

Unconventional Paths

A Way Forward: Innate Paths, Local Power

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Executive Summary

Summary of Findings

Drawing on in-depth interviews with youth aged 18–35 from Cape Flats, the research finds that:

- Existing development and/or employment programme outreach models miss these youth by relying on assumptions about digital access, credentialed experience, or geographic mobility.
- Work is found and skills are developed outside formal pathways: through volunteering, family businesses, community engagement, and self-initiated short-term jobs.
- Informal work builds real employability by cultivating time management, responsibility, and confidence—traits essential for entry-level employment.
- Formal qualification filters block talent: Some youth succeed in applying for formal jobs without matric, indicating that credentials often act as barriers rather than indicators of ability.

These findings reframe deterred youth not as hard to reach, but as systematically excluded innovators — whose paths deserve recognition and reinforcement.

A Community-Led Spirit

This proposal is not a blueprint. Rather, it is a conversation starter grounded in deep respect for the ingenuity of youth and the ecosystem of support around them.



We recognize that local businesses, NGOs, and youth themselves are already building the solutions. Our role is to bring attention to these efforts, and offer a scaffolding framework to help them grow, connect, and gain recognition.

Audience

- Youth development practitioners and programme designers
- Local NGOs, faith-based and community-based organisations
- Small and micro-enterprises in townships and informal economies
- Municipal and provincial development departments
- National policymakers in education, employment, and youth affairs
- Inclusive hiring advocates and employment intermediaries (e.g. Harambee, SAYWA)

Solution Concept

Overview

This solution brief proposes a framework for strengthening and legitimising youth-led economic strategies already underway across the Cape Flats. It calls for partners to act as amplifiers.

Context and Political Fit

- Aligns with South Africa's National Youth Policy and the Presidential Employment Stimulus
- Complements Harambee's Pathway Management Network by bridging informal and hybrid experience streams
- Supports the National Development Plan 2030 goals of inclusive, youth-focused development

Stakeholders and Social Dimension

Primary beneficiaries: Youth without matric; local small businesses; community-based organisations

Secondary beneficiaries: Development practitioners seeking reach and impact; municipalities pursuing inclusive growth

Possible resistance: Formal employers relying on credential-based filters; systems requiring standard documentation

Engagement Strategy:

- Showcase value created by youth in informal and local settings
- Build relationships with local businesses as co-educators
- Work through trusted intermediaries (e.g., community churches, youth hubs)

Reimagined Outreach

- Analog-first, dignity-driven outreach in:
 - Spaza shops
 - Churches
 - Taxi ranks
 - Football fields
 - Word of mouth
- RLabs model: earned smartphone access as part of program graduation.
- Ensure subsidized data access.
- Principle: No youth left behind — in access, dignity, or design

Local Development

Build partnerships between:

- Development programmes (e.g., RLabs, Sustainability Institute)
- Local businesses (informal and small formal)

Create walking-distance opportunities for:

- Skills application
- Mini-projects
- Local enterprise support

Example: A youth in a barber shop develops a booking system; another in a bakery experiments with digital marketing. Development programmes certify these experiences as valid and portable skills.

Implementation Model

Lead Agencies: RLabs, Sustainability Institute, Bertha Centre, local youth NGOs.

Components:

- Local outreach network
- Youth-business matchmaker tool (analog and SMS)
- Micro-certification framework
- Embedded mentorship

Operational Feasibility and Financial Considerations

Recommended Adopters

- RLabs
- The Sustainability Institute
- Bertha Centre
- Local youth-oriented NGOs and social enterprises

Implementation Activities

- Launching analog and blended outreach models — posters, flyers, local radio, peer-referrals
- Using earned-access models for digital inclusion (e.g., phones after programme participation)
- Establishing walking-distance opportunity maps in each neighbourhood
- Partnering with local businesses to host micro-internships or collaborative projects
- Creating informal-to-formal certification models (e.g., co-signed work experience attestations)

Financial Needs

- Resources for programme coordination and outreach (print and community mobilizers)
- Subsidies for phone/data access
- Training support for local businesses
- Certification system development (with institutional credibility)

Potential Funding Sources

- National Youth Development Agency (NYDA)
- South Africa's Jobs Fund
- Corporate Social Investment (CSI) from telecoms and retail (e.g., MTN, Vodacom, Pick n Pay Foundation)
- Innovation and inclusion-oriented philanthropies (e.g., Allan Gray Orbis Foundation, Bertha Foundation, DGMT)



Key Evidence and Uncertainty

Evidence Base

- Seven in-depth interviews illustrating informal learning, local contribution, and employability without formal qualification
- Documented challenges in formal re-entry, digital access, and transport

