



Inclusion and Integration of Youth Needs in Youth Empowerment Programmes: Nairobi and Trans Nzoia Counties

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Abstract

The youth bulge, a rapid population increase of the youth occasioned by reduced infant mortality without a corresponding decrease in fertility among women, has of late become a sore reality in Africa. It has triggered calls for concerted efforts from all development actors in the continent to ensure that youths are engaged in meaningful socio-economic and political advancement of their respective nations. In view of this, a myriad of state and non-state youth empowerment programmes (YEPs) have been developed in Kenya in the last two decades, even as concerns continue being raised on their efficacy and sustainability. The goal of this study was to explore the extent of youth inclusion, and integration of youth needs in YEPs in two counties, Nairobi, an urban setting, and Trans Nzoia, a rural setting. The study adopted a mixed method research approach. First, a comparative survey of the youth was done in Nairobi and Trans Nzoia counties. The cross-sectional survey involved 244 youth respondents in the two counties, and was complemented by Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews and observation. The study established that youths who participate in YEPs are mainly engaged as groups and less often as

individuals. In addition, youth inclusion in YEPs is generally wanting, with majority of them in both counties, 53.1% in Nairobi and 59.7% in Trans Nzoia, at least disagreeing that youth decide what programmes to be run in their respective areas. On integration of youth needs, the study found that the youth experience limitations in accessing finance and support from programme officers. The study recommends enhancement of avenues for youth engagement to facilitate efficacy in conceptualization and execution of YEPs in Kenya.

Keywords: Youth inclusion, integration, youth needs, youth empowerment, decision-making, YEP

Introduction

The Constitution of Kenya (GOK, 2010) defines the youth as those aged between 18 and 35 years old. According to Commonwealth (2020), youth account for 60% of the global population, and most are found in developing countries. Inclusion of young people in national socio-economic and political development agenda is pivotal for advancement of countries all over the world (United Nations, 2020). However, youth are often left at the periphery of development, with their vast potential remaining largely untapped (Isioma & Boadu, 2018). In Kenya, the youth have continued experiencing perennial unemployment challenges as well as limitations in access to services and opportunities (Kenya Youth Development Policy, 2019). In a quest to address these concerns, numerous youth empowerment programmes (YEPs) have been rolled out in the past two decades in Kenya, by both state and non-state development actors. Notably, there is no single size that fits all programmes, with each being tailored to the context of its immediate environment. YEPs provide different resources such as finance/funding, job opportunities, entrepreneurial support and training, amongst others, even as efficacy and sustainability concerns persist (Mburu & Makori, 2015; Sikenyi, 2017; Dirastile, 2020; Kasoli & Mutiso, 2020).

Despite the decades-long rhetoric over the need to promote youth programmes with a goal to cure or tackle youth unemployment, the plight of youth remains in a state of despair (United Nations, 2020). In an attempt to address this concern, critical attention is paid to the main parameter of youth engagement in YEPs, that is, their place in decision-making towards efficacy in design, and execution of programmes. With this consideration put in the forefront, programmes need to effectively address the needs, aspirations and challenges experienced by youth. The notion of youth inclusion is embodied in empowerment whose essence (processes and outcomes) is hinged on provision of youth with the ability to influence and control their destiny. At concept and strategy levels, youth empowerment is largely unspecific and

yet to be well understood by many stakeholders (Xavier et al, 2017; Pilar et al, 2018; Dirastile, 2020). The overt convergence of thoughts among scholars is that empowerment is a process through which individuals, groups or communities gain control and power over their lives (Xavier et al, 2017). Empowerment is population and context-specific and at the same time open to selective interpretation (Zimmerman, 2000; Pettit, 2012). This underlines the need to contextualize empowerment within YEPs. Furthermore, the level of knowledge on processes and outcomes of youth empowerment programmes remains limited in many set-ups (Morton & Montgomery, 2013; Peterson, 2014; Xavier et al, 2017). It is against this background that this study aimed to examine the extent to which youth are involved in design and implementation of YEPs, and how much their needs are integrated in YEPs in rural and urban settings in Kenya, specifically Nairobi (urban) and Trans Nzoia (rural).

