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## Exploring Youth Livelihood Challenges in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda

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### Abstract

*The persistence of youth challenges is a global concern, with unemployment biting the generation. In Uganda, the youth comprise the highest population (UBOS, 2014). The young ones are battling socio-economic challenges despite, natural resource availability, programmes from government, and NGOs. This study is questioning the continued misery of the youth in post conflict northern Uganda yet the country is endowed with natural resources and entrepreneurial interventions. The major objective of the study is to examine challenges facing youth and suggest best entrepreneurship measures to youth empowerment. The study employed explorative methods design to generate both qualitative data with a descriptive survey. The youth (18-30 years) as the primary respondents were randomly sampled. The findings portray that youth unemployment and poverty originated from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war which lasted for over 20 years and implanted dependence syndrome, laziness and negative attitudes towards agriculture and work. Limited entrepreneurial training, politicisation of livelihood programmes, inadequate capital and communal land, communication deficiencies were reported to be constraining factors to youth livelihood. The study therefore recommends youth entrepreneurship through intensive training, sensitisation, and parental inclusion in planning and implementation, access to market information and behavioural change for enhancing individual functioning.*

**Keywords:** *Livelihood challenges, entrepreneurial interventions, capitals, youth entrepreneurship, post conflict.*

### 1. Introduction

World over, youth unemployment is a worrying issue. In Uganda, youth livelihood challenges are confronting the country since youth are the majority (UBOS, 2014). This has led to adverse consequences on society such as social instability, frustration, depression and dependence on families. Governments issue strategic plans and devote increasing budgetary resources to youth employment and entrepreneurship programmes, sometimes complemented by bilateral and NGOs support (Fox, Senbet, & Simbanegavi, 2016). In Uganda, livelihood programmes have been designed and implemented to create a self-sustaining youth population. Northern Uganda, unlike other parts of Uganda had many initiatives intended to uplift the lives of youth. The reason is based on two decades of war that devastated the region. The interventions are available, land is abundant and fertile, and climate is favourable, yet the youth remain miserable.

Therefore, multiple reasons explain this situation, thus, this paper focuses on exploring socio-economic challenges, and propose way forward for improved livelihood.

Youth born and growing in conflict areas have limited access to opportunities and fail to build skills and assets, therefore, they are at a disadvantage to transit to adulthood. With increasing population and lack of access to quality education many youth entering labour market becomes a challenge (Fox et al., 2016). Although research shows that levels of education are rising in SSA, in northern Uganda the two decades of war affected children access to education and other human capital opportunities (Betancourt et al., 2012). This explains why there is high unemployment, and poverty among youth. For almost two decades (1986-2006), the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) a rebel group waged war on government thus, claiming lives of people, and paralysing economic and social fabrics of life. Scores of people lost their lives, property destroyed, economic activities retarded, poverty and human life suffering deepened (Otunnu, 2002). It is believed that over 12,000 people were killed, 20,000 children kidnapped as soldiers and slaves, spies and over 1.5million people displaced to Internally Displaced People's camps (Nampindo, Phillipps, & Plumptre, 2005). The youth were greatly affected by war (Reinke, 2016), as frontline soldiers, fighters, (Barber, 2009), sex slaves, cooks and porters. Several studies indicated that youth are a target during war and are greatly affected by war with unemployment, poverty, HIV/AIDS, psychological trauma, conscription into war as evidenced in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda, Yemen, Palestine and Colombia (Utas, 2003; Lai & Thyne, 2007; Leonardi, 2007; Bizouras & Birger, 2013; Cherewick et al., 2015). As guns go silent, the battle is on economic recovery and increasing productivity commenced. Studies indicated that many programmes were designed towards promoting youth livelihoods in post conflict, as evidenced in Sierra Leone (*National Youth Commission of Sierra Leone and UNDP, 2013*). UNDP initiated Youth Employment and Empowerment Programme (YEPP) in 2011 to provide business development and career advice to youth in Sierra Leone. The programme provided entrepreneurial skills in business such as turning industrial and domestic waste into energy-efficient cooking fuel, agribusiness, carpentry, and management skills to over 200 youth-led businesses.

