Jean Bosco Nsengiyumva , 25, starts his shifts a security guard at a non-Governmental Organization (NGO) branch in Kayonza District, Eastern Province just as the sun sets. His uniform, a little too big for him, reflects the aspirations he had when he first finished school with a diploma in tourism after two years of post-secondary studies.

Back then, he thought that with his education, he would find a stable, fulfilling job. Instead, he's guarding a building at night and watching his peers struggle in similar low wage, low skill jobs.

"I always thought after finishing my school, I would be set, I never thought I'd be doing this job. But the reality is, there are not many opportunities for people like me with just a school diploma," Nsengiyumva says.

Nsengiyumva's story is all too familiar to young people in the Eastern Province of Rwanda. Despite the country impressive strides in education, skills gap continues to leave many of its youth unemployed or underemployed.

According to a recent report, Rwanda's working-age population stands at approximately 8.2 million. Among these, around 4.37 million are active in the labor force, with 4.3 million employed and 869,000 unemployed. The unemployment rate is reported at 15.3 per cent, and youth unemployment remains significantly higher, at 18.8 per cent, however, a significant gender gap remains with male employment at 64.3% compared to 45.4% females.

Nsengiyumva isn't alone, the 2024 Labour Force Survey shows that while education levels in the country have been improving, Rwanda has made significant progress in enrolling youth in schools, many young people like Nsengiyumva aren't gaining the skills that match what employers are looking for.

The survey reveals that 47 per cent of the youth are in sectors that require little to no technical skills, such as security, retail and agriculture, which are characterized by low pay and job insecurity, Many young people are entering these fields because they don't have the specialized skills to pursue opportunities in services or technology, sectors that are growing rapidly in the country.

According to the Economic Policy Research Network, (EPRN), youth in Rwanda face significant challenges related to employment, skills development, and economic inclusion. For example, the 2024 Labour Force Survey shows that in Rwanda, the

ICT sector is growing at 15 per cent annually, still reports a 30 per cent skills shortage, pointing to a clear misalignment between education and labor market demands.

While Nsengiyumva struggles to secure a better job, Jeannette Uwamariya, a 24-year-old from Kabarondo sector, faces her own set of challenges. She spends her free time scrolling through job listings on her phone, searching for opportunities. Despite holding a degree in business administration, she has been job-hunting for over a year without success.

Uwamariya’s experience echoes the plight of thousands of Rwandan youth who, despite their formal education, grapple with unemployment in an evolving job market shaped by a persistent skills gap. This gap threatens to undermine Rwanda’s ambitious development goals.

During the agricultural season, Uwamariya who grows maize, sweet potatoes, and beans for sell, but she is acutely aware that her traditional farming methods fall short of modern techniques. “I’ve been farming since I was a child, but I know I need more knowledge to compete. I want to learn about irrigation and using better seeds, but there aren’t many programs in my area,” she explains.

Her story highlights a broader national issue: women in rural areas are disproportionately engaged in agriculture yet often lack access to training that could modernize their work. Although agriculture remains Rwanda’s largest employment sector, limited skills development leaves many young people like Uwamariya trapped in outdated methods, reducing productivity and slowing progress.

Share of workers in Agriculture sector

Source: NIRS, Labor Force Survey 2024 (Q3).

The bar graph displaying participation rates by gender and year (Q3) from 2019 to 2024. Each bar shows the percentages for women, men, and the tot

The 2024 (Q3) Labour Force l. Survey highlights that while agriculture employs 39.3 percent of Rwanda’s labor force, much of this work is informal and lacks modern techniques , which results in lower productivity and stagnant wages. The

agricultural sector, which has traditionally been the dominant employer, saw a decline in its share from 44 per cent in May 2023 to 39.3 per cent in May 2024.

Unemployment among the youth has been relatively higher according to the 2024 (Q3) survey than the rat e in adults. In comparison with 2023 and 2024, the rate decreased by 2.2 per cent among youths.

Source: NIRS, Labor Force Survey 2024 (Q3)

The survey also reveals a significant gender gap in labour force participation where 70.3 per cent of men are in the workforce compared to 55.6 per cent of women. This gap is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where cultural expectations and limited access to training often restrict women involvement in higher paying sectors.

Beatrice Uwera, a gender equality advocate, said that the barriers young women face in accessing training and formal employment are significant, But it’s essential that these barriers be addressed, as women are critical to the future of the economy.

Source: NIRS, Labour Force Survey 2024 (Q3).

The graph showing employment rates by gender (women, men, and total) in Rwanda from 2019 (Q3) to 2024 (Q3). It illustrates the steady rise in employment rates over the years, with men consistently having higher employment rates than women, though both have shown improvement, especially from 2021 onwards.

The Rwandan government, under the Second National Strategy for Transformation (NST2), has set an ambitious target to create 1.25 million new jobs by 2029—an average of 250,000 jobs annually. This initiative focuses on key sectors such as construction, ICT, and agriculture. NST2 aligns with Rwanda’s broader vision to reduce unemployment to 7% by 2035 and 5% by 2050, emphasizing inclusive economic growth and long-term sustainability.

Prime Minister Édouard Ngirente highlighted that achieving these job creation goals will require strategic interventions across all sectors of the economy, including services, agriculture, and industry. Expanding internships and skills development

opportunities, especially for Rwandan youth, will be a central focus.

Additionally, the government plans to intensify support for the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which are crucial for job creation. Ngirente underscored the importance of improving access to essential services such as training, advisory support, financing, and modern equipment for entrepreneurs and private businesses.

Key sectors targeted in this job creation drive include manufacturing, with a particular emphasis on agro-processing, ICT-driven small enterprises, cross-border services, and the arts and entertainment industry. This holistic approach aims to stimulate economic growth and create sustainable employment opportunities across diverse sectors.

Nsengiyumva for example is planning to enroll in a government supported program for construction workers, designed to give young people like him the skills needed to secure stable job.

“This program is my chance to move up. I plan to enroll and learn skills so that I can get myself hope in my future” Nsengiyumva noted.

Additionally, the 2024 (Q3) Labor Force Survey paints a stark picture of the challenges facing youth’s in Rwanda, particularly those in rural areas, however, initiatives like the NST2 provide hope that these issues can be addressed, With proper skills training and better access to formal job opportunities, Rwanda’s young people have the potential to break free from the cycle of underemployment and create a more prosperous future for themselves and the nation.

As Bosco puts it, “I never imagined that something like this would happen. But now, I’m hopeful, to learn and help me self-build my future not just survive it”

Graph: NST2 Employment and Skills Training Programs

Source: Created by Vital Karangwa