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WHAT LIES BENEATH: UNDERSTANDING HOW POVERTY AFFECTS YOUNG PEOPLE – AND HOW THEY CAN FIND NEW HOPE

In South Africa in 2025, more than a third (35%) of young people aged 15 to 24 are not in employment, education, or any form of skills training. Among those aged 25 to 34, the figure rises to 44%, highlighting a deepening crisis in youth readiness for work and economic participation. Growing up — and remaining — trapped in poverty doesn't just mean going without material necessities. It also chips away at a person's self-esteem, sense of agency, social trust, and ultimately, hope. These less visible dimensions of poverty show that breaking the cycle isn't only about creating more jobs; it requires addressing deeper emotional and social impacts as well.

Recognising this aspect is key to unlocking new opportunities and someone's sense of hope. Because poverty is multidimensional, the solution should be too. DGMT believes that young people's struggles with poverty should be viewed and understood in a holistic manner. That's why we at DGMT have invested in an approach that connects young people to the right level of support, based on their needs — from having secure and decent income to being able to handle life in a resilient way.

This learning brief looks at the thinking behind the "FETCH" model and how it is put to use in a practical way to help young people from disadvantaged communities "fetch the future" they aspire to.

THE UNSEEN SIDES OF POVERTY

Labour statistics show that between April and June 2025, over a third (35%) of young people between 15 and 24 were not engaged in any form of skills training or learning opportunity to get them ready for a job, nor were they in employment if already old enough to work.¹ Among 25–34-year-olds this number climbs to 44%.² But there's more to it: figures from earlier in the year show that almost 60% of the 3.5 million people of working age who are so discouraged by unemployment that they've stopped looking for a job, are under 35.³

Without a job, or the opportunity to build skills to get ready for work, the prospect of getting a meaningful and sustainable income, and a better life, feels unattainable.

But poverty goes beyond a lack of material resources. For those who haven't experienced it, it can be hard to grasp just how deeply it affects every part of a person's life — especially for young people. Sometimes, the best way to convey its full weight is through a metaphor.

Think of young people as a car, and poverty as a road travelled. This road is in disrepair — full of potholes and strewn with debris. When the car runs low on fuel, we can top it up, and it keeps moving. But if we never fix the road, the engine takes hit after hit, wearing down with every bump and obstacle. Reaching any destination becomes a struggle — if the car makes it at all. A smooth road helps, but it's not enough. What's under the hood matters just as much.

Society often responds to young people in poverty by focusing on the visible issues only, like the fuel gauge, but forgets to look deeper to see how the poor road conditions have affected the engine's performance. Often the damage is not visible. This is why poverty is often described as having multiple, hidden dimensions. It affects far more than just material resources, reaching into parts of people's lives that aren't always visible from the outside. And it can't be meaningfully addressed by strategies that focus only on fixing material shortfalls.

Living in deprivation affects someone's sense of who they are, how they fit into society and how other people treat them — hidden dimensions that make it hard for someone not only to connect to earning opportunities but also to hold on to a

job. It's like expecting the car to keep running well without servicing its engine and fixing the damage from driving on a treacherous road.

When basic needs such as income, food security and health care are unmet, the impact doesn't stop there; these deprivations interact with and reinforce each other over time. For a young person, the struggle to afford transport can mean missing school, falling behind academically, and eventually feeling excluded from pathways that lead to employment. Each barrier compounds the next, creating a cycle that is difficult to break.

UNLOCKING HOPE

Conventional approaches to poverty reduction often focus on material upliftment: creating jobs, stimulating entrepreneurship, or increasing access to income. In other words, putting fuel in the tank and fixing the road. Although these are crucial components, they don't adequately deal with the problems hiding under the engine hood.

"Poverty kills dreams and cages the dreamers," said a respondent to a large multi-country study about people's inner experiences of poverty.⁴ Many people in these situations say that they feel disempowered because they don't have control over their circumstances and, in turn, must depend on what society offers them to get by. This leaves them with few options to take back control of their lives, reinforcing feelings of helplessness, dependence and insecurity. It breeds a vicious cycle of suffering that affects people's physical and mental health, often leaving them frustrated, angry, scared and anxious. These experiences can gradually chip away at a person's self-esteem, feeding their sense of helplessness and despair. When daily survival becomes an almost unbearable struggle, thinking of how to escape the situation can seem futile.

