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), the overall national rate of unemployment among youth (aged 15 to 29) declined slightly to 9.9%, with urban areas having a much higher rate of youth unemployment at 13.6% compared to 8.3% in rural areas (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2025). This institutional unpreparedness complicates the transition for young workers from traditional agrarian sectors to higher-value employment, leaving millions to find their place in an unregulated digital gig economy without formal social safety nets. South Africa on the other hand, presents one of the most severe structural crises, with youth disproportionately shouldering the failure of the labour market to absorb them. According to data sourced from Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), the official national unemployment rate in the country surged to 32.7% in 2026 (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2026). However, when the data is disaggregated by age, the crisis reveals its starkness. The youth (15-24 years) face an extraordinary unemployment rate of 60.9%, while the next cohort (25-34 years) registers a rate of 40.6% (Stats SA, 2026). These staggering metrics are deeply intertwined with historical, spatial, and socio-economic exclusion. Furthermore, Nigeria too, has been experiencing a growing problem where excessive population demographics are combined with insufficient job creation. According to figures reported by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), there are close to 80 million Nigerians who are either underemployed or unemployed, making up around 53 percent of Nigeria's total youth demographics (ActionAid Nigeria, 2024).

All of the aforementioned structural problems have been further exacerbated by shocks to the economy regionally and given present global geopolitical fragmentation as highlighted by ILO, which includes extreme depreciation of the local currency and soaring food prices in the developing nations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth unemployment represents a critical issue for emerging countries that turns the demographic advantage into local exclusions. On a global scale, a striking paradox exists where youth unemployment rates decline to 13% - the lowest in 15 years - but at the same time, the rate of youth Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET) reaches 20.4%, with young women disproportionately affected (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). As a reaction to this situation, India, South Africa, and Nigeria increase investments in Active Labor Market Programs (ALMPs) and vocational skilling (World Bank & ILO, 2024). Nevertheless, government-sponsored efforts are ineffective at providing a smooth transition to labour market inclusion.

The traditional assumptions about the inverse relationship between economic growth and unemployment according to such theories as Okun's law cannot be applied in the modern reality. Growth in developing countries often results in "jobless growth" where no formal jobs are created. The unified structural feature for youth initiatives in India, South Africa, and Nigeria consists in the fact that they have a supply-oriented structure.

The Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) forms the primary scheme for skills development in India. However, despite awarding more than 1.29 crore certificates, translating the credentials to wage-based jobs poses a serious challenge. It was found out in a performance audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) that just 41% of short-term trainees were provided with placement opportunities because of insufficient local skill gap assessments under PMKVY 1.0 to 3.0. This inconsistency is supported by the figures given in the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) reports. The Periodical Labour Force Survey (PLFS) suggests that although youth unemployment rates decreased to 9.9% on average (ages 15–29), the rate of unemployment among urban youths rose to 13.6%. Moreover, the MoSPI report shows that 25.0% of the youth in India are considered NEETs, whereas only 4.2% of working-age adults have undergone vocational training.

The problem of youth unemployment is especially severe in South Africa where the country's youth unemployment rate has been averaging 53.036% for the last two decades. According to Stats SA, the youth unemployment rate is currently recorded at 60.9%. In order to deal with such a severe stagnation, the government invests funds in projects such as the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI). Although such programs can help with providing youth unemployment with a temporary relief in form of stipends, they cannot ensure sustainability and a way out of unemployment for people involved in those programs (Zikhali & Matsiliza, 2024).

In Nigeria, the problem is compounded by an economic crisis with a rise in the number of unemployed youths that has reached 53%, according to ActionAid Nigeria. As a result, almost 80 million youth in the country have been rendered useless. The country registers about 1.7 million graduates every year; however, structural problems impede their access to the formal labour market. The federal program "N-Power" serves as a short-term solution to the problem but is limited by operational constraints, delays in stipend payment, and weak control (Ugben et al., 2024).

Ultimately, current literature emphasizes the importance of making a shift from quantity-oriented enrolment objectives to high-quality demand-oriented ecosystem development.