Similarly, in Liberia, government and NGO-Landmine Action (LMA) ran intensive best practices agricultural training programmes for ex-combatants, affected rural youth and other high-risk youth. LMA gave the youth seven months' skills training, counselling, microcredit, business planning, agricultural productivity which gave them a peaceful, sustainable, and legal alternative to extract resources, easy reintegration and employment (Blattman & Annan, 2011). These activities were advanced by Youth Enterprise Development Programme (YEDP) and Youth Professional Training and Employment Project (YPTEP) in Liberia and Guinea-Bissau respectively (Izzi, 2013). All programmes recognise and empower youth as key stakeholders in socio-economic development

### 1.1 The youth in Ugandan context

Defining youth is quite debatable as scholars, organizations and countries tend to provide perspectives basing on culture, purpose and challenge at hand. UNESCO defines youth as transition from dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence and awareness of interdependence as member of the community. UNESCO further argues that the category youth is more fluid than fixed age groups, as it involves leaving compulsory education and finding first job. However, the definition ignores youth who are neither educated nor employed. United Nations view 'youth' as those persons between ages of 15 years to 24 years, without prejudice to other member states' definitions (*UN Youth*). African Youth Charter defines "youth" as every person between the ages of 15 years to 35 years. In Uganda, The National Youth Council defines 'Youth' as any person between ages of 18-30 years. The Uganda National Youth Policy 2001, youth are 'All persons; female or males aged 12 to 30 years undergoing a period of great emotional, physical and psychological changes that require societal support for a safe passage from adolescent to full adulthood' (*Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2001*). Additionally, definitions can be socially constructed in terms of societal expectations and responsibilities (*Society for International Development, 2015*). Some societies in Uganda define youth as anyone who is married or can manage a family regardless of age bracket. Therefore, there is no limitation on the understanding of the youth. The study adopted definition by National Youth Council, which focuses on 18-30 years. These youth are legible for government programmes and capacity to utilise available resources.

### 1.2 Youth livelihood in the northern Uganda

According to Sustainable Livelihood Approach, there are 'capitals' required for building capacities and assets of youth (Chambers & Conway, 1992). Livelihood is capabilities, assets and activities required as means of living (Chambers, 1992). Livelihood assets are categorised in human, social, financial, physical and natural capital meant to generate a decent living for the population. In northern Uganda, capitals include fertile soils and land, conducive weather, government and NGOs programmes. Such interventions are intended to afford youth with opportunity to be useful (Perold, Cloete, Papier, 2012). The resources can be utilized to alleviate suffering and social problems (Zimmerman, 2000). Basing on empowerment theory connecting youth with local resources, and sustainable skilling for positive change is fundamental. The presence of such capitals would spur youth to alleviate poverty and generally improve quality of life (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998). To this end, government and other organisations to capacitate youth have adopted a number of initiatives. These aim at building assets of youth and enhance capacity of communities to earn a living. To sum up, 'capitals' are available, surprisingly, youth continue to face misery, and it is not clear if youth have been fully linked to local resources. Therefore, the study examined socio-economic challenges facing youth amidst capitals in northern Uganda.