But it's not only people's internal feelings of despair that erode their resilience. The way society reacts to and treats people living in poverty can further crush someone's spirit. Often, formal institutions such as government bodies or even civil society organisations fail to adequately address the needs of people living in poverty, which can lead to an unfair distribution of resources and services. When this happens people can feel as if their voices aren't being heard, creating a sense of exclusion and powerlessness that feed an already overwhelming feeling of disempowerment.

¹ StatsSA. 2025. *Quarterly Labour Force Survey: Quarter 2*, 12 August. Available here: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02112ndQuarter2025.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ StatsSA. 2025. *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) – Q1:2025*, Presentation, 13 May. Available here: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/Presentation%2520QLFS%2520Q1%25202025.pdf>; Also see: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=18398>

⁴ Ibid., p.16–17.

Research increasingly shows that without addressing these hidden dimensions of poverty — the internalised sense of exclusion, low confidence, limited social networks and poor mental health that accompany material deprivation — sustainable change remains out of reach. To truly support young people to thrive, youth development programmes need to work with the whole person. That means recognising that emotional wellbeing, self-belief and social connection are not “extras” to economic empowerment; they are the foundation.

As a social worker in the study on people’s experiences of poverty said: “We shouldn’t ask what’s wrong with you. We should ask what happened to you.”

FETCH THE FUTURE

This shift in thinking about how to address the fallout of poverty is the foundation of FETCH’s approach. As part of DGMT’s goal to help all young people get on a pathway to productivity,⁵ FETCH (an incubated project of DGMT) aims to unlock the potential of youth and their communities to grab opportunities that can help them create the future they aspire to.⁶ It is built around recognising the many ways in which poverty impacts young people’s lives and uses a multidimensional, trauma-informed mentoring approach to help them break free and chart a different course for their lives.

The FETCH model recognises that many young people face multiple deprivations because they live in poverty. These show up in different ways, at different times and to different degrees; it’s not the same for everyone. Because the issues facing young people in poverty are complex and dynamic, they need an entire system of support — not just one intervention or approach.

“FETCH advocates for a scaffolded and responsive system of support that can meet the needs of young people where they’re at,” explains Simone Peinke, the FETCH project lead. This means offering different layers of support, which someone can tap into based on what they need in their life at that moment, with the FETCH team facilitating this access.

“Adolescence and up to young adulthood presents a second window of opportunity⁷ for setting someone up to thrive,” adds Anya Hollands, the marketing and communications lead for FETCH, and so it makes sense to focus on helping young people break out of the cycle of poverty to turn the tide of socio-economic development in South Africa.

FETCH’s scaffolded support model includes three tiers, each corresponding to the level of support a young person needs. For those needing intensive support, FETCH works with implementing partners to deliver multidimensional coaching. For those needing less intensive support, FETCH advocates for peer-group support sessions, and for the least intensive level of support, there is a digital offering.

Importantly, the FETCH model acknowledges that any effective support system needs to be embedded in a community of quality referral services. To this end, FETCH works with partners to map local services — making them visible for young people and helping local providers to build quality referral networks and youth-facing services.

Multidimensional coaching is an approach to upliftment that focuses on a mentor helping someone to find a solution to their situation themselves, rather than **telling** them what to do about it. The thinking is that because poverty affects many different parts of someone’s life experience, the solution has to do the same. In a nutshell, multidimensional coaching is a way to create social inclusion that is more collaborative and aims to build back people’s agency and autonomy.

