



CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

Zimbabwe Youth Innovation HackLab 2026

National Youth Empowerment Strategy 2026-2030 | National Youth Symposium

Zimbabwe | 2026

CATEGORY 1	CATEGORY 2	CATEGORY 3
Holistic Youth Health & Well-being	Youth Economic Empowerment	Scaling Green Jobs & Climate Resilience

Applications Open	25 September 2026
Closing Date	20 October 2026 Time: 23.59
Who Can Apply	Young people aged 18-35, registered in Zimbabwe
Award	USD 5,000 seed grant per category winner
Submit Applications	https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf6rTo4o-tTSB2fTAxEWb2SOsDHJTRWw6ULvB8WLqy_loFJw/viewform?usp=header
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1. INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Youth, in partnership with the UN Youth Group and its chairing agency UNFPA invites young people across Zimbabwe to submit innovation ideas for the Zimbabwe Youth Innovation HackLab 2026.

The HackLab is an innovation mobilisation programme that identifies, and seeds the best youth-led solutions to Zimbabwe's most pressing development challenges. It is not a competition in the conventional sense. It is a structured pathway from idea to funded enterprise. Young people who apply are applying to co-design, build, and own a real solution with real support behind it.

This call is anchored in the Zimbabwe National Youth Empowerment Strategy (NYES) 2026-2030, approved by Cabinet in August 2025, and in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The problem areas that this HackLab addresses were defined by young people, government representatives, UN agencies, and civil society during the HackLab Problem Definition Workshop held in July 2026. The problem trees developed at that workshop are the basis for this call.

2. WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

We are looking for original, practical, youth-led innovation ideas that directly address one of the three validated problem areas below. Your idea does not need to be fully developed. It needs to be grounded in a real problem, targeted at a specific root cause, and plausible to prototype within 12 months with seed support.

AN INNOVATION IS NOT	A research report, a study, or an advocacy campaign alone. An existing programme replicated without meaningful adaptation. A technology for its own sake with no clear user or social outcome. An idea that requires the government to act before young people can begin.
AN INNOVATION IS	A new product, service, platform, process, or business model that changes something in a measurable way. Something that a team of young people can build, test, and refine with users in their community. An idea with a clear link between what you are building and the root cause you are addressing. Scalable: if it works here, it could work elsewhere in Zimbabwe or across the region.

3. THE THREE HACKLAB CATEGORIES

Applications are accepted in one of three categories. Each category has a validated focal problem and a set of root causes identified through the Problem Definition Workshop. Your innovation must address at least one root cause within your chosen category.

1	CATEGORY 1: Holistic Youth Health and Well-being
FOCAL PROBLEM	<i>Young people in Zimbabwe face inequitable access to quality, affordable, youth-responsive and comprehensive health services, resulting in poor health and wellbeing outcomes.</i>

Validated Root Causes Your Innovation Should Address:

- Laws, policies, and governance barriers including legal and policy constraints and gaps in policy implementation that restrict young people's access to health services.
- Health financing challenges including high out-of-pocket costs for youth, limited domestic health financing models, and delayed disbursement of health funds.
- Health system and service delivery gaps including lack of youth-friendly health services, stock-outs, procurement delays, and weak resilience to shocks such as disease outbreaks and natural disasters.
- Social, cultural, and behavioural barriers including stigma, harmful cultural norms, gender inequality, and religious misconceptions that prevent young people from seeking health services.
- Information, education, and digital access gaps including limited comprehensive sexuality education, inaccessible health information for young people with disabilities, and digital exclusion.

Effects Your Innovation Should Help Reverse:

- Poor health and well-being outcomes: high maternal health risks, elevated rates of STIs and adolescent pregnancies, poor mental health, depression, substance abuse.
- Reduced human capital and socioeconomic outcomes: school dropout, youth unemployment, and poverty.
- Weakened health systems: reduced trust in public services, slower progress toward universal health coverage.

EXAMPLES OF ELIGIBLE INNOVATIONS	A digital platform providing confidential SRHR information and service referrals for young people in rural areas. A community-based youth health financing model or savings scheme targeting out-of-pocket barriers. A peer-to-peer mental health support network integrated with community health workers. A technology-enabled service continuity solution for youth-friendly clinics during supply disruptions.
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CATEGORY 2: Youth Economic Empowerment and Structural Formalisation

FOCAL PROBLEM

Limited economic opportunities are available to match the high youth demographic in Zimbabwe, resulting in exclusion, vulnerability, and systemic economic contraction.

Validated Root Causes Your Innovation Should Address:

- Skills misalignment with market needs: the gap between what young people are trained for and what the economy actually demands.
- The changing work environment including the impact of artificial intelligence and digitisation on job availability and the skills required to access emerging opportunities.
- Barriers to entry into formal employment and industry including structural discrimination, credential requirements that exclude informally skilled youth, and limited pathways from informal to formal economic participation.
- Lack of entrepreneurship support including restricted access to finance, limited mentorship, inadequate financial literacy training, and consequent low survival rates of youth-owned businesses.
- Behavioral and soft skills gaps including low resilience, and limited emotional intelligence, problem-solving capacity, and conflict management skills among young job seekers and entrepreneurs.