## 2. Methodology

The context of this research calls for appreciation for the significance of youth voices in understanding realities surrounding them. Therefore, study adopted an exploratory mixed methods design in a predominantly qualitative inquiry. The design provided the use of a wide range of qualitative methods to gather information about the subject matter under investigation (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). The survey provided numerical information to guide a more in-depth qualitative inquiry (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009), thus justifying this blended design. The target population were youth drawn from Youth Interest Groups (YIGs) benefiting from Youth Livelihood Programme (government funded). These youth were purposely selected because the programme targets youth (18-30 years) organised in enterprises. The sample size involved 225 youth randomly selected from over 102 youth groups from the district. The lists were obtained from the programme focal persons and simple random sampling applied to choose sizeable respondents. Each youth was given equal representation in the study. Those to participate in-depth study were selected through snowballing with networks created during the survey and guidance of youth leaders and youth focal persons. Therefore a total of thirteen focus discussions (with six to 10 members), twelve key informants, and six in-depth interviews comprised the sample till saturation. A total of eight projects were visited on sites to gather and verify survey and interview findings.

Data collection instruments include semi-structured questionnaire, interview guides and observation checklist. The questionnaires were administered by the research team directly to solicit for responses. Where some respondents declined face to face interaction, the questions were administered through telephone conversation. During interviews, interview guides were used to collect qualitative data from key informants. These included youth leaders, district YLP focal persons, opinion leaders and managers from local Nongovernmental Organisations, while focus discussions were carried out on youth income generating activities. Observation method provided a platform to note behaviours, practices and youth activities in their natural setting for example ways of life, shelter, economic activities and assertiveness. Survey data was analysed through simple statistics (percentages and frequencies) with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), while thematic content analysis guides qualitative data analysis with help of computer based qualitative data analysis ATLAS TI. All field notes, memos, pictorial were transcribed, cleaned, and coded. The codes were categorised to create subthemes which were later patterned for major themes. Analysis of qualitative data went throughout entire exercise as the interpretations were noted down during survey and qualitative exercises. The presentation of data is concurrent with qualitative findings supported by quantitative findings. Ethically the study was approved by Institutional Review Board of School of Social Sciences and forwarded to National Council for Science and Technology, and cleared under protocol SS5112. Individual consent was obtained, respect, anonymity and confidentiality of participants maintained throughout the study. Pseudo names and titles are used in this paper to

avoid exposing and damaging participants in the study. The emerging themes of economic vulnerabilities, socio-cultural factors, institutional barriers, and personal challenges are presented and discussed in the following sections.

### 3. Results

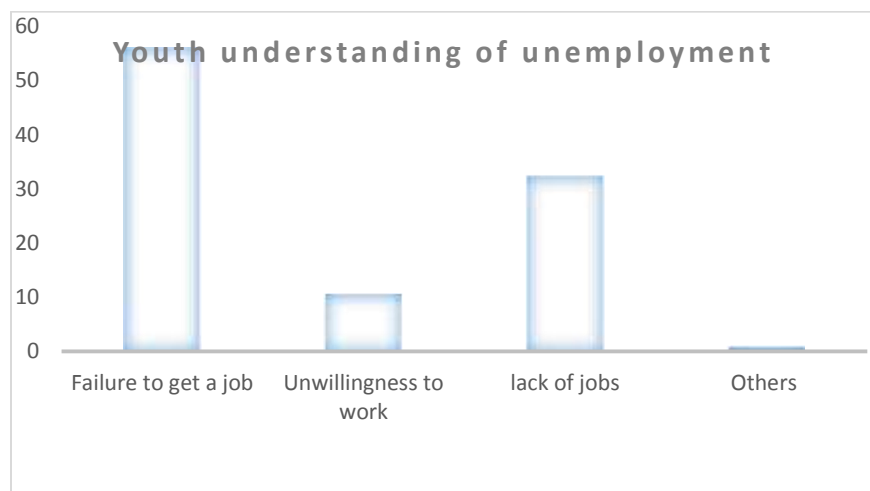
The key question in the study was on the challenges facing the youth in northern Uganda. Throughout the study, the participants expressed concepts in narratives that reflected social, economic, personal, and political and environment issues limiting youth potentials. The responses were coded, and categorised into sub-themes presented as economic vulnerabilities, institutional barriers, socio-cultural factors, personal challenges.