Studies of global policies show that youth training programs can produce better results when coupled with comprehensive services (World Bank & ILO, 2024). Emerging countries need to make fundamental changes in their policy structure by building institutions that facilitate cooperation between the state and private sector in terms of technical training.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilizes a comparative, qualitative case-study framework to analyse the structural dynamics of youth unemployment and the emerging gig economy across three nations of the Global South: India, South Africa, and Nigeria. These nations were selected because they represent major Global South Economies with distinct demographic structure, labour market characteristics, and policy approaches to youth employment. It includes India's young working-age heavy cohort maneuvering a formalizing yet still agrarian economy, South Africa's historically embedded marginalization, and Nigeria's population explosion surpassing job creation while sharing a common type of policy response, which is State-led Active Labour Market Programs (ALMPs) such as Pradhan Mantri Krishi Vikas Yojana, PYEI, and N-Power from respective nations. The comparative study enables moving beyond single-country analysis towards the identification of multinational patterns, differences, policy challenges, and learnings.

The research depends entirely on secondary data mainly sourced from a combination of governments' annual and quarterly statistical publications, audit reports, and peer-reviewed and existing literature. Quantitative data explaining trends of the labour market was mainly sourced from national statistical agencies, including the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), a publication of India's Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation; the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) published by Statistics South Africa; and the labour force survey data from Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics. Regarding the program-specific performance data and implementation status and measurement of real impact, data was procured from the Comptroller and Auditor General of India's performance audit of

PMKVY, official communication from the Presidency of South Africa and SAYouth.mobi regarding the PYEI, and present academic analysis of the N-Power Programme. These sources were mapped with global datasets and reports from the multilateral international institutions like the International Labour Organization and the World Bank to locate country-specific findings within broader global trends in youth unemployment rates. The research utilizes a standard analytical approach to provide a consistent basis for comparing the three countries that are covered in this study. In addition to the analysis of the unemployment rate, an examination is done in terms of various other aspects related to the country such as the structure of the youth employment program chosen by the country, implementation strategies, the ability of the government to implement the strategy effectively, labour market dynamics, industry connections, and the growing importance of the digital gig economy in the country. The research also takes into account policy implementation gap, skills-to-work transition, and the existence of sustainable labour market participation laws and institutions in place.

Choosing PMKVY, PYEI, and N-Power as case studies was meant to offer a comparative insight into some key state-sponsored Active Labour Market Programs (ALMPs) and not a full-scale assessment of the whole youth employment landscape of each country. This is why the focus of the research is placed on institutional efficacy, implementation problems, and the results of the policies in question rather than on the success of the programmes judged by enrolment numbers alone. Through the analysis of various secondary sources, the researcher identifies common trends such as poor industry links, fragmentation of governance, implementation problems, and the rising importance of the gig economy.

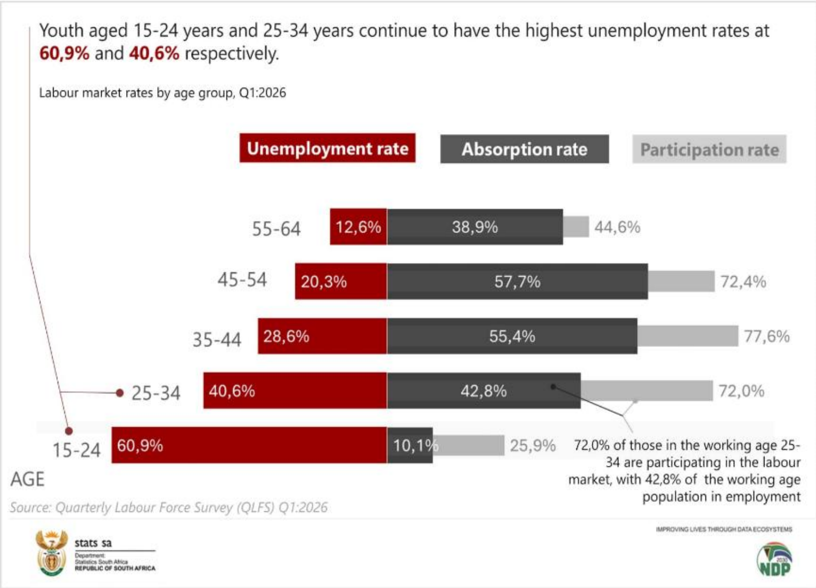
Findings have to be interpreted in relation to the research design applied in the study. Being based on only secondary sources and having focused on only one main programme of each country, the study lacks an insight into the full complexity of the issue of youth unemployment and all kinds of policies implemented in these countries. Differences in data availability and its quality especially regarding the data about the rural labour market and the informal sector have an effect on the level of cross-country comparisons made. Time, resource and data constraints did not allow assessing the results of programmes' performance over a longer period of time.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Youth Employment Interventions, Structural Hurdles, and Digital Evolution in Emerging Economies

SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa continues to experience one of the highest youth unemployment rates globally, with young people aged 15-34 disproportionately affected by poverty, inequality, and limited labour market opportunities. These challenges are compounded by poor education outcomes, spatial inequalities, and slow economic growth, limiting young people's ability to enter the labour market. In response, the government introduced the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI) in 2020 as a coordinated strategy to expand employment, skills development, and entrepreneurship opportunities for youth (The Presidency, 2025). The PYEI is a key policy response that coordinates government and private-sector initiatives through mechanisms such as the National Pathway Management Network (NPMN), demand-led skills programmes, and the National Youth Service. These initiatives aim to improve labour market access and support youth enterprise development (State of the Nation South Africa, 2025a). A notable innovation is SAYouth.mobi, a zero-rated digital platform that connects young people to employment, training, and entrepreneurial opportunities without requiring mobile data costs (SA Youth, 2025). The intervention has also delivered measurable outcomes. For example, the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) provided temporary employment opportunities to more than 300,000 young people during the Covid-19 pandemic (Department of Basic Education, 2025).



Source: QLFS, SA

Despite these achievements, research highlights persistent implementation challenges. Many municipalities and government departments face administrative, financial, and coordination constraints that limit effective programme delivery. Bureaucratic delays and weak monitoring systems have further reduced the long-term impact of youth employment initiatives (Government of South Africa, 2021). In addition, many opportunities created through the PYEI remain temporary and do not adequately address structural drivers of unemployment, including limited economic growth, unequal access to quality education, and persistent spatial inequalities (Government of South Africa, 2021).

South Africa's transition towards a digital economy has created new employment opportunities through online labour markets and digital platforms. However, many young people, particularly in rural and low-income communities, continue to face barriers related to limited internet access, inadequate digital skills, and unequal digital infrastructure (SAYouth, 2025). Furthermore, while the gig economy has expanded alternative income opportunities, many workers lack formal contracts, social protection, and income security, exposing gaps in existing labour regulations (State of the Nation South Africa, 2025b). Overall, the literature suggests that improving implementation capacity, digital inclusion, and labour protections is essential for strengthening youth employment outcomes in South Africa.

INDIA

In this context, the approach adopted to address youth unemployment in India has largely focused on ensuring that the country's vast labour force adapts to the new economy. Initiated in 2015, the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) is a vital program of India's demographic dividend, aiming to provide industry-oriented skills to young individuals (Kumar & Shobana, 2025). The project was initially conceived for people aged 15 to 29, although certificates have also been issued to those aged up to 45 (CAG, 2025). Academic experts recommend better planning and industry involvement due to the high outreach and low employability linkages (Mehrotra, 2018; Sharma & Singh, 2020). The NSDC is responsible for implementing the PMKVY under two tracks: CSSM, accounting for 25% of the funding provided to states through State Skill Development Missions, and CSCM, involving 75% of the targets (MSDE, 2024). The three phases of the program cost approximately ₹14,450 crore (CAG, 2025). More than 75,000 COVID-19 warriors were trained during the pandemic, with the initiative supported by skill development councils and private trainers.

