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ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA: THE IMPERATIVE FOR ENHANCED DIGITAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: *The study examined the role of entrepreneurship in youth empowerment in Nigeria, particularly focusing on the imperative for a well-developed digital skills development system. Available statistics show that Nigerian youths are faced with the huge problem of unemployment and poverty due to a lack of or inadequate employability skills, as the schools in the country are not imparting skills that are substantially relevant in the global labor market to enhance their graduates' global competitiveness. Consequently, out of the 160 million youth in the country, 53.4 percent are unemployed, representing more than half of the youth population. Thus, the main objective of the study is to demonstrate that provision of enhanced digital skills for youths will help address the unemployment (and poverty) challenge among youth in the country. This is because such digital skills have the potential of enhancing the ability of the youth to establish e-businesses. Obviously, the Nigerian state would be the major beneficiary if the youth digital skills development were given the attention it deserves. The study relied mainly on secondary data and analyzed that data using content analysis. The study revealed that youth unemployment is a product of mismatch in skills and overdependence on the oil sector, which creates very limited job opportunities. Previous efforts at youth empowerment have failed to produce the desired result because of policy disarticulation, which is not in consonance with the socio-political and environmental realities. Hence, it is the conclusion of this paper that increased youth population is a blessing to the country; however, to achieve the blessings higher youth population brings, deliberate and strategic efforts must be made to invest in youth digital skills development. The paper recommends, among other things, that investments in youth empowerment should be intentional and calculated towards reducing the huge youth unemployment, and efforts at job creation should be strategically directed towards youth digital skills development. This would enable massive youth participation in the global digital economy and create the much-needed jobs and alleviate poverty in the country.*

KEYWORDS: Digital skills, Empowerment, Entrepreneurship, Youth, Unemployment, Poverty.

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has a very huge youth population, with youths constituting approximately 70 percent of the nation's total population. The youth population, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), is about 160 million people out of the country's projected 220 million people. A significant number of the youth population, about 42 percent, is under 15 years old (NG Youth SDGs, 2024). This presents a fantastic opportunity for economic growth and development if properly harnessed.

However, youth in Nigeria are faced with severe unemployment challenges and poverty. Some estimates put youth unemployment at an alarmingly high rate of 53.4 percent in 2022, suggesting that over half of the youth population is unemployed, causing serious economic and social challenges in the polity. Some of the major factors contributing to youth unemployment, among others, include a mismatch between the skills taught in schools and those needed in the labor market, as well as overreliance on the oil sector, which does not provide ample employment opportunities for the youth (NBS, 2022).

Successive governments have made frantic efforts towards addressing the unemployment problem of the youth in particular, and the country at large, through various youth empowerment programs such as N-Power, YES, You-WIN, etc. (Kalagbor & Harry, 2018; Kalagbor & Harry, 2019). Nonetheless, these efforts have not yielded the desired result due to obvious policy disarticulation that is not in tandem with the socio-political and environmental realities; hence, youth unemployment and poverty remain endemic in the country. To achieve real and sustainable youth empowerment, government effort should be geared towards investing in education and training programs that focus on practical, digital and entrepreneurial skills that enhance the ability of the youth to establish and operate small- and medium-scale enterprises. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to demonstrate that provision of enhanced digital skills for youths will help address the unemployment (and poverty) challenge among youth in the country. The paper contends that the Nigerian State would be the major beneficiary if youth digital skills development is given the attention it deserves. No doubt, such skills will enhance the global competitiveness of the youths and increase their productivity as well as their contributions to national development.