#### 3.1 Economic Vulnerabilities

This theme captures sentiments many participants expressed as they decried economic woes. Economic vulnerabilities is an umbrella term used to describe economic challenges to youth. The youth lamented that they are exposed to many economic risks related to production, distribution and consumption. The subthemes are: unemployment, market instabilities, and poverty as major risks limiting utilisation of available opportunities.

##### 3.1.1 Unemployment

Results indicate one hundred percent agreement that youth unemployment is a major challenge affecting youth. Slightly more than a half (56%) of youth view unemployment as failure to get a job, 32.4%, lack of jobs, 10.7%, and unwillingness to work at the current wage rate, while others are reported at 0.9%. These are presented in the figure below:



Those who were unemployed were asked about causes of unemployment, 46.9% cited low levels of education, 3.7% do not prefer to work, 21% discrimination in labour market, 28.4% cited limited start-up capital. Loss of skills and increased crime were the most reported consequences of unemployment with 36.4% and 31.7% respectively, with many females indicating domestic violence than males (13.5% and 7.4%).

### 3.1.2 Poverty

The respondents indicated poverty as a serious problem despite the presence of fertile land, and development initiatives. Majority (60.4%) understand poverty as lack of basic needs of life, while 31.6% (71) as simply being poor, 7.6%, as failure to enjoy better life, and the least number (0.4%) perceive poverty as normal. During interviews, the study observed hopelessness, loss of self-confidence, helplessness, anger as the youth were dressed in lags, smoking and drunk as early as 2.00pm. Many urban youth were sitting in betting centres, verandas of bars and shops while playing cards. One youth explained the worrying situation:

You see me here, sometimes I sleep hungry, I stay at my sister's place who is also very poor, our parents very poor too, and you can also see the kind of shirt I am putting on. At times I feel like committing suicide but I come here for comfort, when friends have some 'waragi (local gin),' I can taste and have sleep (FGD, Male participant).

Respondents attributed poverty to lack of access to resources such as land (41.8%), limited education (27.6%), and participation in decision-making (2.7%), limited skills (5.8%) and laziness (22.2%). Furthermore, results showed that many boys and girls have resorted to prostitution, crimes, and other unsocial behaviours to earn a living. Such behaviours have exposed many to HIV/AIDS, and consequently death.

### 3.1.3 Market Instabilities

The study findings show that youth engaging in agrienterprises feel pain from price fluctuations, very low prices and counterfeit inputs. This was mostly reported by youth dealing in crop production, produce buying and selling, and horticulture, and those operating small scale enterprises, face competition from foreign and large businesses.

There is no available market for our maize, soya beans and beans, we give it away at a very low price locally known as "lap lap (FGD Female Participant, 2019).

Therefore, youth are discouraged from participating in agriculture, since return on investment is very low. This renders them unemployed and very poor amidst the natural resources, and funding opportunities.

## 3.2 Socio-cultural Factors

The paper conceptualise socio-cultural factors as shocks/barriers stemming from cultural practices and responsibilities in a given society. Several respondents commented on cultural issues especially in rural areas. The emerging subthemes are cultural practices and parental responsibility.

### 3.2.1 Cultural Practices

With regard to this, results reveal that 66.2% regard while 33.8% disregarded cultural factors as an obstacle to youth empowerment. Majority (66.2%) of youth consider early marriage, restricted land ownership and social exclusion from opportunities as blockades to achieving

ambitions. Females claimed that they are not permitted to own land, participate in economic activities such as operating butchery, construction, boda boda (motorcycle taxi) and recreational ventures such as bars. Communal land ownership was reported a major obstacle to investment in agriculture, some family members inhibit individual youth from utilising the land. Female participants lamented that children produced while at parents' home, regarded as 'foreigners', discriminated and denied land ownership. Likewise, divorced ladies are denied land utilisation since they belonged to another family:

Once we leave our homes for marriage, we are not supposed to own land. Culture proposes that we should only own at our husbands' homes. In case of divorce, the children we produce are also denied land, they are treated as foreigners locally referred to as 'cal lutino luk' (FGD Female Participant, 2019).