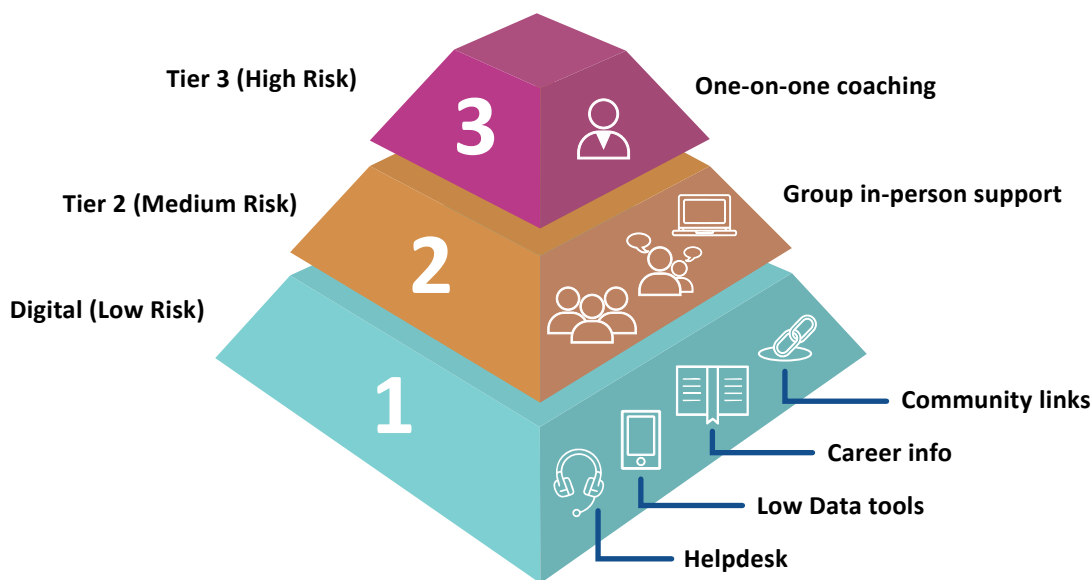


5 DGMT, Goal 3: All young people on pathways to productivity. Available here: <https://dgmt.co.za/our-approach/goal-3-enable-all-young-people-to-be-on-pathways-to-productivity/>

6 DGMT. *FETCH*. Available at: <https://dgmt.co.za/project/fetch/>

7 The first five years of someone’s life is seen as an important window of development, and therefore considerable attention and resources are given to early childhood development programmes. For example, see: <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/>

HOW FETCH HELPS YOUNG PEOPLE GRAB OPPORTUNITIES



The different tiers of support offered by FETCH look like this:

- A “light touch” offering is the most basic level. Here someone can talk to a “youth igniter” — a young person from the community, or a digital agent, who is tech savvy, a good communicator and has a go-getter attitude to help them kickstart their journey to finding a learning or earning opportunity. This can involve getting career information, being linked to job opportunities or services in the community, or just getting basic admin in place, such as setting up a professional email account, creating a CV, applying for a bank account or writing a cover letter for a job.
- Group sessions that offer in-person peer contact represent a medium level of support. Often many young people in a community are grappling with the same issue, says Hollands, so a coach can facilitate a group session where they can share their experiences and thoughts. This way young people support one another, and trust is built among the group. “There’s a lot of power in peer support. Young people often have the answers in them already; they just need a safe space to be heard and to feel that they can talk about these things,” she says.

- The most intensive level of support is one-on-one coaching. This involves someone working with a coach directly to help them set goals and map out a plan to move forward. Because these goals are set **with** the person needing support, rather than them being handed goals or steps to follow, progress feels more tangible and attainable. It’s not always easy to track success, notes Hollands, but evidence from some of the project’s implementing partners shows that there’s real improvement in someone’s mental wellbeing after just three coaching sessions. “It moves away from the thinking that a coaching model of support will be difficult to scale because it’s expensive and time consuming. Very often people need only two or three sessions to figure out a plan, and then they’re on their way.”

This pyramid of support must be anchored in a local ecosystem of services that practitioners can refer young people to. That’s why the FETCH team works closely with communities to build strong, trusted referral networks. The team creates digital maps of suitable services that are shared with community members, who then become custodians of the maps by establishing so-called youth collectives — a group of young people coming together to achieve common goals and share ideas.

“Building that network of services is not about creating a referral directory; it involves engaging with a network of people to shift how they’re responding to young people, to improve the level of service to them,” explains Peinke. Because young people are identifying their own challenges and helping to find solutions, they take the lead in maintaining the network — while local service providers are activated as partners in the response.