Entrepreneurship

The concept of entrepreneurship has its roots in the work of Richard Cantillon, an Irish-French economist who is often credited with coining the term "entrepreneur" in his book "Essai sur la Nature du Commerce en Général" around 1730 (Thornton, 2019). Cantillon associated the term with the concept of undertaking or taking on risk (Thornton, 2019). According to Cantillon, an entrepreneur is someone who buys goods at a certain price to sell them at an uncertain price, thereby taking on the risk of making a profit or a loss (Newo et al., 2023). Cantillon's emphasis on entrepreneurship moved significantly from the public to the private sector, revolutionizing the meaning of the concept. Today, the philosophy and ideology that underscores the term has come to mean any form of self-employment, where the entrepreneur is seen as a risk taker who invests in goods or services whose final selling prices have not yet been determined (Newo et al., 2023). Entrepreneurship is about identifying a chance to bring something new and valuable into existence and then taking action on that chance, regardless of whether it means setting up a new business or organization (Nakajima & Sekiguchi, 2025). The main emphasis here is that any efforts at entrepreneurship involve creating value through innovative ideas, products, or

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services, which encompass various activities, including opportunity recognition, risk management, and resource allocation (Ogunsanya, 2021; Schlichte & Junge, 2024).

As more people seek self-employment, empowerment and business ownership, entrepreneurship becomes even more topical for fostering systemic change, inclusive growth and impacting the economy on a meaningful scale. Amini-Sedeh et al. (2022) assert that entrepreneurship is often associated with the ability to identify market gaps and capitalize on them by introducing new or improved products or services. They further opine that this process involves a combination of creativity, strategic planning, and leadership skills, enabling entrepreneurs to navigate through challenges and achieve their business objectives. Thijs and Alt (2022) noted that entrepreneurship is considered as when an individual or group of individuals possesses the foresight to identify opportunities for new products or processes and has the capability to transform these ideas into viable business ventures. These ventures not only serve as a means of personal empowerment for the individual(s) but also contribute significantly to socio-economic development within a specified geographical area. Therefore, the whole essence of entrepreneurship serves as an aid to economic growth, self-esteem, job creation, competitiveness, economic independence and the social welfare of any country, as well as political stability and national security.

Youth and Youth Empowerment

In contemporary times, youths have been recognized as the primary catalysts for economic growth and development. This is largely attributed to their innate curiosity, innovative spirit, and ability to acquire new skills, making youth empowerment a crucial element in today's economy. The significance of empowering youths is underscored by their potential to drive technological advancements, entrepreneurship, and social change. In this segment of the study, a clear understanding of the concepts of youth and youth empowerment is considered. The concept of youth is not a generally agreed-upon term, particularly with emphasis on the age range. Countries and organizations have different age ranges into which they categorize youth. While there are dichotomies in the age range of youth, a generally accepted meaning of youth is that youth is the transition from adolescence to being a young adult (Newo et al., 2023). Previous studies (Anthony & Ikechukwu, 2019; Odeh, 2022; Newo et al., 2023) considered youth as a timeframe between the end of childhood and the entry into the world of work. Newo et al. (2023) in particular assert that the period of youth is characterized by individuals being in school or having recently graduated, with access to professional and political rights. According to Newo et al. (2023), this stage is significant as it encompasses the transition from education to professional life and the acquisition of rights that enable young people to participate fully in society, especially in the area of entrepreneurship.

The works of Ayeni et al. (2021) and Osimen et al. (2025) have shown that the skills acquisition and opportunities available during youth have a profound impact on later life outcomes. For instance, access to quality skills and employment opportunities can significantly influence an individual's socio-economic status and overall well-being (Osimen et al., 2025). While the above studies have evidently revealed that skills acquisition and opportunities available during youth have a profound impact on later life outcomes, it is crucial to understand that being a youth is periodized to a specific age range. The United Nations defines 'youth' as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, a definition that has been adopted by many countries for statistical purposes (Odeh, 2022). However, the age range that constitutes 'youth' can vary significantly across different cultures and contexts. For example, the Nigeria National Policy