This signifies that culture is deep rooted in resource ownership and utilisation. The male youth with entrepreneurial competences and investment prospects requiring land are prohibited and discouraged by cultural silo mentalities.

### 3.2.2 Parental responsibility

Findings discovered that parents are failing to play a leading role in enhancing youth empowerment. Some parents in rural areas fail to educate girl child, confine them with domestic duties in homes and gardens. Further, some cultures entertain early marriage, and shield defilement cases justifying that early marriage shape family lives. Similarly, children are left to attend night parties, own shelter (at 14 years) and enjoy discos in town and market days without parental control. One key informant had to explain:

The issue of defilement is very high, girls are defiled, they are married off when still young and parents conceal information. The conservative parents say that girls are supposed to get married when they are still young before they are spoilt.

Some rural families look at girl child education as a waste of time, implying low levels of education hence compromising the quality of life. Surprisingly, even those who are educated are discouraged and denied work opportunities by family and other community members (husbands). The acts violate the girls' right to education and better life and creates an economic imbalance between male and female in families (Gillies, 2008), parents and other family members are supposed to foster and transmit core values to the young ones. The consequent mistreatment retard social development not only on females but entire community.

## 3.3 Institutional Barriers

When discussing institutional challenges, key questions focused on organisational dysfunctionality in most programmes and their influence on youth socio-economic situations. The perceptions of the problem were organised into three common sub-themes:

### 3.3.1 Political Manipulation

The study explored the extent to which political environment limits youth potentials. Most of the participants recounted that political influence is among contemporary challenges to livelihood

interventions. The youth lament that politicians exploit, influence decisions and mislead youth during campaigns. The miscommunication creates confusion, mistrust and social exclusion from the programmes. Consequently, those who do not subscribe to particular political dance are barred from technical, material and financial assistances. Most importantly, programmes meant for youth are channelled to specific adults amidst youth political leadership. Participants overwhelmingly reported that they lack representation at different levels:

People who are elected represent their own interests and forget us. Even youth leaders we have do not come to seek for our own views and learn about challenges we face. Therefore, no one knows what we go through (FGD, female participant rural subcounty, 2019).

Such assertion implies that politics often gets into way of doing what is best for youth. Decisions are repeatedly made without clear understanding of youth needs. Lack of transparency and authentic climate disregards youth voices hence failure to addressing most intractable social problems (Collins & Clay, 2009). With limited youth involvement in policy decisions, a big hoopla is made since the end result of the policy is not addressed effectively.

### **3.3.2 Corruption**

Study established that corruption is a common characteristic in most government programmes. In this case, youth claim that most government resources and programmes are not equally distributed. In addition to embezzling funds, innovative youth are left out. Sometimes officials solicit for bribes before accessing any job or funding at district level (termed as ‘kickback’). The participants lamented that inability to raise bribes, excludes them opportunities, hence limiting their capacity.

### **3.3.3 Limited supportive infrastructure**

The findings revealed that youth who would have operated Income Generating Activities (IGAs) successfully could not access extension services, information, business incubation centres and market. It was observed that some villages are so remote without social services, impassable feed roads, and limited vocational centres. There were very few technical and professional persons within communities to offer technical support, mentorship and assist youth in best agricultural practices, and business management.

## **3.4 Personal Challenges**

The previous sections examined the revelations of socio-economic, institutional challenges depicting the discourse of the study as external factors. The respondents acknowledged youth behaviours are detrimental to personal growth and development. The responses ranged from attitude to lifestyle and attributing youths’ woes to personal responsibility.

### **3.4.1 Personal Attitude**

The study intended to establish how attitude limits one’s ability and potential to exploit the available opportunities. The findings revealed that

Most youth are arrogant, lazy, have ‘poverty of the mind’, fear risks, lack confidence, values and positivity. It was further reported that youth prefer to spend on alcohol, dancing, betting, and sexual behaviour than investment. Respondents stated disrespect, negativity towards work, moral degeneration and too much fascination for money.