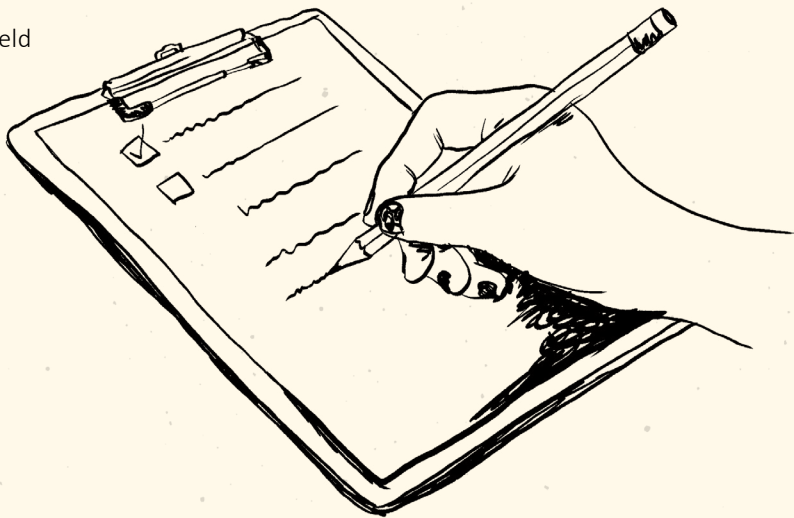
NUMBERS TO KNOW

Of the young people involved in FETCH programmes:

Indicators	Before coaching	After just three coaching sessions
On wellbeing	63% felt they lived a life of suffering	13% felt this way
	43% said they have no-one to talk to	0 (none) said the same
	15% showed possible symptoms of generalised anxiety disorder	4% showed these symptoms
On employability	41% had a CV	98% had a CV
	18% had been looking for learning or earning opportunities	53% were looking for learning or earning opportunities

Community strengthening:

- 193 services mapped across five communities
- Approximately 20 youth collectives held



SPARK TO A FLAME: THE ROLE OF YOUTH IGNITERS AND COACHES

Youth igniters and coaches are central to making the FETCH approach work. They have complementary roles, explains Bongiwé Gwala, FETCH's youth collective convenor in KwaXimba near Cato Ridge in KwaZulu-Natal.

"Youth igniters actively recruit young people for the programme. Once someone's signed up, they get assigned to a coach who works with them for a few sessions, getting to know them, learning where they're from and what their family background is, and discovering what they want to achieve and what might be holding them back," she explains. These questions help the young person and coach to set the first goal of their journey, after which the igniter steps in to help with the practical side of achieving that goal, whether it's creating a CV, applying for a tax number or choosing the right learning programme at a post-school institution.

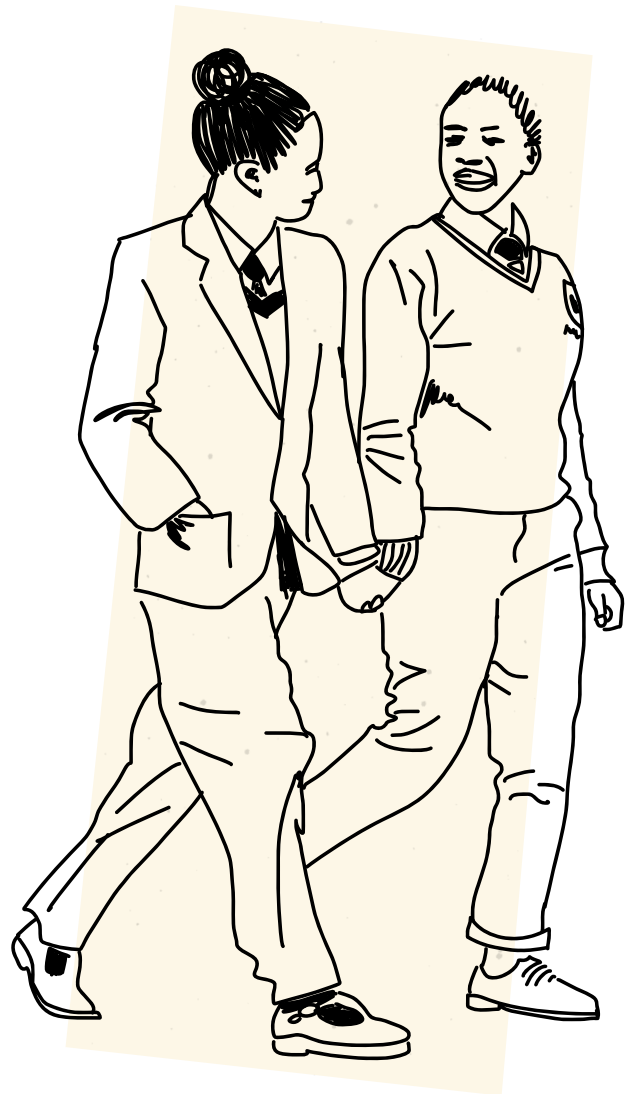
Through the programme in KwaXimba, around 15 young people found jobs in the area and seven more were accepted into a learnership run by the municipality. "It's the most rewarding thing to hear that someone who's come through our project has been linked with an opportunity," says Gwala.