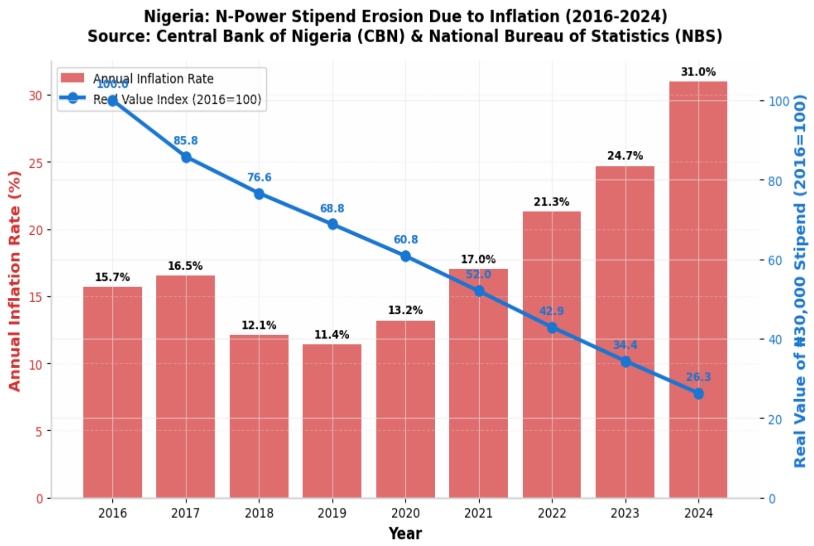
However, in its first three phases, nearly 1.1 crore people got themselves enrolled, but only 24.39 lakh were placed, i.e., 22% of the total enrolment (CAG, 2025). Research from Haryana indicates that skills can boost career opportunities, but linking training with placement proves to be challenging (Rinku & Rani, 2021). The audit also reveals corruption, including the reuse of photos for fake trainees and beneficiaries who didn't even have an account, coupled with lack of supervision, as the steering committee has not held any meetings in years (CAG, 2025). The majority of certifications have been issued for only a few job roles, overlooking sectors that require high human resources while oversupplying in other sectors (CAG, 2025). For instance, the construction sector got very few certifications relative to the projected demand from this sector, while the apparel and electronics sectors were notably overrepresented (CAG, 2025). Regional planning in India also exhibited deficiencies due to insufficient training centers in states such as Bihar and a lack of research into the skills required in local areas, leaving trained youth without employment opportunities nearby.

India has constantly introduced labour protection for workers in the wake of digitalization and platform labour. The Code of Social Security (2020) was an attempt to incorporate platform and gig workers into the law, although they are not yet treated as employees, thereby making them ineligible for welfare services (Koley, 2025). E-Shram was launched to ensure easier access to welfare services through worker registration; however, there is a lack of integration among various ministries' databases (Koley, 2025). PMKVY 4.0 introduces innovation in the system through transparency of the process using digital platforms like the Skill India Digital Hub (SIDH) (Kapoor & Mehta, 2021).

NIGERIA

Nigeria faces one of the world's most severe youth unemployment crises, with approximately 80 million young Nigerians 53% of the youth demographic unemployed or underemployed (ActionAid Nigeria, 2024). The National Bureau of Statistics recorded a 20.1% general unemployment rate in Q1 2023, with youth bearing a disproportionate share of economic exclusion (NBS, 2023). Annual graduate output of 1.7 million far exceeds formal labour market absorption, pushing most youth into the informal sector where underemployment prevails (Nwaobi, 2019; Oluwatayo & Ojo, 2021). The crisis stems from four structural deficiencies. Educational mismatch persists as universities produce graduates in oversaturated fields while digital services and advanced manufacturing remain underdeveloped (Odey et al., 2019). Macroeconomic instability, 31% inflation, currency depreciation, and unreliable power renders self-employment unviable (Adeyemi & Ojo, 2023). Institutional fragmentation disperses employment policy across multiple ministries, diluting accountability (Ugben et al., 2024). Informal sector constraints trap youth in jobs lacking income stability or upward mobility (Oluwatayo & Ojo, 2021).

