



A Call to Action for Business

by Jane Nelson, Director of the Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government



Companies in sectors as diverse as hospitality, energy and mining are implementing their own youth-focused apprenticeship, recruitment, and mentoring programs. Global ICT corporations are supporting youth development and training, particularly in the area of technology and entrepreneurship skills. Manufacturers and retailers in apparel, food and beverages are developing partnerships to build their young workers' skills and provide them with access to finance and health care.

The business case for investment in youth is clear: the world's young people—more than 1 billion citizens—constitute a vast and growing pool of potential employees, customers, suppliers, and innovators for private-sector companies. However, in an era of greater competition, constrained public sector resources, high unemployment, growing inequality of opportunity, and a mismatch between the skills required to drive competitiveness and prosperity and those that are being developed through many education and training systems, the private sector must invest more directly and strategically to support youth development, employability and entrepreneurship. Companies can find new ways to create shared value by engaging youth as employees and entrepreneurs and by producing products and services that directly serve young people as consumers. Companies can also more effectively harness their philanthropic programs to support youth groups and youth-serving organizations.

There are growing business opportunities to engage with the youth agenda and increased acknowledgment of the rising risks for failing to do so. But what does this mean in practice? Although the specific risks, opportunities and needs will vary, all business leaders can and should ask themselves the following three sets of questions:

How can we include youth in our core business operations and value chains?

What does the youth demographic mean for our core business strategy and operations? Does it create risks and opportunities that we are failing to address? Are there ways we can more effectively manage our risks and create shared value by including young people directly in our own value chains as suppliers, employees, distributors or customers? What business strategies do we need to achieve this?

How can we support youth through philanthropy and community engagement?

Do our current philanthropic, community investment and employee engagement programs offer opportunities to initiate or expand our support for youth development, employment and enterprise? Are there ways that we can align these programs more strategically with our core business interests and capabilities? Can we use them to address the specific skills and workforce needs that our company faces, or to support greater youth entrepreneurship and leadership in communities where we operate?

How can we advocate for youth through public policy dialogue?

How can our senior executives engage more broadly in public policy debates and advocacy to help address systemic obstacles and policy challenges related to improving skills, employability and innovation for the 21st Century? How can we give voice to youth and to the issues that matter to them on national and global public policy agendas? How can our companies offer platforms to youth leaders so their voices are part of the dialogue?



More and more companies are asking these questions and implementing strategic initiatives to address them, either directly through their own business operations or working with youth-focused nonprofits or on a collective industry-wide basis.

Youth organizations around the world have made great progress over the past decade in raising awareness of the business case for involvement in youth development, employability and entrepreneurship initiatives. Leading companies have also demonstrated some of the practical ways they and others in the private sector can get engaged through core business operations and philanthropic and employee engagement programs. New multi-stakeholder and social media platforms, such as the World Economic Forum's Global Shapers program and G20's Youth Summits, are providing youth with a greater voice. Despite this progress, much more leadership is needed from the business community. Companies and corporate leaders must increase the scale and impact of their activities in all of these areas to put youth issues more firmly on global and corporate agendas and mobilize the necessary resources for addressing them. **Y**