Many young people were sceptical when FETCH first came to KwaXimba, unsure of what the programme was about, or how talking to someone about their problems could help them craft a future. But looking back, people who took part in the programme can recognise the value of the contact sessions, Gwala adds. "They come back and tell us things like: 'At first I didn't understand the reason for all these questions, but then after the first session I found out things about myself that I didn't know, and it was so nice that I wanted to come back once I saw how it helps to change my attitude.'"

STRENGTHENING SUPPORT SYSTEMS

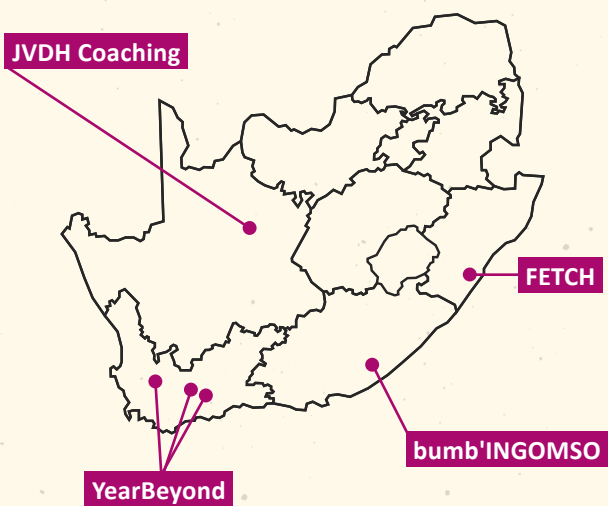
At its core, FETCH aims to strengthen the broader youth development sector — where many others are already active — by applying the insights gained from testing and refining the approach since 2020.

Originally, FETCH was part of the Basic Package of Support (BPS), a consortium project led by the Universities of Cape Town and Johannesburg. The BPS is unique in its collaborative



and evidence-based approach to tackling the crisis of young people who are not in employment, education or training. DGMT joined the group to help bring the concept to life, by designing and piloting the approach in different communities across South Africa. The collaboration was a success, and a proof-of-concept stage was reached. Since 2024, DGMT has continued to build on this work through its network of civil society partners, under the incubated FETCH project.

FETCH currently works with four implementing partners in six communities across South Africa, helping to strengthen existing programmes by mapping local services, engaging community members in providing holistic, quality, youth-friendly services, and providing individualised, multidimensional coaching. Because the real challenge often lies with implementation, FETCH provides partners with training support and ongoing quality assurance support. Practitioners are also invited to monthly role connect sessions, where they can learn from colleagues doing similar work in different contexts.



- **Bumb'INGOMSO** is a development project of the National Department of Health, funded by the German government and DGMT. It works with various organisations around Mdantsane near East London, and since 2022, FETCH has facilitated coaching support to about 250 young people. Approximately 100 young people have been connected to learning and earning opportunities as a result.
- **YearBeyond** is a national youth service partnership between the Western Cape government, donors and NGOs. It provides unemployed youth (18–25 years old) with work experience and a pathway to further training or work. FETCH contributes to a number of its programmes, including in Mbekweni near Paarl, Swellendam in the Overberg district, and Bonnievale in the Winelands district. FETCH has been helping YearBeyond deliver multidimensional coaching to young people since May 2025, to equip them with the emotional and psychological skills that can help them hold on to a job.
- FETCH has teamed up with DGMT's **Place-based Synergies team** for the past two years to help young people in Postmasburg in the Northern Cape and KwaXimba in KwaZulu-Natal to improve their emotional wellbeing and employability outcomes. In Postmasburg, JVDH Coaching works as the implementing partner, while FETCH itself is the implementer in KwaXimba. So far, 75 services have been mapped in these areas, 16 youth collectives have been set up and 70 young people were able to work directly with a wellbeing coach.

"I'm so excited for the future"

Siyamthanda Shezi, 20, volunteers at FETCH in KwaXimba. A year ago, he wasn't even aware of the project and how it could help young people like him.

He'd been applying for post-matric learning opportunities for a long time but was always rejected.

