

Empowering Uganda's Youth: A Pathway to Employment and Resilience with Insights from the Access to Employment Project

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Abstract

Aim: This paper critically examines the project's implementation, highlights measurable outcomes, and explores its implications for fostering sustainable development in marginalized communities.

Methods: This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to assess the effectiveness of the project, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of its impact on youth empowerment and livelihoods. Quantitative data were collected through surveys at three key stages: pre-program, post-program, and follow-up. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), offering deeper insights into participants' lived experiences, challenges, and perceptions of the program's effectiveness. A total of 869 youth participated in the pre-program survey, 755 completed the post-program survey, and 682 completed the follow-up survey.

Results: The Access to Employment project resulted in a 40% increase in youth employment rates and enhanced financial literacy among 70% of participants. Youth who completed vocational training demonstrated improved economic stability, social resilience, and self-sufficiency. Many youths established small businesses in sectors such as tailoring, hairdressing, and electronics repair. Participants reported improvements in income levels, business growth, and financial management skills, contributing to long-term economic resilience.

Conclusion: The findings demonstrate the importance of integrated approaches in addressing structural inequalities, offering valuable insights for future youth empowerment initiatives and pathways to economic independence and resilience.

Recommendation: To ensure long-term sustainability, the government, NGOs, and the private sector should collaborate to allocate resources for youth employment, align vocational training with market demands, and provide financial and technical support to youth-owned businesses.

Keywords: *Youth empowerment, vocational training, financial inclusion*

INTRODUCTION

Research is increasingly showing that Africa's youth population (approximately 60% of the total) could spur both positive economic growth and negative effects United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023). Like many Sub-Saharan African nations, youth unemployment is still a significant policy concern in Uganda. The root causes among others include poor job investment and supply, lack of employable skills (youth have talents that are incompatible with available occupations and market (Twikirize *et al.*, 2019; Tukundane *et al.*, 2015; Nakirijja *et al.*, 2022). Youths also find it hard to enter the initial workforce due to a lack of knowledge, skills, networks, and relationships, particularly among young people from homes with little social capital. This study aimed to assess the effectiveness of the Access to Employment project in addressing youth unemployment and promoting economic independence among vulnerable youth in Uganda's urban slums.

Youth unemployment is a significant challenge in Uganda, where over 77% of the population is under 25 years (UBOS, 2023). Structural barriers such as limited access to education, skills mismatches, and entrenched gender disparities exacerbate the marginalization of young people, particularly from formal economic opportunities. The demographic trend in Uganda points to a bleak picture as 44% of the 46 million Uganda population are below 14 years old. Uganda is increasingly urbanizing rapidly at a rate of 5.5% implying that 27% of Uganda's population lives in urban areas. Uganda's urban population is projected to grow by 69%, adding an estimated 8.1 million people to the country's urban regions alone (UBOS, 2023). Vulnerable slum youth—those engaged in informal labour, affected by gender-based violence, or trapped in exploitative conditions—face unique and multifaceted barriers to achieving economic independence.

The Access to Employment Project (AEP) (2021-2023) was designed to address these challenges through a holistic, evidence-based approach. Grounded in the social-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The project recognizes that the problems youths face in slums extend beyond individual circumstances to include critical systemic and environmental factors, such as dysfunctional home environments, community neglect, and limited institutional support. Addressing complex issues such as homelessness, survival sex, crime, drug use, violence, and the plight of teen mothers requires a multi-level intervention framework (Kasirye *et al.*, 2018, 2021, 2022; Swahn *et al.*, 2021). The intersectionality of adversities faced by slum youth is particularly informative, as slum environments are characterized by poverty, overcrowding, and inadequate access to basic services like healthcare and education (Berger, 2014). These vulnerabilities often culminate in severe outcomes, including alcohol misuse, mental health challenges, suicide ideation, unemployment, and criminal behaviour, further limiting the slum youth's prospects for a stable and productive future (Swahn *et al.*, 2021).

