

## Regional workshop

# Strengthening apprenticeship systems in the informal economy in Africa to promote quality, innovation and transitions to formality

## Background

Apprenticeship in the informal economy – also referred to as traditional or informal apprenticeship – continues to train millions of young people in Africa. While in some countries it trains ten times the number of learners in formal skills development or TVET systems, and over 30 percent of 18-24 year-olds have been apprentices (Brooks et al. 2014), government funding very rarely reaches the actors of this self-governing system.

Informal apprenticeship has been the subject of national and international research for many years (Carton, 1980; Fluitman 1986; Fluitman 1992; Walther and Filipiak 2008; Haan 2006; Ahadzie 2009; ILO 2008; Nübler et al. 2009; ILO 2011; Akoojee et al. 2013; Adams et al. 2013; Hofmann and Okolo 2014, ADEA 2015; Nordman and Pasquier-Doumer 2012; OECD/ILO 2019; Arias Diaz et al. 2019; ILO 2020a; Werquin 2021; Palmer 2020, Avenyo 2021, Hofmann et al. 2022) yet empirical studies remain scarce and statistical information with a few notable exceptions insufficient. While there is an increasing body of literature on the informal economy, informal apprenticeship – despite its high and lasting prevalence – remains understudied.

Research has confirmed that apprenticeship is much more than an individual contract between a learner and a workplace trainer. It is a training system, embedded in local norms and traditions, utilizing enforcement mechanisms that involve kinship and the wider community. It ensures that skills for a trade or a profession are passed on from one generation to the next. In some contexts, like for the Igbo in Nigeria, the apprenticeship system is considered a “business incubator model” and at the core of the entrepreneurial spirit of its people (Ugabaya 2019, Ekekwe 2021).

Policymakers are increasingly reassessing the value and opportunities of apprenticeship systems in the informal economy and are including them in national skills development policies and strategies. The [African Union’s Continental Education Strategy for Africa](#) (African Union 2016), the [Continental Strategy for TVET to Foster Youth Employment](#) (African Union 2018), or national strategies such

as the [National Five Year Development Plan in Tanzania](#) (2016–2021) all recognize apprenticeship in the informal economy as a pathway for skills development and highlight the need to improve it. The [Abidijan Declaration](#) calls for “making decent work a reality for Africa’s youth, developing skills, technological pathways and productivity for a brighter future in Africa, transforming Africa’s informal and rural economy for decent work”.

Skills reforms in a number of African countries during the past decade have aimed to introduce dual training approaches, end of apprenticeship assessments, recognition of prior learning, incentives for master craftspersons to upskill, financial incentives and other measures to upgrade informal apprenticeships and strengthen their contribution to national skills development systems. International development partners like AFD, DANIDA, GIZ and KfW, LuxDev, SDC, or the World Bank have invested in different approaches to improve informal apprenticeships.

Benin has often been referred to as a country where reforms to the country’s autochthonous training system have successfully combined bottom-up and top-down approaches with strong engagement of associations of craftspersons, leading to two types of qualifications for apprentices graduating from apprenticeships in the informal economy: the CQM and the CQP to address the diverse needs and realities of apprenticeship and the economy in the country. The country is registering increasing numbers of apprentices under both systems, therefore providing a clear pathway for young people to learn the skills for an occupation under shared quality standards, leading to nationally recognized qualifications.

ADET as the country’s national agency for the development of technical education is coordinating the TVET sector in the country and acting as a role model for the region to demonstrate how apprenticeships in micro and small businesses can be fully integrated into national skills development systems. ADET coordinates this work in partnership with public and private structures, a network of training centers throughout the country, the Chamber of occupations in the crafts sector in Benin, and local professional crafts associations whose members offer apprenticeships. These reforms are undertaken to ensure that the crafts sector reaches its full potential to contribute to national economic development, fostering local skills ecosystems through strengthened apprenticeships.

A number of continental initiatives are also increasingly placing emphasis on the upgrading of informal apprenticeship: The [Association for the Development of Education in Africa \(ADEA\)](#) had broadened its definition of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) to technical and vocational skills development (TVSD) in 2012, to explicitly include the reality of informal apprenticeships. Its Triennale in October 2022 also touched upon the upgrading of informal apprenticeship systems as part of its conference track on TVSD. The [Skills for Africa Initiative](#) by AUDA-

NEPAD co-funded by Germany and the EU is developing guidance on formal and informal apprenticeships in Africa.

The ILO's [Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015](#) (No. 204) takes account of informal apprenticeships and recognizes their potential to support transitions to formality – provided countries improve them. In addition to being a leverage for transitions to formality for young people and enterprises, apprenticeships can be a source of innovation and entrepreneurship and support local economic and sector development. What is more, they can strengthen a country's TVET system by extending its outreach, labour market relevance, and improving its cost-effectiveness, given the important contribution micro- and small enterprises already play in training delivery.

The ILO has long been supporting knowledge generation and research at country level to understand how [informal apprenticeship](#) functions, and how its prevailing decent work deficits, such as poor working conditions and child labour, can be addressed. Knowledge exchange between countries has been supported through [technical workshops in 2007](#) in Geneva (ILO 2008) and [2013 in South Africa](#) (Akoojee et al. 2013), drawing on experiences from over twenty countries. A recent [working paper](#) compares findings of country level research. In 2022 and 2023, the International Labour Conference discusses and elaborates a new international labour standard on apprenticeship. The draft text incorporates recommendations to improve apprenticeship in the informal economy, recognizing its potential to support the skilling of millions of young people in developing countries.