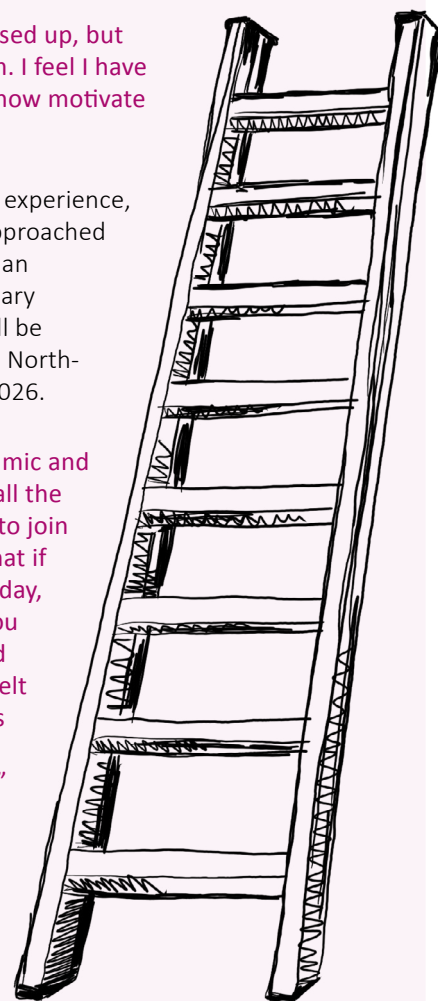
"I was starting to lose hope," he says. "But then early this year, one of my sisters learnt about FETCH and told me about it. So, I went there the next day, asked some questions and joined the sessions. I didn't miss a single day."

With the help of the FETCH team, he applied to universities and got accepted at the Tshwane University of Technology, where he will be studying public management next year.

"My life was so messed up, but now it's like a dream. I feel I have matured, and I can now motivate my friends too."

In fact, based on his experience, one of his friends approached FETCH for help with an application to a tertiary institution, and she'll be attending courses at North-West University in 2026.

"I wish I could get a mic and big speakers to tell all the youth in KwaXimba to join FETCH. I've learnt that if you can't make it today, maybe tomorrow you can. I was trying and trying before and I felt rejected many times but look at me now. Look at where I am."



KEY LESSONS

Supporting young people in building a positive future is a journey.

Here's what the FETCH team has learned along the way:

1 MEET YOUNG PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

A key lesson from FETCH's journey has been that support must begin with a deep understanding of local realities. In many under-resourced communities, digital access and data costs remain real barriers. This means that well-intentioned online tools can inadvertently exclude the very youth they aim to serve.

FETCH has learnt that success comes from co-creating solutions with young people and implementing partners, and adapting delivery models to fit local resources, cultures and capacities. By meeting people where they are, rather than expecting them to adapt to rigid systems, FETCH ensures its interventions are inclusive, practical and sustainable.

2 YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THE EXPERTS OF THEIR OWN LIVES

FETCH's approach is grounded in humility and partnership. Communities do not need rescuing; they need space, tools and trust to drive their own change. This means moving away from top-down models of development that prescribe how transformation should happen, and instead focusing on measuring outcomes that reflect lived realities.

FETCH has learnt that when young people and local organisations take ownership, change becomes not only more authentic but also more enduring. This lesson has shaped FETCH's emphasis on building capacity over dependency: ensuring that skills, systems and confidence remain in communities long after external projects conclude.

3 COACHING IS A CATALYST FOR PRACTICAL CHANGE

Through its multidimensional coaching model, FETCH has discovered that coaching is not a soft skill, but a bridge to tangible progress. Many young people begin by articulating their challenges, but effective coaching helps them move from reflection to action. Coaches help youth identify opportunities, map services and build step-by-step plans to move forward. This process transforms passive support into empowered problem-solving — a crucial distinction when addressing multidimensional poverty, where emotional wellbeing and access to opportunities are deeply intertwined.

4 YOUNG PEOPLE NEED ECOSYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Young people rarely face a single barrier to progress because the challenges they face are so interconnected. From lacking identification documents to navigating health, childcare or legal issues, the consequences of every obstacle can ripple across their lives. No single organisation can address all these needs alone.

FETCH has learnt that collaboration, not competition, is key. When local organisations work together to share data, learn from one another's successes and failures, and build trust, they are able to create a web of support that young people can seamlessly move through. This requires a shift in mindset: from service delivery to system stewardship, where each actor plays a part in shaping a young person's pathway out of poverty.