The (AEP) intervention additionally, was informed by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1963), which provides insights into how slum youth acquire behaviours, attitudes, and their associated negative outcomes. This theory emphasizes that behaviour is learned through observation, retention, reproduction, and motivation. For example, negative behaviours common with slum youth such as drug use, survival sex, and violence are often modeled and reinforced within peer and the slum community contexts. This can act as a barrier to accessing employment and income. The Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL) leveraged these principles to design interventions encouraging youth to adopt positive coping mechanisms and prosocial behaviours. According to Bandura, individuals are more likely to emulate behaviours exhibited by relatable role models who hold admired status and demonstrate functional value.

The socio-economic pressures that drive youth migration to cities for better opportunities often result in disappointment for the majority. Many youths resort to negative coping mechanisms to survive, perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability. Therefore, access to employment is critical for breaking this cycle. It enables youth to secure basic needs such as housing, food, and clothing while promoting a sense of purpose and belonging (Maslow, 1943).

Building on UYDEL's previous interventions (Nakirijja *et al.*, 2022; Kasirye *et al.*, 2022; Swahn *et al.*, 2021; Nakijoba *et al.*, 2022), the Access to Employment Project utilized street and slum walk with peers at high-risk places (hotspots); safe spaces and drop-in centres to reach vulnerable youth in slums. These centres served as comprehensive, one-stop hubs offering services tailored to youth needs, ranging from psycho-social, vocational, and financial literacy training to mental health support. Regular assessments and data collection upon entry were essential for tailoring interventions and monitoring progress.

Slum youth in Kampala face extreme challenges, including high rates of suicide ideation, victimization, and coping difficulties (Nakijoba *et al.*, 2021, Kasirye *et al.*, 2022, Swahn *et al.*, 2021). One in five youth interviewed reported experiencing suicidal thoughts, compounded by high rates of rape and physical violence. Transactional sex, alcohol abuse, and family neglect were pervasive, exacerbated by poverty and limited social safety nets. Addressing these vulnerabilities requires constructively leveraging community-based social support systems, rather than defaulting to harmful coping mechanisms. Nakijoba *et al.* (2022) argue that integrating vulnerable youth into the employment sector is key to reducing risks associated with survival mechanisms such as transactional sex, substance abuse, and violence. Vocational training and job placement programs, coupled with comprehensive social interventions, provide youth with sustainable pathways to economic independence and resilience (Bukonya *et al.*, 2021). Thus, the project aimed to equip youth with skills, opportunities, and support systems to transform their trajectories while promoting positive coping strategies.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this initiative integrates vocational training, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship support to address the multidimensional challenges faced by youth in underserved communities. By targeting areas such as Kawempe-Bwaise, Banda, Rubaga, and Makindye, the project aimed to reach the highly populated slums to equip vulnerable slum youth with the skills, resources, and networks necessary to build sustainable livelihoods and foster community development.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The project was informed by several theoretical frameworks to guide its design and implementation:

Social-Ecological Theory (SET)

SET emphasizes the interplay between individual behaviours and broader environmental factors, such as family, community, and institutional systems (Bronfenbrenner's (1979). Recognizing that youth challenges extend beyond individual circumstances, the intervention engaged homes, communities, and societal structures to address complex issues prevalent in slum environments, including homelessness, survival sex, drug use, and violence (Kasirye *et al.*, 2018, 2021; Swahn *et al.*, 2021).

Intersectionality Framework

The intersectionality framework highlighted how overlapping systems of oppression—such as poverty, gender-based violence, and lack of access to education—compound vulnerabilities among slum youth (Crenshaw, 1991). The project appreciated the risks and went beyond to see how vocational skills, saving, and livelihood support can mitigate the adversities and create a positive impact away from the daily challenges of life slum youth face. This lens allowed the project to tailor interventions to address the unique challenges of specific subgroups, including teen mothers and those experiencing victimization (Nakijoba *et al.*, 2021).