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2009 puts the age range of youth at 18 to 35 years. For the purpose of national service, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) puts the age range of youth at 18 and 30 years (Newo et al., 2023). In the United Kingdom, national policy sees youths as those in the age range of 18 and 19 (Newo et al., 2023). In Ghana, the youthful age range is between 18 and 40. In Botswana, the youthful age range is between 18 and 30. Finally, in The Gambia, youths are those between the ages of 17 and 35 (Newo et al., 2023). Regardless of the specific age bracket assigned to youths, the prevailing narrative surrounding youth emphasizes their vibrant energy and capacity for creative problem-solving (Benson, 2023; Corney et al., 2024) This portrayal underscores the potential of young people as a social cohort to drive positive change through their fresh perspectives and novel approaches (Benson, 2023; Corney et al., 2024). Based on these varying definitions, this study employs the definition offered in Ghana, which defined youths as individuals between 18 and 40 years. This age range is somewhat of a compromise between the different definitions, taking into account the lower and upper limits set by various countries. For example, the UK defines youth as those between 18 and 19, while others have higher upper limits. By setting the upper limit at 40, this definition acknowledges the transitional phase from adolescence to adulthood while also considering the diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts.

Despite the differences in age range, for youths to contribute meaningfully to economic advancement, they need to be empowered. With respect to Empowerment Theory, propounded by Julian Rappaport in 1987, empowerment is the processes that help individuals and communities to gain control over their lives and improve their well-being, as well as the general development of the society (Osimen et al., 2025). The National Youth Development Policy (2009) describes youth empowerment as a multifaceted process of human capacity development that encompasses attitudinal, structural, and cultural dimensions. This process helps facilitate the acquisition of capacity, authority, and agency among young people, enabling them to exercise autonomy in decision-making and enact transformative changes within their own lives and the society at large (Osimen et al., 2024). The concerns of youth empowerment involve the provision of relevant education and training to youths, enabling them to acquire the necessary skills needed for effective participation in the development of their communities (Nnaeto & Nwambuko, 2023). As society evolves into a more digitalized era, empowering youth becomes vital, particularly in the aspect of helping in developing not only the business capacity of the youths but also enhancing digital skill acquisition (Nnaeto & Nwambuko, 2023). This is why the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE) (2006–2015) defined youth empowerment as the engagement and value creation process that enables young men and women to decisively contribute to the economic, social, and cultural development of their families and nations, while also facilitating their own personal fulfillment (Virk et al., 2024; Osimen et al., 2025). What can be deduced from the above submissions is that empowering young people enables them to have meaningful contributions to the economy, particularly in the area of enhanced establishment of means of livelihood, which is needed to address the unemployment and poverty challenges of today.

The State of Youth Unemployment in Nigeria

Unemployment is one of the most devastating social and economic issues in every country. As a result, measures of utilization and non-utilization of labor are usually of considerable concern to researchers and policy makers. The stock of unemployment usually attracts smaller attention than the flow; that is, how the rate of unemployment is moving (Olusoji & Oderinde, 2022). It is not easy to measure the rate of unemployment because of the conceptual problem of defining

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who is employed, unemployed or underemployed (Ugbomhe & Omoaka, 2025). Essentially, unemployment refers to the forced idleness of wage earners who are able and willing to work but cannot find jobs (Onwuka & Udeze, 2023). When such a situation affects the youth demographics, it becomes youth unemployment. Although globally, the youth unemployment rate is often higher than the adult rate (Ugbomhe & Omoaka, 2025). However, there are country-to-country differences in youth unemployment. In Nigeria, the situation of youth unemployment is unprecedentedly alarming. The majority of Nigeria's youth, between the ages of 18 and 35, are less productive or involved in any type of creative or lucrative activity (Onwuka & Udeze, 2023).

Indeed, youths in Nigeria are confronted with a serious unemployment challenge. Some estimates put youth unemployment at an alarmingly high rate of 53.4 percent in 2022, indicating that over half of the youth population is unemployed, causing severe economic and social challenges in the polity. The major factors contributing to youth unemployment, among others, include a mismatch between the skills taught in schools and those needed in the labor market as well as overreliance on the oil sector, which does not provide ample employment opportunities for the youth (NBS, 2022). However, in what appeared like a miracle, reports in 2023 and 2024 put youth unemployment in the range of 5.13 percent to 8.4 percent, without any evidence of real jobs created. This was after rebasing and redefining the concept of unemployment by the government of the day to mean engaging in any venture for which money is earned for 2 hours per day per week rather than the previous view of 8 hours per day, 5 days per week.

