

EMPOWER PROGRAMME · SUDAN · OCTOBER 2026

In-Depth Gender-Sensitive Joint Labour Market Assessment

Danish Refugee Council and Mercy Corps with IMPACT Initiatives, funded by the European Union

2,814

youth surveyed

936

employers and MSMEs

66 · 54

key informant interviews · focus groups

18 in 9

localities in nine states, July–August 2026



HOW TO READ THESE FINDINGS

The youth survey was designed for locality-level estimates (90% confidence, $\pm 10\%$ margin of error), although the targets were not reached in Bahri and Khartoum localities. The employer survey, the key informant interviews and the focus groups are indicative. State and subgroup findings should be read with caution because geographic coverage and subgroup sample sizes vary. The pathway classifications are programme-oriented measures of relative viability, not estimates of sector size or numbers of jobs.

Eight things the assessment found

59%

of surveyed youth were not currently working or engaged in an income-generating activity

This is not an unemployment rate: it includes youth studying or not looking for work. Most of them (58%) had never had an income-generating activity: 70% of young women against 33% of young men.

35%

of youth employment is in trade, mainly petty trade

Work is informal and self-arranged: self-employment 47%, casual daily labour 26%. Petty trade is the option both young women (64%) and young men (65%) see as most suitable.

62% | 32%

of young women | young men earn under SDG 200,000 a month

Less than one-third of the 689,341 SDG needed for the Minimum Expenditure Basket.

4 sectors

with varying potential

Services: established base, most recent hiring (46%), access mostly for men. Trade: most accessible entry for self-employment, little wage-employment growth. Manufacturing: most MSMEs, strongest skilled demand, few youth and women. Agriculture: stable and labour-intensive, low youth participation.

44%

of employers struggle to recruit suitably skilled workers

Only a third of youth (32%) say their skills fully match available opportunities, and mismatches are sector-specific. Nepotism and favouritism (41%) are the most reported institutional barrier.

61%

of employers: finance is the main constraint on creating jobs

Followed by weak business growth (43%) and high labour costs (33%); taxation and fees (52%) are the leading regulatory barrier and transport costs constrain growth for 21%.

58%

of employers are willing to take part

in employment-creation interventions, despite the constraints they face.

2

limiting factors recur across all pathways

Access to finance and the availability of appropriately skilled workers, with the specific constraint varying by state.

Youth working, by gender

Share of surveyed youth; 41% overall



Lack of capital is the main challenge

Share of youth naming it, by employment status



What limits new vacancies

Share of employers, n=936



Report sections 1.2, 2.1 and 3.4; youth survey n=2,814, employer survey n=936.

Where the opportunities are

The employer and youth findings point to three distinct types of opportunity rather than one, each with its own barriers and its own response. Mobility, safety and care constraints cut across all three and decide whether young women can use any of them.

1 Placement into existing vacancies	2 Work-based learning	3 Self-employment support
42% · 41% of service and manufacturing employers expect to hire 810 unfilled positions reported, 309 of them in services 1.3 recruits per business in the past year <i>Best addressed through employer engagement, transparent recruitment and job matching, which 55% of employers say would help them.</i>	22% + 11% of employers host apprentices or trainees now (22%) or did previously (11%) 32% · 18% offer on-the-job training · formal apprenticeships 59% ask for stipend or wage support to host youth; 31% toolkits <i>Manufacturing (30% apprenticeships) and services (22%) are the most active.</i>	77% of youth prefer self-employment 64% of employers consider it the most realistic pathway Trade self-employment is practically the only entry route, as trade businesses rarely recruit <i>Best addressed through finance, business development services and market linkages.</i>

Sectoral pathways by state

Each state–sector pair was scored on employer indicators (stability and growth, demand, inclusion, terms of employment) and youth indicators (commitment, earnings, stability, retention, safety); thirteen pairs in five states are priority or promising (Figure 8).

	Agriculture	Manufacturing	Services	Trade
Gedaref	Employer-ready, youth uptake needed	Priority	Priority	Promising
River Nile	Priority	Promising	Promising	Promising
South Darfur	Priority	Priority	Promising	Youth-preferred, capacity-constrained
Kassala	Promising	Moderate	Promising	Moderate
North Kordofan	Youth-preferred, capacity-constrained	Fragile	Priority	Fragile
Khartoum	Fragile	Moderate	Fragile	Weak
White Nile	Moderate	Weak	Fragile	Weak
South Kordofan	Fragile	Fragile	Fragile	Fragile
Central Darfur	Weak	Weak	Employer-ready, youth uptake needed	Youth-preferred, capacity-constrained

Priority: strong on both sides. Promising: strong on one side, moderate on the other. Employer-ready / youth-preferred: strong on one side, weak on the other. Moderate, fragile and weak as defined in section 4.4. Some state–sector classifications rely on fewer than 30 respondents and should be read as indicative; see Annex I of the full report for the methodology.

Recommended focus for the thirteen priority and promising pathways

Gedaref · Manufacturing Prioritise technical and business skills for food processing, soap production, handicrafts, and blacksmithing, alongside access to equipment, finance, and markets.

Gedaref · Services Prioritise employer-side finance and business development support (working capital, business development services, and group/cooperative lending for women's personal-service and food-service micro-enterprises).

Gedaref · Trade Invest in sales/retail skills training matched to employer demand.

River Nile · Agriculture Strengthen agricultural production, value addition, and market linkages.

River Nile · Services Support demand-responsive training and enterprise development in health, ICT, technical, and personal services.

River Nile · Trade Consider sales/retail skills matched to employer demand alongside incentive mechanisms addressing labour-cost barriers to formal hiring.

River Nile · Manufacturing Consider a contract-structuring, retention incentive similar to Gedaref.