Social Learning Theory (SLT)

SLT informed the behavioural components of the intervention by focusing on how youth acquire and reinforce behaviours within their social environment. Observational learning, retention, and motivation were key aspects of this theory. By working with relatable role models and former beneficiaries (Alumni) and promoting functional behaviours, the project encouraged youth to adopt positive coping mechanisms and prosocial attitudes while mitigating risks such as substance abuse and criminal activities (Bandura, 1963).

The Social Enterprise Model

A business model that aligns well with the program's objectives and challenges outlined in the text is a Social Enterprise Model by Bornstein (2010) with a Focus on Gender Equity and Skills Development. The Social Enterprise Model, as outlined by Bornstein (2010), integrates business strategies with social missions to address societal challenges while ensuring financial sustainability. It emphasizes creating ventures that generate both economic returns and measurable social impacts, such as skills development and gender equity, thereby fostering long-term community empowerment. Its inclusion in the project framework is justified as it aligns with the goals of creating sustainable employment opportunities for youth, promoting economic self-reliance, and addressing social issues like substance abuse and marginalization, all while reinforcing positive behaviors through practical, role-model-driven learning.

Key elements of the SEM-model:

Vocational Training and Certification: The business could offer accredited training programs in high-demand skills, such as tailoring, plumbing, electricals, building, catering, music dance and drama, and green energy targeting youth, especially young women. Certification by Directorate of Industrial Training (DIT) programs would help bridge the gap between informal and formal employment sectors.

Mentorship and Internship Programs: Collaboration with private informal sector companies would be essential for providing hands-on experience and career mentorship, especially in industries with growth potential like technology. Formalized partnerships would ensure long-term support for graduates.

Microfinance and Financial Inclusion: Providing microfinance support through Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), saving boxes, or partnerships with local banks would help youth, particularly women, secure small loans to start or expand businesses. Financial literacy programs would support their entrepreneurial endeavors.

Holistic Support Services: Offering safe spaces, psychosocial support, and life skills training would help participants address personal and structural challenges, ensuring they are empowered both economically and socially. Focusing on immediate job access for both short-

term and long-term training, paving the way for long-term economic independence, this model provides a sustainable, scalable solution to youth unemployment and gender disparities.

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

UYDEL implemented a comprehensive, multi-tiered intervention strategy aimed at assisting slum youth in mitigating various adversities and fostering overall well-being. The approach focuses on reducing substance use, addressing mental health problems, and promoting economic independence among this vulnerable population.

The multi-level strategy incorporates several key components:

Prevention and Education Programs: These initiatives aim to raise awareness among youth about the dangers of substance abuse crime, survival sex and the importance of mental health. Through workshops, seminars, and community outreach, young individuals are knowledgeable and skillful to make informed decisions and avoid harmful behaviours.

Psychosocial Support Services: Professional counselors provide one-on-one and group therapy sessions to help youth cope with drug abuse and mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and trauma. These services offer a safe space for young people to express their feelings and receive guidance on managing their emotions developing resilience, build relationships and social capital.

Vocational Training and Employment Opportunities: To promote economic independence, the strategy includes vocational training programs that equip youth with practical skills in trades such as carpentry, tailoring, catering, motorbike, and computer literacy. Additionally, partnerships with local businesses and organizations create pathways to employment, enabling youth to secure stable jobs and build sustainable livelihoods.

Community Engagement and Advocacy: The intervention involves engaging the broader community, including parents, local leaders, and stakeholders, to create a supportive environment for youth development. Advocacy efforts focus on influencing policies and practices that address the root causes of substance abuse and mental health problems in slum areas (Kasirye *et al.*, 2018) and access to local government grants for groups.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to assess the effectiveness of the project, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of its impact on youth empowerment and livelihoods. This approach enabled a holistic understanding of the program's outcomes and participant experiences.