The Group Chief Economist and Managing Director of Research and Trade Intelligence at Afreximbank, Dr. Yemi Kale, warned that rising youth unemployment in Nigeria is fast becoming a time bomb and should be considered a national security threat (Abimbola, 2025). However, as society transitions into a more digital economy, the importance of utilizing digital skills for establishing trustworthy and legitimate business opportunities emerges as a crucial solution to address youth unemployment in Nigeria. This shift underscores the necessity for young individuals to adapt to technological advancements and acquire relevant skills that can facilitate their entry into the workforce or enable them to create their own enterprises. The integration of digital competencies not only enhances employability but also empowers youths to innovate and contribute positively to the economy.

The Nature of Digital Skills in Nigeria

The contemporary digital revolution is rapidly transforming economies worldwide. It is seen as a catalyst for promoting economic growth and prosperity, as well as widespread improvements in living standards, which is being fueled by cutting-edge technologies (Langthaler et al., 2020). Individuals equipped with digital literacy and skills such as data analytics, digital marketing, technical prowess, social media savvy, adaptability, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, data science, leadership, financial management, and project management are undoubtedly the key drivers of this revolution (Nwokoro et al., 2025). They leverage contemporary digital technology to boost job security, productivity and employment opportunities (Nwokoro et al., 2025). Countries are increasingly focusing on fostering digital literacy and skills development through different entrepreneurial initiatives. Many of these countries, particularly those within the developed categories (including Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, among others), are recording significant success in digital skills development. For developing or underdeveloped categories especially Nigeria,

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Kenya, and Uganda, among others, challenges such as unreliable electricity, inadequate funding, limited internet access, inadequate digital infrastructure, a lack of qualified personnel, high maintenance costs and resistance to change remain major impediments hampering digital skills development and utilization in these countries (Ogunode & Ndayebom, 2023).

In Nigeria, the potential of contemporary digital technologies to drive economic development, social change and community empowerment is significant, yet in reality it remains uneven, as there is widespread illiteracy in digital skills among many youths in the urban and rural areas of the country (Bello & Ajao, 2024; Nwokoro et al., 2025). Various studies such as the works of Brotcorne (2020), Bello and Ajao (2024), and Nwokoro et al. (2025) in the field of digital skill enhancement consistently identify several efficacious approaches for fostering digital literacy. These include localized community training initiatives, structured formal education systems, and accessible online learning platforms. However, despite the proven efficacy of these methods, when applied to the context of Nigerian youth, a significant gap in digital proficiency persists, leading to detrimental effects on the overall digital competencies of young individuals within the nation (Bello & Ajao, 2024).

Although the importance of digital skills among the notable population in Nigeria is still recognized. For example, a study revealed that among eleven digital jobs available within the Nigerian economy, Point of Sales (POS) service, digital marketing, digital commerce and E-commerce are the most explored (Challenge Funds for Youth Employment, 2023). With the increasing demand for digital literacy in various sectors, Nigerians are acknowledging the need to acquire these skills (Bello & Ajao, 2024). Despite the growing recognition of digital skills as essential for driving development, many women and youth in Nigeria continue to face barriers to digital skill acquisition (Nwokoro et al., 2025). The International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2021) noted that there are huge gender disparities and socio-economic factors significantly hampering access to digital skills among young females in Nigeria. It was observed that the lack of targeted training programs and non-availability of material and financial resources exacerbate these problems (Smith, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

The Place of Digital Skills in Youth Empowerment

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) signifies a profound global transformation, fundamentally redefining technological advancement and, by extension, reshaping economic activities, diverse industries, and the fabric of everyday life (Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2025). This paradigm shift is primarily propelled by key technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), advanced robotics in industrial processes, and artificial intelligence (AI) (Benassi et al., 2021; Venturini, 2022). According to a report by the World Economic Forum (2020), 85 million jobs may be displaced by shifts in labor between sectors due to digitalization, while 97 million new roles may emerge that are more adapted to the new division of labor, driven by digital transformation (World Economic Forum, 2020). This shift underscores the necessity for young people to acquire relevant digital skills that align with future job demands. These skills are indispensable for empowering young people, equipping them to effectively navigate and thrive within an increasingly dynamic and technologically driven landscape. Critical digital proficiencies include foundational computer literacy, data analysis, coding, digital communication, and a comprehensive understanding of cybersecurity principles (Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2025).