5 SUCCESS IS BUILT STEP BY STEP

Real, systemic change takes time — especially when starting from a foundation of disadvantage. FETCH has learnt to value incremental progress as the essential building blocks of transformation. Each small success — a young person showing up consistently, a local partner building trust, a new referral pathway opening — contributes to long-term outcomes like education access or employment. This mindset helps communities and teams stay motivated and grounded, recognising that cumulative, community-driven progress is the true measure of success.



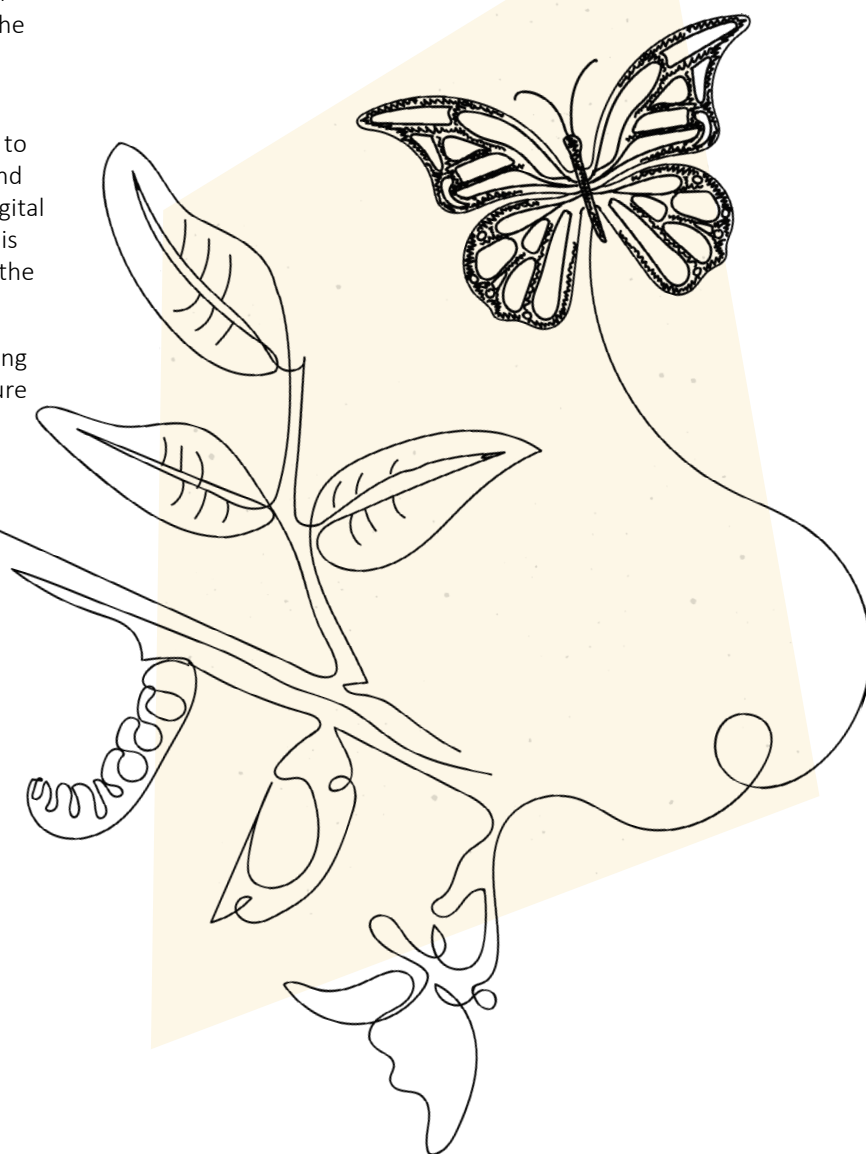
WHAT'S NEXT?

FETCH is preparing to scale, building on its lessons to expand impact sustainably. The team is working to strengthen local delivery through long-term partnerships and shared training infrastructure that empowers implementing partners to lead independently. Plans include securing multi-year funding to expand the model's footprint, deepening collaboration across the youth development ecosystem and adapting the multidimensional coaching model for use in schools.

A key focus will be launching FETCH Future, a zero-rated digital platform providing "light-touch" coaching support to offer young people tailored resources, guided referrals and self-directed wellbeing and career tools. By combining digital accessibility with community-embedded delivery, FETCH is positioning itself to reach more youth while maintaining the human connection at the heart of its work.

FETCH's next chapter is about systems change — equipping communities, partners and young people to create a future where opportunity and wellbeing are not privileges, but the norm.

This brief was written by Linda Pretorius and edited by Rabima Essop.



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