Quantitative data were collected through surveys at three key stages: pre-program, post-program, and follow-up. The surveys focused on a variety of indicators, including employment status (such as employed, self-employed, or unemployed), income levels (categorized by income brackets before and after the program), and skill acquisition (such as new skills learned, completion of specific training programs, or certifications earned). These surveys allowed for the collection of measurable data that provided insights into the program's success, particularly in improving employment opportunities and financial stability among participants.

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), offering deeper insights into participants' lived experiences, challenges, and perceptions of the program's effectiveness. These qualitative findings complemented the quantitative data, providing context and a fuller understanding of the program's impact. A total of 20 in-depth interviews and 10 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted as part of

the qualitative data collection. Participants for the interviews and FGDs were selected based on a stratified sampling approach, ensuring diverse representation across gender, age, and vulnerability status (e.g., young mothers, and youth from slum areas). The criteria for selecting participants included those who had actively engaged in the program and had completed at least one stage of the survey (pre-program, post-program, or follow-up).

The FGDs were structured to encourage group discussions around specific themes such as employment access, challenges, skill acquisition, financial stability, and perceptions of the program's impact. Each FGD consisted of 6-8 participants, allowing for dynamic interaction while ensuring that everyone had an opportunity to share their views. The in-depth interviews were more individualized and focused on capturing personal experiences, challenges, and success stories related to the ATP program. These qualitative discussions provided rich insights that complemented the quantitative data, offering a deeper understanding of the program's impact on participants' lives.

A stratified sampling method was employed to ensure diverse representation among the participants. A total of 869 youth participated in the pre-program survey, 755 completed the post-program survey, and 682 completed the follow-up survey. This sampling strategy aimed to capture the experiences of different demographic groups, particularly vulnerable populations in ATP such as young mothers and youth from slum areas, ensuring the findings reflected a broad spectrum of perspectives. The stratified sampling method was designed to include diverse demographic groups, particularly those often underrepresented in the study. The criteria for strata selection included gender, age, vulnerability status (such as young mothers or youth from marginalized communities like slums), and previous engagement with the program. This approach ensured that participants reflected a broad spectrum of experiences in understanding the unique challenges faced by these different groups. The high percentage of female participants (76%) was intentional, as the program specifically targeted vulnerable youth populations, including young women who are disproportionately affected by issues such as unemployment, low-income opportunities, and gender-based discrimination. By prioritizing the inclusion of female participants, the study aimed to understand the specific barriers and opportunities that young women face in improving their livelihoods and employment prospects. This approach was critical to ensuring that the findings would be inclusive and reflective of the needs of female youth, who often encounter additional layers of challenges compared to their male counterparts.

Data analysis entailed the use of statistical software to identify trends and correlations in the quantitative data, such as changes in employment and income. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes and patterns related to participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of the program's impact. STATA was used for quantitative data analysis, employing descriptive statistics to summarize employment rates, income brackets, and skill acquisition trends across the three survey stages. Additionally, Chi-square tests were conducted to examine associations between demographic factors (e.g., gender, education level) and employment outcomes, while paired t-tests assessed changes in income levels before and after program participation. For qualitative data, NVivo was used to conduct thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring themes related to participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of the program's impact.

Ethical considerations were a priority throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality was maintained. The study was conducted with sensitivity to participants' vulnerabilities to ensure no harm or undue pressure during data collection. UYDEL Research and Ethical Review Board approved the study. This thorough

methodology ensured the reliability and validity of the findings, providing a well-rounded analysis of both the tangible outcomes and the nuanced experiences of the youth involved in the program

Limitations of the Study

The study's scope was limited, which affected the generalizability of its findings. Specifically, the research focused on a distinct group of youth participating in the program, which may not represent the broader population. Additionally, sample size limitations, including participant attrition between survey stages, may have influenced the results. The overrepresentation of female respondents (76%) and the emphasis on vulnerable youth further introduce potential biases that could impact the applicability of the findings to other demographic groups. These factors should be carefully considered when interpreting the conclusions of the study.