Successive administrations deployed three programmes: NAPEP (2001) targeting poverty reduction through skills training; SURE-P (2011) redirecting fuel subsidy savings into graduate internships; and N-Power (2016), the largest intervention, paying ₦30,000 monthly stipends across education, health, and agriculture tracks (Nwaobi, 2019). N-Power suffers centralized federal control excluding state adaptation, BVN-linked biometric verification lacking independent audit, and absent post-programme employment tracking. The fixed ₦30,000 stipend has lost approximately 60% of real value to inflation, while public debt at 53% of GDP constrains expansion (IMF, 2025; World Bank, 2024).



Source:NBS Nigeria

Overall, **Cross-country analysis yields lessons**: **India's Aadhaar-linked tracking** could eliminate ghost beneficiaries; South Africa's Presidency-level coordination offers adaptive governance models. All three nations share the "**transitional cliff**" where beneficiaries return to unemployment post-programme. Future policy must shift from enrolment targets to **demand-driven ecosystem development**, thus integrating private sector market signalling, introducing inflation-indexed stipends, and establishing gig worker regulatory frameworks. Without these reforms, Nigeria's youth employment schemes will remain temporary palliatives rather than sustainable pathways out of poverty.

GIG ECONOMY

Contrary to these abovementioned interventions, unemployment remains persistent across the three countries, proving that policy frameworks alone are not enough to curb structural labour market challenges. The structural inadequacy shows a trend in implementation gaps, with rooted bureaucratic inefficiencies, poor institutional coordination and persistent mismatches between education systems and labour market demands. Furthermore, the introduction and expansion of the digital gig economy transformed labour markets in all three countries. The rise of digital work platforms created new employment opportunities, particularly for young people in services such as food delivery and e-hailing. However, the shift in these gig economies has raised concerns in issues relating to fair wages, social protection, worker classification and labour rights. In multiple cases, gig workers are classified as independent contractors, depriving them of employment protections and social security benefits such as employment pension. Consequently, policymakers increasingly emphasize the need for updated regulatory frameworks that balance labour protection with innovation and labour market flexibility.

DISCUSSION

The comparison among India, South Africa, and Nigeria indicates that there is a similar challenge for policymakers, in that although the expansion of programmes designed to increase employability among the youth has been adopted by the government, such policies have not been able to keep up with the fast pace of the gig economy in the digital age. Whereas governmental programmes still emphasize training and short-term employment opportunities, an increasing number of young people make a living through the gig economy and digital platforms. This creates a gap between the design of youth employment policies and the changing realities of the labour market.

One such gap in the implementation of skill development programs is the inadequate linkage between these programs and the demands of the labour market. Though the Indian PMKVY has successfully created an extensive and standardized framework for skill development, the placement rate is still poor as training is based on the requirements of the program and not the industry. In South Africa, the PYEI has enhanced employment opportunities via digitization of registration. However, poor administration and lack of proper coordination have rendered it ineffective. Nigeria, with its growing digital economy, has been responsive to the demands of the market through private technology firms and digital employment platforms, although they function outside the scope of public policies. Together, these experiences suggest that governments should strengthen partnerships between skilling programmes, digital platforms, employers, and local industries so that training leads to sustainable employment.

Growth in the gig economy highlights another issue in terms of regulation. In all three countries, platform workers are considered to be independent contractors rather than employees. It means that young gig workers do not have access to minimum wage guarantees, social security coverage, healthcare services, paid leave days and effective complaints channels. Current youth employment programs are oriented towards digital jobs but fail to offer enough protection for them. In other words, there is an imbalance between employment creation and labour regulation.

Another issue in question is unequal access to digital technologies. There is a problem with insufficient connection to the internet, lack of digital devices and low level of digital skills among women, rural youth and poor families. According to the findings, future policy making should acknowledge the gig economy as a permanent feature of the labour market. It is necessary to include gig workers into labour and social protection regulations, build connections between skilling programs and demands of industries and improve digital infrastructure. Future research should consider issues related to quality, stability of income and future career development of gig workers instead of focusing only on participation and employment rates.