Effects Your Innovation Should Help Reverse:

- Individual-level harm: mental health deterioration, increased vulnerability to sexual exploitation.
- Community-level harm: high crime rates, rising prevalence of human trafficking, drug and substance abuse.
- System-level harm: economic contraction, low GDP, declining local production capacity.

EXAMPLES OF ELIGIBLE INNOVATIONS	A digital marketplace connecting informally skilled youth to verified buyers and formal sector pathways. A youth-led micro-enterprise incubation model integrating financial literacy, mentorship, and peer accountability. An AI-powered skills assessment and job-matching tool tailored to Zimbabwe's labour market. A structured apprenticeship platform linking tertiary institutions, youth, and SMEs.
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3**CATEGORY 3: Scaling Green Jobs and Climate Resilience**

FOCAL PROBLEM	<i>Young people in Zimbabwe lack access to decent and sustainable green jobs and are disproportionately affected by weak climate shock-resilience.</i>
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Validated Root Causes Your Innovation Should Address:

- Lack of information about green economy opportunities, green job pathways, and climate adaptation resources available to young people.
- Skills and education gaps in environmental sciences, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and other green economy sectors.
- Structural and policy barriers that prevent young people from accessing green economy markets, finance, or procurement opportunities.
- Inequality and exclusion including the disproportionate climate vulnerability of rural youth, young women, and youth with disabilities in green job markets.
- Limited access to finance, infrastructure, and technology needed to start, sustain, or scale green enterprises and climate adaptation initiatives.

Effects Your Innovation Should Help Reverse:

- High youth unemployment and underemployment in climate-relevant sectors.
- Increased youth vulnerability to climate-linked shocks including crop failures, floods, and economic displacement.
- Slower economic growth and reduced progress toward Zimbabwe's climate and development commitments.

EXAMPLES OF ELIGIBLE INNOVATIONS	A youth-led solar energy enterprise providing affordable energy solutions to rural households and small businesses. A climate-smart agriculture platform connecting young farmers to weather data, inputs, and markets. A green jobs skills training and placement programme targeting unemployed urban youth.
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A community climate resilience tool enabling youth to map, monitor, and respond to local climate risks.

4. WHO CAN APPLY

Applications are open to individuals and teams. Team applications are strongly encouraged. The eligibility criteria below apply to all applicants.

Criterion	Requirement
Age	All team members must be between 18 and 35 years old at the time of application.
Residency	All team members must be ordinarily resident in Zimbabwe.
Team Composition	Individuals may apply. Teams of 2-5 members are strongly encouraged. Teams must identify one Team Lead who will serve as the primary contact throughout the process.
Gender	Teams with at least 40% female membership are prioritised. All-female teams are equally eligible and encouraged.
Category	Each application must select one category only. Applications spanning multiple categories will not be considered.
Idea Stage	Ideas may be at concept, early prototype, or early pilot stage. Fully operational businesses are not eligible unless they are pivoting to address a root cause in a materially different way.
Affiliation	Applicants may be employed, students, or self-employed. Affiliation to a university, NGO, private company, or government body does not disqualify an applicant, provided the innovation idea is not proprietary to that institution.
Previous Awards	Applicants who have previously received a UNFPA or UN agency innovation award in Zimbabwe are not eligible to apply for the same idea. A new idea targeting a different root cause is eligible.

5. WHAT WINNERS RECEIVE

The HackLab is not a one-time prize. Winners enter a structured post-HackLab support programme spanning 12 months. Every winner and runner-up receives a package of support, not just a cash grant.

Support Type	What You Receive
Seed Grant	USD 5,000 per category winner, disbursed in milestone-based tranches.
Business Development	Financial literacy, business model refinement, and pitch coaching provided.
National Visibility	Feature in the National Youth Symposium pitching event. Media coverage through UN Youth Group Zimbabwe communications channels.
Regional Exposure	Strong performers may be nominated for UNFPA ESARO Incredible Stories campaign and ENGINE platform investor marketplace access.

6. SELECTION PROCESS AND TIMELINE

The selection process has five stages. Every stage is transparent. All applicants receive written feedback after the shortlisting stage.

Stage	Phase	What Happens	Timeline
01	Call Open	Applications submitted via https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf6rTo4o-fTSB2fTAxEWb2SOrsDHJTRWw6ULvB8WLqy_loFJw/viewform?usp=header	25 September
02	Technical Review	A multi-sector review panel scores all applications against the published judging criteria. Shortlist of finalists confirmed.	21-23 October
03	Notification	Finalists will be notified, invited to the National Youth Symposium and briefed on the Pitch.	23-24 October
04	Pitch at National Youth Symposium	Finalists pitch to a multi-sector judging panel at the National Youth Symposium 2026. Winners and runners-up were announced at the event.	National Youth Symposium, 4-5 November 2026

7. JUDGING CRITERIA

Applications and pitches are scored against six criteria totalling 100 points. The minimum threshold for shortlisting is 60 points. The minimum threshold for a seed grant award is 65 points.