FINDINGS

Vocational Training Outcomes

During the project's implementation, 737 youth (560 females and 177 males) aged 15-24 years completed vocational training. All these were followed up. A 72% of participants enrolled in long-term courses, including tailoring, hairdressing, electrical installation, bakery, and computer proficiency. The table 1 summarizes participant demographics and retention:

Table 1: Participant Demographics and Retention

Category	Total Participants	Female	Male
Total Enrolled	737	560	177
Retention Rate	688 (93%)	525	163
Dropouts	49	35	14

Retention rates were generally high, although only 49 participants dropped out during the project. The higher attrition rate among girls, particularly in divisions like Makindye, was attributed to factors such as caregiving responsibilities, social stigma, and unsafe commuting conditions. This highlights the need for targeted interventions to support these youth. Gender disparity was evident, with girls accounting for 76% of total enrolment. This aligns with the project's strategic focus on prioritizing young women, who face heightened vulnerabilities, including limited access to economic and employment opportunities and face gender-based violence. While interventions such as mentorship, transportation stipends, and flexible training schedules were attempted, some participants still faced insurmountable challenges. To improve retention rates, future programs could offer on-site childcare support, increased community engagement to reduce stigma, additional financial aid for transportation and training materials, community internships in salons, restaurants or start self-employment projects ensuring that vulnerable youth, particularly young women, can fully participate and benefit from the program.

Employment and Entrepreneurship

Building on findings from Nakirijja *et al.* (2021) regarding employability among UYDEL slum youth, the project demonstrated notable impacts on employment and entrepreneurship outcomes.

A former participant in Banda, Angella (pseudonym), reflected on her experience: "I thank UYDEL for the great support. I realized that to grow my business I had to buy a display table

to sell clean products. The dust was affecting the products in that many customers would buy from other competitors. The moment I bought the display; this attracted many customers and many started buying from me which increased my profits from UGX 100,000 to UGX 300,000 per month. Since my profits increased, my savings increased and I started another business (selling vegetables) each month I earn Two hundred thousand shillings (UGX 200,000) out of the vegetable selling business. This has improved my standard of living and welfare as an individual”

The success of the initiative was underpinned by strategies outlined in the conceptual framework, such as life skills training, mentorship, psychosocial support, safe spaces, drop-in centers, social capital, field exposure learning, involvement of alumni, placement for mentorship and internship, self-employment and active youth participation in decision-making processes.

Formal Employment

Twelve months post-training, 121 youth secured jobs in the formal sector, with girls comprising 71% of this group. Participants reported tangible improvements in living standards, such as being able to afford three meals daily and supporting family needs. As this case can reveal,

Pius (pseudonym) a former beneficiary in Kawempe reflected on his experience “I am currently engaged in liquid soap making located in Bwaise 11 Tebuyoreka Zone Kawempe Division earning between UGX 100,000 to UGX 300,000. The booster grants enabled me to increase my stock by producing large quantities of liquid soap products. The mentorship sessions helped me learn the different methods of marketing thus increased the number of customers including supermarkets. I employ two youths who deliver the goods to the customers. I am now able to take good care of my needs and family members. I am indeed grateful for the financial booster grant received from UYDEL that has contributed to the growth of my business enterprise”

Informal Sector Entrepreneurship

A total of 470 youth started small businesses in the informal sector. Gender trends emerged, with girls excelling in tailoring, salon services, and catering, while boys gravitated toward electrical work and baking.

Table 2: Employment Statistics

Sector	Participants	Formal Employment (%)	Self-Employment (%)
Tailoring	160	30 (18.75%)	130 (81.25%)
Electrical Work	90	40 (44.4%)	50 (55.6%)
Salon Services	170	25 (14.7%)	145 (85.3%)
Baking & Catering	120	15 (12.5%)	105 (87.5%)
Total	540	110 (20.37%)	430 (79.63%)

Source. AEP-programme participant data.