Literature Review

Youth empowerment as concept is not clearly defined, neither is its adoption in YEPs well laid out. The concept invites diverse interpretations and this heavily impacts its execution. In the quest for clarity, the necessary conditions for empowerment must be outlined clearly, so that any initiatives envisioned through YEPs go beyond mere rhetoric. Notably, the concept of youth empowerment has drawn varied interpretations from scholars, while largely serving as an adopted 'buzzword' in propagating youth-targeted programmes. A reflection on scholarly works provides critical parameters upon which efficacy in execution of YEPs can be observed. In particular, understanding of youth empowerment is embedded in knowledge on conditions or elements that influence the processes and outcomes (Hodgson, 1995; Pestech et al, 2005; Jennings et al, 2006; Kempe, 2012). According to Hodgson (1995), for youth to be empowered fully, a number of conditions need to be taken into account. These include access to individuals in power; access to pertinent information; ability to choose between different options; support from trusted person who is independent, and, a channel for raising grievances where necessary. Further, Kempe (2012) postulates the three factors that could influence youth empowerment in Kenya as, experiencing an environment of safety closeness and appreciation; meaningful participation and engagement, and, experiencing and exercising power through youth-led and youth-directed initiatives. Even as these conditions for empowerment remain largely acceptable, there is need to examine whether they are incorporated in conceptualization and execution of YEPs in Kenya, and to what extent the execution of YEPs in Kenya meet the said conditions.

While adoption of YEPs in Africa is widespread, massive unemployment among youth and the related challenges still remain a major

problem in the continent. Existing empowerment programmes are marred with reports of ineffective implementation and sustainability challenges (Mburu and Makori, 2015; Sikenyi, 2017; Kasoli and Mutiso, 2020). In Kenya, several state and non-state YEPs have been rolled out over the years, but many have remained inefficient in performance. The Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF) is the most studied in the country, being the longest surviving state programme, established in 2006. The fund is widely spread in the country and has received significant political goodwill and support from key government ministries and statutory bodies since inception [Youth Enterprise Development Fund Strategic Plan (2020/21-2023/24)]. The YEDF is predominantly known for provision of micro-credit and training aimed at job creation. It has, however, over the years been widely criticized for poor implementation of set programmes. According to Mburu & Makori (2015), implementation of YEDF initiatives in Nairobi has been hampered by training, financial, leadership and policy challenges. Further, weak support structures in the fund not only contribute to exclusion of many youths, but also compromise successful utilisation of loans granted to beneficiaries (Sikenyi, 2017). Other State YEPs include the National Youth Council, established in 2009; National Youth Service, relaunched in 2014; Uwezo Fund, launched in 2014, and, the Kenya Youth Employment Opportunities Project (2016-2021).

For one to fully appreciate the said inefficiency in the YEPs, it is critical to assess the knowledge, attitude and practical aptitude of the youth involved in the programmes, both state and non-state. Secondly, there is need to explore beyond the known impediments in implementation of YEPs and look into the place of youth in the structuring and implementation of the programmes. Notably, politicization and/or political interference is a key impediment to effective and successful implementation of youth programmes (Mburu & Makori, 2015; Sikenyi, 2017; Dirastile, 2020). Many policies and programmes intended for employment creation are politically motivated and often abandoned when champions of the initiatives exit office (Isioma and Boadu, 2018).

The role of youth agency is integral to decision-making, structuring and execution of YEPs, yet empirical knowledge on extent of youth involvement remains limited. Youth agency is the desire and ability among young people to make decisions and drive change in their own lives within their settings (communities or larger sphere of influence). Focus on youth agency can be explained in the light of Anthony Giddens's Structuration Theory in the examination of processes in YEPs. The theory emphasizes on duality of structure and interaction between the human agency and structure (Giddens, 2009). The structural environment constrains individual behavior but also enables it. Thus, the theory provides an avenue for examination of

the interaction between the youth (human agency) and YEPs (structural environment) in the assessment of processes and outcomes. Arguably, the environment in which the YEP is implemented is bound to influence youth involvement and extent to which youth needs are integrated.