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A study by Venturini (2022) revealed that digital skills have the potential to empower youth and women by providing access to education, economic opportunities, and social participation, thereby fostering a more digitally skilled workforce and entrepreneurial mindset. In Nigeria, there is an increase in the demand for digitally enabled jobs, particularly in sectors such as banking, health, education and fashion (Olomi, 2020). Another study by Challenge Funds for Youth Employment (2023) identified fourteen digital skills that have the potential to contribute to youth empowerment in Nigeria. Among these skills are graphics design, e-communication, leadership, typing, monitoring, UI/UX design, coding, artificial intelligence, data analysis, cloud computing, electronics, use of computers, AutoCAD, and photography. For example, foundational digital skills like typing, use of computers, and e-communication provide essential digital literacy, enabling access to online opportunities and remote work. Specialized technical skills, including coding, UI/UX design, artificial intelligence, data analysis, and cloud computing, are creating pathways into high-demand tech sectors, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship among young Nigerians. Creative skills such as graphics design and photography empower youth to establish freelance businesses and contribute significantly to the burgeoning gig economy. Furthermore, leadership and monitoring skills enhance project management and employability, while electronics and AutoCAD open doors in technical design and engineering.

However, the country's relatively weak economy hampers access to advanced technology, setting a disparity with more developed countries (Challenge Funds for Youth Employment, 2023). Scarce internet access and unreliable electricity, both in the rural and urban areas, pose formidable obstacles, while inadequate infrastructure impacts logistics, payment, and delivery (Oyewole and Ogundele, 2018 and Olomi, 2020). A deficiency in formal training for computer science and digital marketing necessitates additional education for aspiring workers (Challenge Funds for Youth Employment, 2023). Ultimately, there is a significant cultural barrier to entering the digitally enabled jobs market in Nigeria, which means that individuals must be able to navigate the complex cultural environment in order to be successful in these positions. Regulatory shortcomings hinder job growth, prompting the need for comprehensive policies and frameworks to foster digital entrepreneurship and gig economy expansion.

Efforts at Development of Digital Skills of Youth in Nigeria

As the digital revolution continues to impact global economies, countries, especially those in the developing world, are striving to equip their populations, particularly the youth, with essential digital skills to foster entrepreneurship. This initiative is crucial as it aligns with the growing demand for digital literacy in various sectors and aims to enhance economic opportunities for young individuals. For example, in Bangladesh, the government has formulated several policies, rules, and acts and undertaken various initiatives for facilitating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) among youths in the country (Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2025). In Nigeria, a range of recent policies that seek to address digital skill development, particularly for youths, include the National Policy on ICT in Education (NPICE) and the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (NDEPS) (Bello & Ajao, 2024).

The Federal Ministry of Communication, Innovation and Digital Economy was created to foster a knowledge-based economy and facilitate ICT as a key tool in the transformation agenda for Nigeria in the area of job creation, economic growth and transparency in governance. The key government agency for digital skills development is the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), established to design and implement policies and guidelines