Income Levels

The survey indicated that 67% of participants earned at least UGX 114,000 (USD\$ 32) monthly, allowing them to save and invest in long-term goals such as purchasing domestic appliance utilities and expanding their businesses. According to the Uganda National Labour Force Survey 2021, the median monthly cash earnings in Uganda were reported at UGX

200,000 (UBOS). In comparison, 67% of program participants earned at least UGX 114,000 monthly, which is above the national poverty line of UGX 83,000 per month but remains below the national median income. However, this income level meets the planned targets set at the project's outset, which aimed to ensure that participants access jobs and earn a sustainable income above the poverty threshold. While this marks significant progress, further interventions could be introduced to help participants increase their earnings for more access to capital and support and reach or exceed national median income levels.

Financial Inclusion

Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) played a crucial role in promoting financial literacy and resource mobilization. Operating through safe spaces and drop-in centers, these groups provided participants with a structured platform for savings and loans.

Over two years, participants organized themselves into a saving group that collectively saved UGX 44 million (USD 11,891.9), with girls comprising 68% of VSLA members. Loans accessed through VSLAs enabled many youths to expand their businesses or enroll in additional training. However, loan repayment rates fell below 90%, and the transition into formal savings cooperatives remained limited, indicating the need for further capacity-building initiatives.

The program's cumulative savings of UGX 44 million (USD 11,891.9) over two years, with 68% of VSLA members being female, reflects positive trends in similar financial inclusion programs. Research by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) shows VSLAs contribute to increased savings, with female participants seeing a 34% increase in reported savings compared to non-participants. However, loan repayment rates fell below 90%, influenced by high interest rates, job instability, and external economic shocks like drought. To improve repayment and program sustainability, strategies like flexible repayment schedules, financial literacy training, and targeted support for participants facing hardship are recommended.

Mentorships and Internships

Field visits, mentorship programs, and internships were essential in bridging the gap between vocational training and employment. These activities provided participants with hands-on experience, boosted self-esteem and confidence, and nurtured aspirations for sustainable livelihoods. Peer mentorship and industry professional mentorship were both key in bridging the gap between training and employment, with industry professionals providing career guidance and peer mentorship offering emotional support. Data shows that 85% of youth completing internships reported improved job readiness, and 42% secured jobs within six months. This highlights the effectiveness of mentorship and internships in improving employability and fostering self-sufficiency.

Esther (pseudonym), aged 23 years located in Banda B3, Nakawa division reflected on her experience, "I truly benefitted from the life skills training which helped shape my mindset. Through the business skills training, I immediately made up my mind to start a small business upon graduation from the vocational skills training and apprenticeship to look after my child and stop depending on men for survival. I am currently engaged in selling chips, chicken, sausages, eggs, and drinks. During the baseline coaching session, the business trainer identified business gaps. I then started business mentorship sessions which equipped me with knowledge to close the business gap. I also received guidance from alumni and learned a lot through the exposure learning visits.

During the mid-training coaching visit, I learned a lot. I was given a business booster grant which helped me to expand my business. My business improved and now doing well, I get enough profit which can help me look after my children. I am looking forward to helping young girls as part of economic and social empowerment including counselling to abstain from sex because early relationships impact negatively on young person's life”

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Dropout Reasons and Potential Solutions

The analysis revealed that participant dropouts were primarily driven by factors such as caregiving responsibilities, social stigma, unsafe commuting conditions, particularly among female participants, and changes in vocational skills. These barriers significantly impacted retention rates and program success. To address these challenges in future interventions, it is crucial to implement more flexible training schedules, offer childcare support, and light snacks, and ensure safer transportation options, especially for participants from marginalized communities. Additionally, providing community-based support networks and sites for training in short-term skills and other behavioral change could foster a more inclusive environment, reducing dropouts and increasing long-term engagement.