Uncertainties

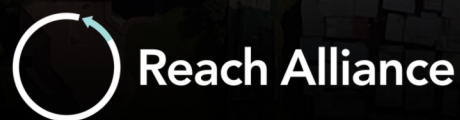
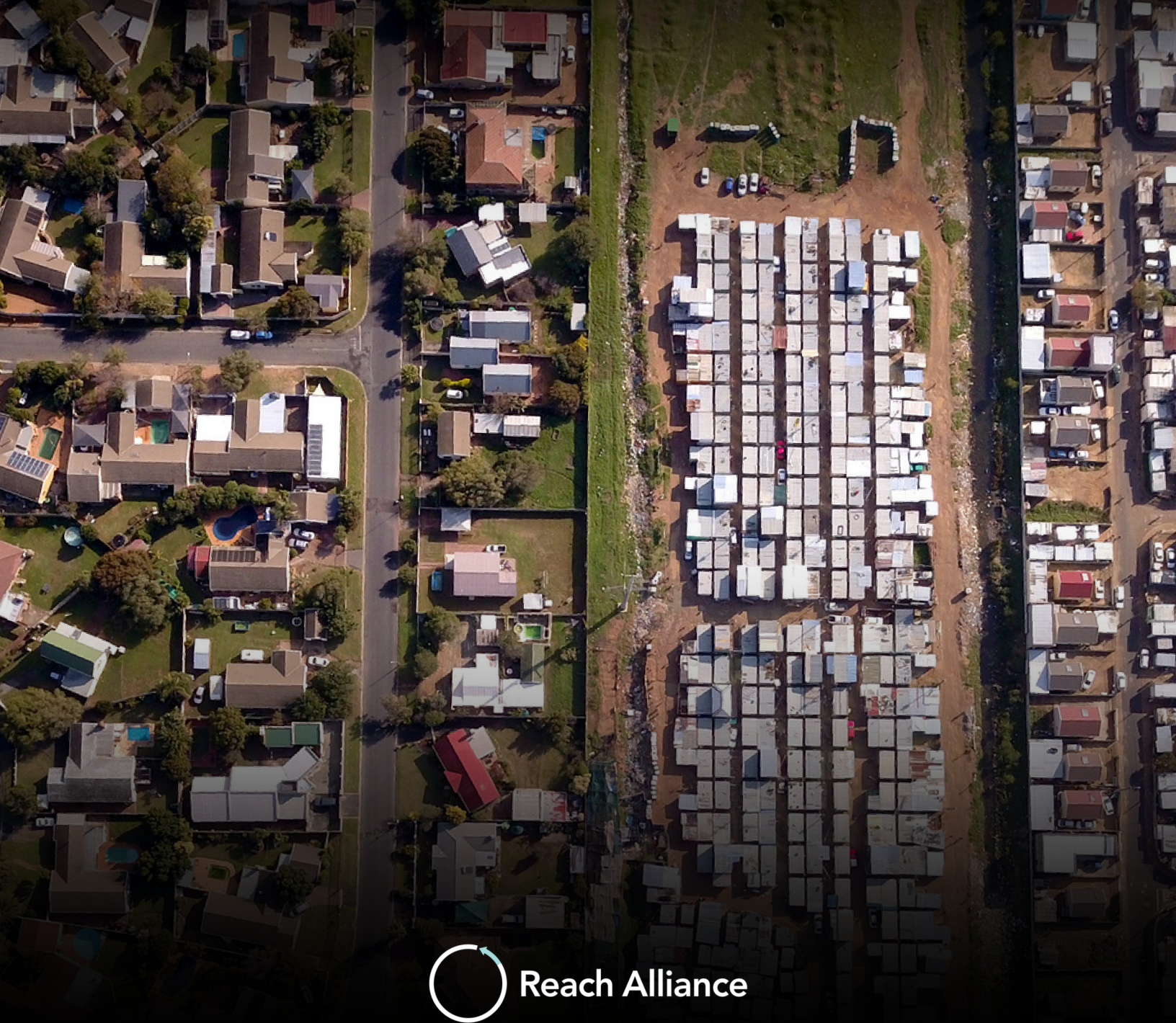
- Scalability: Will these models work across other regions or youth groups with different community dynamics?
- Sustainability: How stable are informal pathways over time, and how can they lead to lasting economic inclusion?
- Recognition: Can informal certification be legitimised in formal systems (employers, public service)?
- Business capacity: Will local businesses have time and interest to engage? What incentives are needed?

Contact

How can we support your way forward?

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This work builds on the 2024-25 Reach research report, "Unconventional Paths: Employment Strategies for Youth Deterred from Completing High School in South Africa," by Natasha Haffajee, Sikelelwe Mtshizana, Wenbo Zheng, Solange Rosa, and all the impactful partners, community members, and mentors involved in the research.

As part of the "Pathways from Evidence to Action" series, inspired by the African Center for Equitable Development (ACED), the Reach Alliance challenged researchers to identify connections, address gaps, and develop recommendations grounded in their findings. The series comprises thirteen briefing notes developing solutions for urgent climate, public health, and economic challenges and engages practitioners and policymakers in advancing pathways to implementation.

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