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for driving ICT-related activities in the country. Indeed, the establishment of digital skills-enabled and/or related small and medium-scale enterprises is essential in tackling the youth unemployment menace and stimulating the drive for inclusive economic growth in the nation. In 2022, the agency organized a program called “the Digital Economy Employability Programme,” which was aimed at training over 200,000 Nigerians, mainly youths, from all over the country. However, the impact of this training is not visible due to the urban-biased nature of the agency’s activities. Most of its activities are in the urban areas to the neglect of the rural communities. Meanwhile, the rural areas accommodate more youths than the urban areas. Therefore, to make a tremendous impact on the country's digital skills development efforts/activities of government agencies, especially NITDA should be organized and/or established in the 774 local government areas across the country. NITDA activities in the areas of digital training, supply of computers to educational institutions, etc., are more in the news than real visible implementation in communities. Similarly, the Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy launched the DeepTech Ready Upskilling program to transform the country’s digital skills landscape. This program is encapsulated in the 3 Million Technical Talent (3MTT) initiative, which seeks to position Nigeria as a leading hub for digital skills and innovation within Africa and beyond. It is aimed at availing young Nigerians of the essential skills with a focus on data science and artificial intelligence (AI) (Tijani, 2025). According to the minister, the investments in the upskilling programs like DeepTech Ready are intended to establish a robust foundation for innovation and economic growth as well as ensure that Nigeria remains competitive in the global digital arena.

It is important to note that most successful digital skills development efforts were achieved by private initiatives across the country.

Indeed, the traditional apprenticeship model has been a cornerstone for knowledge transfer and skill development in Nigeria for generations, predating formal education systems (Azubuike et al., 2024). This system has been instrumental in passing down valuable knowledge, including "trading secrets" and business acumen, from experienced artisans to aspiring entrepreneurs (Ugwu and Mbah, 2022). In the digital age, this method has been adapted to equip Nigerians with relevant skills, making apprenticeships a significant contributor to the country's digital skills development landscape. Many Nigerian youths pursue digital apprenticeships under the guidance of experienced professionals within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) offering Information and Communication Technology (ICT) services (Azubuike et al., 2024). Be that as it may, the formal education system also plays a crucial role as one of the methods of developing digital skills of youths in Nigeria. Bello and Ajao (2024) noted that the formal education system in Nigeria offers opportunities for practical digital skills development beyond theoretical knowledge through initiatives like the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES), funded by the Industrial Training Fund (ITF). SIWES places students in relevant industry settings, including computer or IT-related fields, for practical training periods ranging from four to six months (Federal Ministry of Education & Industrial Training Fund, 2017). This exposure allows students to gain hands-on experience, apply theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios, and develop valuable workplace skills like teamwork and communication. By doing so, it bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, making youths more employable in the digital economy.

Despite these policy initiatives to develop digital skills of youths in Nigeria, implementation remains a challenge due to factors such as outdated curriculum and lack of trained educators (Bello & Ajao, 2024; Nwokoro et al., 2025). Additionally, the public sector's capacity to

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provide digital training is limited by inadequate infrastructure, including unreliable internet connectivity and insufficient digital tools. Socio-economic factors, such as poverty and inequality, also affect access to digital technologies, thereby hindering digital skills development among disadvantaged youth, with a negative effect on entrepreneurship development.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing it is clear that Nigeria has a huge youth population, which is approximately 70 percent of the total national population. These youths are faced with a massive unemployment challenge resulting from a mismatch of skills and reliance on the oil sector that creates very limited job opportunities. Therefore, entrepreneurship and youth empowerment through digital skills development are critical to absorb the teeming unemployed youths. To achieve this, IT infrastructure comprising data centers, broadband networks, hardware systems and digital platforms is essential for effective governance, education, commerce and citizens' engagement. Hence, the conclusion of this article is that an increased youth population is a blessing to the nation; however, to actualize this, deliberate and strategic efforts must be made to invest in youth digital skills development. This would enhance the massive participation of youths in the global digital economy, establish e-enterprises and create the much-needed jobs in the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

i. Efforts at job creation should be purposefully and strategically directed towards youth digital skills development and entrepreneurial capacity development.

ii. Investments in youth empowerment should be intentional and calculated towards reducing the huge youth unemployment rate to the barest minimum.

iii. Government agencies in digital skills development, especially the NITDA, should be organized and/or established in the 774 local government areas across the country so as to provide the much-needed digital training infrastructure in all the nooks and crannies of the country.

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