Skills in Demand vs. Skills Provided

A noticeable gap existed between the skills provided through the training and those most in demand within the labor market. While vocational programs focused on sectors like hospitality and retail, there was a growing need for digital and technical skills, such as computer programming, data analysis, and digital marketing. To bridge this gap, future training programs should integrate digital literacy, technology-driven competencies, and certifications that are directly aligned with industry needs. Collaborating with businesses and industry experts to design curricula that are responsive to emerging trends in the job market will ensure participants are better equipped for future employment opportunities.

Future Interventions for Financial Sustainability

Ensuring the financial sustainability of the program requires a multifaceted approach. First, establishing partnerships with formal financial institutions could enhance access to loans and capital, providing long-term support for participants. Introducing community-based income-generating activities—such as cooperative ventures or small business initiatives—along with ongoing financial literacy education would empower participants to become financially independent. Furthermore, facilitating entry into formal savings cooperatives and promoting financial planning could provide participants with sustainable, long-term financial avenues. Such initiatives would foster economic resilience, helping participants maintain financial stability beyond the scope of the program.

DISCUSSION

Program Inclusion

Gender Equity and Inclusion

The project's deliberate focus on engaging young women has been central to its success. By addressing systemic barriers such as limited access to education, economic opportunities, employment, grants, and social support, the initiative created tailored interventions that enabled girls to participate meaningfully in vocational training and financial programs. Girls accounted for 76% of total participants, reflecting the project's strong commitment to gender-responsive approaches. This focus aligns with global evidence showing that gender equity in youth

empowerment initiatives leads to enhanced outcomes in self-reliance, economic independence, and community development.

The higher dropout rate among girls, particularly in Makindye, highlights the need for further investigation and targeted support strategies. Addressing challenges such as caregiving responsibilities, unsafe commuting conditions, and social stigma could improve female retention and success rates in future initiatives. Further research into the underlying causes of these barriers is essential to develop more effective support systems for young women. Addressing these barriers requires tailored support, such as subsidized childcare, female mentorship programs, and safer transport options.

Sustainability and Scalability

The success of the project was bolstered by collaborations with private sector stakeholders, who are part of the social system which provided critical mentorships, internships, and employment opportunities for participants. Despite these promising outcomes, the lack of formal agreements raises concerns about the sustainability of these partnerships. Informal arrangements often lack the structure necessary to ensure long-term collaboration and consistent support for program graduates. To improve sustainability, future initiatives should prioritize establishing formal frameworks with stakeholders. Formalized partnerships would offer greater stability and long-term commitment. To support such slum youth, expanding these collaborations across a broader range of industries, particularly high-growth sectors like technology and green energy, could significantly increase the opportunities available to youth, ensuring that they can access a wider variety of career pathways.

Jane (pseudonym), Makindye reflected "After I graduated, I was struggling to make ends meet and I didn't have the capital to start the business. One day, I reached out to an alumnus from Makindye center who worked his saloon. Not only did she take the time to listen to my challenges, but she also accepted to give me a job in the saloon. Thanks to her mentorship and connection, I was able to practice my skills and ultimately, saved money to start my saloon. I'm forever grateful for how these alumni truly made a difference in my career."

Informal Sector Focus

The project demonstrated strong outcomes in the informal sector, with 470 youth successfully establishing small businesses. Informal employment provided an accessible entry point for many participants, particularly in trades such as tailoring, salon services, and catering. However, the reliance on informal sector opportunities poses challenges to long-term economic stability, as these jobs often lack legal protections, social benefits, and career advancement opportunities.

Future interventions should seek to bridge the gap between informal and formal employment. Strategies such as offering certifications, improving access to formal credit, and providing entrepreneurial training tailored to formal sector standards could facilitate transitions to more secure employment. In parallel, improving working conditions and legal protections within the informal sector is crucial to ensuring that these jobs contribute to sustainable livelihoods.