South Darfur · Agriculture Prioritise crop production and agricultural value-chain opportunities through improved access to inputs, technical skills, markets, storage, and enterprise support.

South Darfur · Manufacturing Support skills upgrading, product quality, and market access alongside small-enterprise development in handicrafts and food processing.

South Darfur · Services Prioritise skills-matching investment alongside continued attention to the finance barrier common across South Darfur's sectors.

Kassala · Agriculture Strengthen access to agricultural skills, inputs, and improved production practices, and build stronger market linkages, particularly in rainfed farming and livestock-related activities.

Kassala · Services Prioritise market-driven TVET and skills development combined with apprenticeships, job placement, and youth-led microenterprise support.

North Kordofan · Services Develop demand-responsive TVET and digital skills linked to health, construction, mechanics, electrical work, driving, and ICT.

Source: Table 4 of the report (first recommendation for each pair); the full recommendations and constraints are in Tables 4 and 5 of the report and in the state profiles.

What to do with it: eleven considerations for the EMPOWER partners

Developed jointly with the EMPOWER programme partners from the findings and their operational knowledge. Where they concern specific implementation modalities they should be tested and adapted locally rather than read as approaches evaluated by this assessment.

1 SELECTING ACTIVITIES

Select activities, not sectors, and select from the market backwards

Petty trade is the activity most youth identify as suitable (64% of young women, 65% of young men) and trade is the sector with the lowest employer absorption (0.6 recruits per business against 1.3 across the sample).

3 SUBSIDISED PLACEMENTS

Pilot time-bound subsidised placements or apprenticeships with willing employers

58% of employers would take part in a youth employment programme and 22% might; stipend or wage support is the condition they most often set (47%); their main reservation about young applicants is lack of experience (54%).

5 JOB MATCHING AND BDS

Provide the two functions the market is not providing: post-start support and locality-level matching

Only 3% of youth and 5% of employers have access to a job-matching service, and 11% of employers to business development services; 55% of employers say matching would help their business.

7 LABOUR-INTENSIVE PUBLIC WORKS

Design labour-intensive works as an asset programme

Roads to markets (48%), health facilities (39%) and market infrastructure (39%) are youth's priorities for economic recovery; 51% of employers would take part in public works.

9 INCLUSION

Tailor support to displaced people and persons with disabilities

One in seven surveyed youth (14%) report a functional difficulty; 24% of them work, against 44% of other youth. Youth with functional difficulties cite physical barriers (58%), communication challenges (34%) and stigma (33%); displaced and returnee youth attribute job loss to lost assets or capital (80%), mobility constraints (36%) and lost networks (29%). Work with representative organisations on accessible pathways and reasonable accommodations.

11 EMPLOYMENT QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Measure job quality, not only placement

Track income relative to the local expenditure basket; income stability, workplace safety and paid days at baseline, six and twelve months, with a non-participant sample.

2 START-UP AND EXPANSION GRANTS

Tailor productive-capital support to each pathway rather than a uniform grant package

Lack of capital is the primary barrier for 70% of youth and 81% of working youth; 74% of employers name lack of finance as a constraint on growth.

4 WORK-BASED LEARNING

Build dual apprenticeships where training capacity exists, and alternative delivery where it does not

Technical and vocational skills are the ones youth most want to acquire (54%); 22% of employers already take apprentices and 11% did so previously; training providers describe a system that has lost capacity since 2023.

6 INCLUSIVE FINANCIAL SERVICES

Do not assume conventional individual credit is the answer to the finance constraint

57% of youth use no financial service and 49% report irregular income; women in the focus groups identify savings groups as the instrument that works for them.

8 WOMEN'S ACCESS TO HIGHER-EARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Base women's pathways on demonstrated market opportunities, not traditionally female activities

Among petty traders, 70% of young women earn under SDG 200,000 a month against 29% of young men; adapt training location, timing, transport and care support.

10 CONTEXT-SPECIFIC, ADAPTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

Adapt implementation to each intervention area

Access, financial services, training capacity, market functionality and local partners differ; use flexible delivery and trusted local actors where the environment is constrained.

Who does what

Implementing partners and donors

Fund packages of interventions rather than components in isolation; allow programme resources to cover employer-side subsidies and materials for public training centres; expect wage-employment targets to remain modest and self-employment to account for the largest share of outcomes.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS

58% of employers would take part in a youth employment programme and 22% might; they ask for stipend or wage support (59%) and toolkits (31%). 77% of youth prefer self-employment; 64% of employers see it as the most realistic pathway.

State and locality authorities

A grace period on local administrative fees and licence costs for new youth enterprises; implementation of the existing 5% public-sector quota for persons with disabilities; labour offices' registers used as a channel for matching.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS

Taxation and fees are employers' main regulatory barrier (52%), then licensing requirements (27%). 88% of employers have no person with a disability on staff and 47% are not open to hiring them. No public employment service reaches young people: 3% of youth and 5% of employers have access to job matching.

Training and finance institutions

Short courses without age or formal-certificate barriers, linked to trade testing and certification; youth-oriented financial products using group liability or programme guarantee instead of conventional collateral and guardian approval.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS

27% of youth say a TVET centre is available locally; 20% trained in the past 18 months; cost (48%), distance (37%) and information (31%) are the barriers; certificates "guarantee attendance but not mastery". 57% of youth use no financial service; providers report no product designed for youth.

Where to find more. Full report: methodology, then findings sections 1 (youth labour supply), 2 (youth perspectives on barriers), 3 (employer demand) and 4 (enabling environment and sectoral pathways), the considerations and Annex I. State profiles: a two-page summary and the complete annex section for each of the nine states. All figures in this summary are taken directly from the report.

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