POLICY AND LEGAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The cross-country analysis highlights that shift from centralized, supply-driven enrolment targets substantially improves employment outcomes. India's Aadhar-linked digital tracking offers a framework to remove ghost beneficiaries and facilitate stipend delivery, while South Africa's Presidency-level governance framework offers an institutional model for a coherent and multi-sectoral coordination.

To bridge the "transitional cliff" and formalize the digital economy following interventions are suggested:

Implementation of Demand-Driven "Skill Passports": Programs like PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana and N-Power require shift from rigid, centralized targets to decentralized ones. India can leverage flexible, market-driven models from Nigeria's remote tech sector, say Decagon, to integrate domestic training directly to the global digital micro-work environment, thereby directly overcoming India's 22% of placement deficit.

Establishment of Inflation-Indexed Stipends and Centralization of Digital Payment Infra: To improve human retention during macroeconomic crisis, establishment of direct biometric tracking can be facilitated which is linked to automatic treasury payments. Moreover, legal frameworks should require stipends to be inflation-indexed to prevent financial burden as observed in Nigeria, where fixed stipends lost almost 60% of their real value during economic stress.

Strong Enforcement and Overcoming Regulatory Gaps: While India's Code on Social Security (2020) establishes a progressive legal paradigm by explicitly attributing and classifying gig and platform workers, implementation gaps and institutional challenges continue to stall social service delivery. Prioritization on operationalization of universal baselines for minimum wages, standardized working conditions and social security benefits. Regarding the educational outputs, the universities continue to produce graduates in fields where absorption capacity is limited, while sectors such as **digital services, advanced manufacturing, and health informatics remain underdeveloped**.

Interestingly, this is not purely a curriculum issue. It also reflects a **slower adaptation cycle between academic institutions and evolving labour market signals**. Some reforms have attempted to address this gap through entrepreneurship education and industrial attachments, yet the scale of mismatch still appears significant.

From a governance perspective, employment policy is not located in a single institutional space; it is dispersed across ministries, commissions, and subnational structures. This fragmentation can dilute accountability and create overlaps where programmes are duplicated without necessarily reinforcing each other. In some cases, **policy continuity is further disrupted by electoral cycles**, which introduce shifts in priorities rather than incremental consolidation. Overall, what becomes apparent is a layered problem rather than a singular failure. Youth unemployment in all three nations **sits at the intersection of demography, institutional capacity, education systems, and macroeconomic structure**. Any attempt to address it in isolation risks producing partial solutions that do not fully engage with the underlying complexity.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis on youth unemployment across India, South Africa, and Nigeria shows a stark contradiction: governments have scaled up intervention programs massively through enrolments and certifications but have failed to convert these tangible outcomes into a labour workforce. PMKVY, PYEI, and N-Power interventions of India, South Africa, and Nigeria, respectively, highlight the disintegration of supply-side skilling gaps with demand-side market signals, which consequently produce short-term solutions rather than long-term structural changes. Central to these, cross-cutting failures include the "transitional cliff" phenomenon, governance fragmentation, insufficient gig workers' protection, and persistent gender and digital divides. Ultimately, the IV Industrial Revolution necessitates emerging nations fundamentally reorient policy architecture toward demand-driven ecosystem development, private sector participation, and institutional accountability. Hence, learnings from India's evolving digital infrastructure, South Africa's cohesive governance, and Nigeria's techpreneurship offer an optimistic framework for reimagining youth employment policies in the Global South.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study mainly relied on secondary data sources, including Labour Force Reports, Statistical Annual Reports and existing body of literature, which may not reflect on-the-ground realities. Also, differences in institutional governance frameworks, economic systems and cultures across India, South Africa and Nigeria restrict direct comparison across three nations. Moreover, due to the presence of insufficient data, specifically in Nigeria, and the absence of accurate statistics related to the evolving gig economy across all three nations, the thoroughness of the study may be affected.

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