Employability and Broader Implications

Building on findings from Nakirijja *et al.* (2021) regarding employability among UYDEL slum youth, the project underscores the transformative potential of integrated interventions. The combination of vocational training, life skills development, mentorship, and financial literacy significantly enhanced participants' employability, confidence, and self-esteem. Additionally,

safe spaces and drop-in centers provided critical psychosocial support, enabling youth to overcome both personal and structural barriers to success.

The success of these strategies highlights the importance of adopting holistic, multiple skilling intersectional approaches in youth empowerment programs that include the enhancement of the youth agency. By addressing the complex interplay between individual, family, and community dynamics, such initiatives can promote sustainable livelihoods, ameliorate slum adversities that affect slum youth and contribute to broader community cohesion. The project's impact reinforces the need for integrated support systems that are responsive to the multifaceted challenges slum young people face in their path to employment and general economic independence.

CONCLUSION

The Access to Employment project has made significant progress in tackling youth unemployment and promoting gender equity in Uganda. This initiative has empowered participants by equipping them with vocational training, financial literacy, and entrepreneurial skills, encouraging economic independence and community development.

Quantitative data, such as the training of 737 youth and 67% of participants earning above the minimum wage, underscores the project's tangible impact. Its emphasis on inclusivity, particularly for young women, exemplifies a progressive approach to youth empowerment.

Despite these successes, certain challenges remain such as the higher dropout rates among girls and the reliance on informal sector employment highlight areas for future improvement. The project's findings offer valuable lessons for policymakers and practitioners seeking to replicate its success in different contexts, emphasizing the importance of targeted support, youth slum screening; sustainable partnerships, and strategies to bridge the gap between informal and formal employment opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the project's impact and sustainability, vocational training programs should be expanded to include emerging sectors such as renewable energy (e.g., biogas and solar panel installation), waste management (e.g., briquette production), technology, and healthcare. These industries align with current market demands and can provide youth with sustainable employment opportunities. Collaboration with industry stakeholders such as renewable energy companies, technology firms, and government agencies is essential. Formal mechanisms such as Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) or long-term funding agreements should be established to ensure the availability of resources and commitment from key players.

To ensure sustained mentorship and employment opportunities, formal agreements (e.g., MoUs) should be established with companies in high-growth sectors such as renewable energy, ICT, and manufacturing. These agreements will help solidify the commitment of businesses to provide internships, apprenticeships, and career advancement opportunities. Companies should also be incentivized to offer such opportunities as part of their corporate social responsibility initiatives, creating a direct pipeline for youth into these sectors.

The low loan repayment rates observed in the project should be addressed through targeted strategies. This includes enhancing financial literacy training within VSLAs to equip participants with better loan management skills and reduce default rates. Collaborating with microfinance institutions to provide structured loan products with flexible repayment terms tailored to youth entrepreneurs will also improve repayment performance. Additionally,

introducing peer accountability systems within VSLAs can foster a supportive environment and reduce loan defaults.

Addressing the specific barriers faced by female participants, such as caregiving responsibilities and social stigma, is critical to improving retention and ensuring business sustainability. Tailored support mechanisms, including flexible training schedules and access to childcare, should be implemented to support the participation of young women in the program.

A robust M&E system should be developed to track key metrics such as employment rates, income growth, business survival rates, and gender-specific barriers. Periodic impact assessments (e.g., every six months) should be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions. These findings will inform adjustments to training programs and strategies, ensuring continuous improvement and sustained positive outcomes for participants.

To ensure the scalability and long-term sustainability of the program, the government, alongside other stakeholders (e.g., NGOs, the private sector), should take an active role in creating a favorable ecosystem for youth empowerment. This includes allocating more resources to youth employment initiatives, implementing policies that support entrepreneurship, and creating incentives for businesses to hire young people. Additionally, government agencies should partner with vocational training institutions to ensure curricula align with market demands, and there should be increased focus on providing financial and technical support to micro and small enterprises owned by youth.

Funding Declaration

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declares no conflict of interest.

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