Points	Criterion	What Judges Are Looking For
20 pts	Problem-Solution Fit	Does the innovation directly address a validated root cause from the Problem Definition Workshop? Is the link between the solution and the cause clear and specific?
20 pts	Innovation and Originality	Is this genuinely new in the Zimbabwean context? Does it go beyond what already exists? Is the approach creative and non-obvious?
20 pts	Feasibility and Viability	Can this be built and tested within 12 months with the seed grant? Is the business model financially realistic? Are costs and revenue streams clearly thought through?
15 pts	Youth Ownership and Leadership	Are young people the primary designers, operators, and owners of this solution? Are they beneficiaries and leaders, not just implementers of an adult-designed idea?
15 pts	Scalability and Impact Potential	If this works at pilot level, can it scale? Is there a pathway from community to district to national level? Is the potential impact on the root cause measurable?
10 pts	Intersectionality and Cross-Cutting Integration	Does the innovation apply an intersectional lens, considering factors such as gender equity, disability inclusion, diverse youth identities, and the leave-no-one-behind principle? Even

Category 2 and 3 innovations should demonstrate this awareness.

8. HOW TO APPLY

Applications are submitted via the online application form at the link below. Paper applications are available on request for applicants without reliable internet access. Contact the UNFPA Zimbabwe Country Office to request a paper form.

Step	Detail
Step 1: Read this call fully	Before applying, read the full call including the category problem statements, root causes, eligibility criteria, and judging criteria. Applications that do not engage with the root causes of their chosen category will not be shortlisted.
Step 2: Choose your category	Select one category: Category 1 (Youth Health), Category 2 (Economic Empowerment), or Category 3 (Green Jobs). You cannot apply to more than one category.
Step 3: Form your team (optional)	Teams of 2-5 are encouraged. Identify your Team Lead. All team members must be eligible as per Section 4.
Step 4: Complete the application form	Complete all sections of the application form at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf6rTo4o-tTSB2fTAxEWb2SOsRDHJTRWw6ULvB8WLqy_loFJw/viewform?usp=header . Required sections: team details, category selection, problem-solution summary (max 500 words), innovation description (max 800 words), root cause addressed, target users, 12-month implementation plan, budget estimate
Step 5: Submit before the deadline	Submit by 20 October at 23.59 CAT. Late submissions will not be considered. Email confirmation of receipt will be sent within 5 working days.

WHAT YOUR APPLICATION MUST INCLUDE	Team Lead name, contact details, age, and nationality. All team members' names, ages, and roles (if a team application). Category selected (one only). Problem-solution summary: in no more than 200 words, describe the specific root cause you are addressing and what your innovation does to address it. Innovation description: in no more than 500 words, describe how your solution works, who benefits, how it will be built, and how you know it will work. Target root cause: state explicitly which root cause from the category list your innovation addresses. 12-month implementation plan: key milestones, activities, and resources required. Budget estimate: how you would use the USD 5,000 seed grant if awarded. Intersectionality integration note: briefly describe how your innovation considers diverse youth identities, the leave-no-one-behind principle, gender equity, or disability inclusion, regardless of category.
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9. TERMS AND CONDITIONS

- Submission of an application constitutes acceptance of these terms.

- UNFPA Zimbabwe Country Office and the UN Youth Group Zimbabwe reserve the right to verify all information submitted in applications.
- Applicants may be contacted for clarification during the review process. Failure to respond within 5 working days may result in disqualification.
- Innovation ideas submitted remain the intellectual property of the applicant. The UN Youth Group does not claim ownership of submitted ideas.
- Winners are required to sign a seed grant agreement prior to receiving funds. The agreement sets out disbursement milestones, reporting requirements, and compliance obligations.
- The UN Youth Group reserves the right to withhold or reclaim seed grant funds if a winner fails to meet agreed milestones without cause or breaches the terms of the grant agreement.
- Photographs and materials submitted as part of the application may be used for communications and visibility purposes with the applicant's written consent.
- Decisions of the judging panel are final. The UN Youth Group will not enter into correspondence regarding individual application outcomes beyond the written feedback provided to non-shortlisted applicants.

10. CONTACT AND SUPPORT

If you have questions about this call, your eligibility, or the application process, contact the UNFPA Zimbabwe Country Office using the details below. Questions received more than 5 working days before the closing date will be answered.

UNFPA Zimbabwe CO Focal Point	Steady Makunike
Email	Makunike@unfpa.org
Office Address	Arundel Office Park, Block 7, Harare
Application Portal	https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf6rTo4o-tTSB2fTAxEWb2SOrsDHJTRWw6ULvB8WLqy_loEJw/viewform?usp=header