Youth down there are very lazy, even if there is an activity, they cannot participate and they prefer watching movies, dancing at market places, (FGD, Female Participant).

To her youth are responsible for own suffering amidst available capitals. They prefer hand to mouth than saving. With above barriers, the presence of opportunities may not necessarily transform into improved livelihood.

#### 4. Discussion

Youth unemployment seems to be unending challenge to youth; it is particularly high in developing economies like Uganda (Betcherman, 2015). High and persistent levels of unemployment is of great concern, negative consequences extend to all youth (Caliendo & Schmidl, 2016). Though limited resources constrain youth to employment, in northern Uganda, land is available and fertile. What is key is that youth despise farming as a profession for villages, and dirty job. The presence of such natural resource has not contributed to improved livelihood. Programmes have been initiated for youth, but laziness, greed for quick cash; cultural factors hinder resource utilisation. Limited expertise, professional and personal immaturity are cited in literature as reasons limiting youth from jobs. Additionally, organisations are reluctant to invest resources in training since they can hire adult employees (Sara Elder, 2014; S Elder & Koné, 2014; Grant, 2012). Labour markets in developing countries often lack available jobs suited for entry-level skills, with most job postings requiring significant working experience (Baah-Boateng, 2016). Similar studies in Kenya indicated that unemployment is leading socio-economic issues in 21<sup>st</sup> century (Wanjohi, 2014). The youth point at unemployment as leading cause of poverty. However, poverty is a dynamic process of economic, social, political and cultural deprivation that affects the youth at individual and community levels often posing barriers to accessing basic necessities.

Economic, institutional and social barriers can as well accelerated poverty. In addition, the youth feel powerless, isolated, desperate, hopelessness, and socially excluded (Lubaale, 2019). The initiatives intended to link youth to local resources have failed to avert situation. With limited knowledge, skills, exposure and positivity the presence of resources may not yield positive results. The society stereotyping, labelling, and nicknaming discourages youth, and deny them opportunities. This incapacitation restricts not only access to income and basic needs but fundamental freedoms of choice, decision making and inability to lead the lives youth reason to value (Sen, 1987, 1992). Personal challenges such as lifestyle and personal attitude contribute greatly to youth misery. The mushrooming sports betting centres are theatres of misfortune and hinder productivity, Therefore, any case of emergencies such as COVID-19, they are left with nothing to survive on. All the above justifications concur with previous reports which portray northern Uganda as the most deprived region, with Acholi sub region as second poorest region in Uganda (Levine, Muwonge, & Batana, 2014).

## 5. Conclusions

This work has led us to conclude that among the most significant challenges highlighted by the study, unemployment and poverty take the lead. Youth livelihood continues to be a dilemma despite implementation of empowerment programmes and presence of capitals. Youth continue to experience chronic poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, illiteracy and drug and substance abuse. Though institutional, societal, structural and economic factors inhibit the youth from achieving inspirations, personal challenges stemming from laziness, negativity, alcoholism, and love for quick cash, stage an additional barrier. Experience shows high significance between personal attitudes and poverty levels among the youth. In as much as youth challenges are similar everywhere, youth in northern Uganda grew up in civil war, which presents a unique situation. Experiences from IDPs retard ones access to quality education, training, and mentorship. Therefore, the presence of physical, financial and natural capital may not cause any positive social change if these challenges are not tackled holistically. There is need for mind set change, distinct training, mentorship and special funding to building a strong and productive youthful generation. Organisations should focus on training before funding. This calls for concerted effort of parents, community, government, academia, third sectors in systematically analysing youth challenges, and design frameworks towards behavioural change and enhancing aspirations. Parental involvement in programme design and implementation is the key.

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