Materials and Methods

A mixed survey approach was applied in the study, comparing, Nairobi County, an urban setting, and Trans Nzoia County, a rural one. The cross-sectional survey involved 244 youth comprising 115 youth from Nairobi and 129 from Trans Nzoia. Data collected featured demographics, mode and extent of youth involvement in YEPs and extent to which youth needs have been integrated in these programmes. Further, observation, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with youth in YEPs and key informant interviews with youth programme officials were conducted. The informants included County Youth Commissioners, District Youth Officers, National Youth Council Chairmen, Youth Community Based Organizations (CBOs) Chairpersons, YEDF Officers, and religious leaders. Purposive sampling, stratified sampling and simple random sampling were all used to select the respondents, participants of FGDs and key informants. The sampling frame of youth respondents was derived from multiple YEPs purposely selected and included in the study contingent on provision of a list of youth aged 18 to 35 years. The combined list across the two counties had a total population of 960, with Nairobi producing 436 and Trans Nzoia 524. The two counties were purposively selected to provide a wide overview of inclusion and integration of youth needs in YEPs. The study drew a sample size of 282 respondents considered adequate for generalization of the findings for urban and rural settings using Yamane (1967) formula, as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = Sample size to be determined

N = Population size = 960

e= Margin error = 5%

At 5% significance level,

$$n = \frac{960}{1+960(0.05)^2}$$

Results and Discussion

The study featured 244 youth respondents, of whom 47.1% (115) were drawn from selected YEPs in Nairobi and 52.9% (129) from selected YEPs in Trans Nzoia. The demographic data captured in the study included age, gender, marital status, level of education attained and average monthly income. In terms of age, majority (67.2%) of youth respondents were aged

26 years and above, with the mean age of 27 years in both counties. On gender, there were more males (59.4%) than females (40.6%) in the selected YEPs in both counties. Majority of the youth were married, with a higher number in Trans Nzoia (65.5%) compared to Nairobi (56.5%). Notably, those who had attained form four education¹ and above were more (67.9%) in Nairobi, compared to those in Trans Nzoia at 48.9%. This implies that beneficiaries of YEPs were mainly those with basic level education (high school level of education) aged about 27 years mostly driven by societal obligations as majority reported to be married. Further, findings showed that majority (60%) of the youth from both counties had modest average income of Kshs 9,000 (US\$ 70) and below per month.

The study set out to understand how the urban/rural youth are engaged in the YEPs. Knowledge on mode and extent of youth inclusion in YEPs is critical for advancement of effective structuring and execution of youth targeted programmes. Drawing from findings, the mode of youth involvement in YEPs in both counties was largely in groups rather than individuals. Group engagement entails YEPs involving youth only as a group not as an individual. The group is registered either with Department of Social Services or Registrar of Societies with a membership of at least 15 persons; 70% of whom should be aged between 18 to 35 years. Notably, group engagement is more pronounced in the rural setting, constituting of 76% youth respondents in Trans Nzoia compared to 63.2% in the Nairobi population. This was corroborated by narrative drawn from FGDs with youth, YEP Officials and State Youth Officers, that *“YEPs often prefer working with youth in a group setting rather than as an individual for logistical and traceability purposes”*. However, the youth were also of the opinion that *‘Programmes should also be more open in dealing with youths in their own individual capacity other than in group orientation’*. Nonetheless, as revealed in the study, while adoption of group engagement may hold a promise, it is not a panacea for promoting empowerment in YEPs. Group fall outs are an impediment to effective and sustainable implementation of YEPs. There is an existential challenge of sustaining youth groups; key setback attributed to challenges in leadership and financial management (Mburu, 2015; Issaka et al, 2022).

The study explored the role of youth in shaping programmes that are geared towards them. To this effect, a Likert scale was used to measure the extent which youth agreed or disagreed with general statements about how

¹ In Kenya’s education system, pupils spend 8 years in primary school and 4 years in high school. Those who pass well and meet minimum requirement to join University, take 4 years on average to attain a degree.

they are involved in YEPs². The statements sought to capture knowledge, attitude and practice with regard to youth involvement in YEPs encompassing information, consultation, decision making and management. The responses are represented Table 1.

Table 1: Youth involvement in Youth Empowerment Programmes in Kenya

	General statements	County	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
1.	Youth are mainly informed about youth programmes when they start	Nairobi	-	19 (16.5)	7 (6.1)	82 (71.3)	7 (6.1)	115 (100)
		Trans Nzoia	8 (6.2)	3 (2.3)	-	84 (65.1)	32 (24.8)	127 *(98.4)
2.	Youth are not consulted before youth programmes start	Nairobi	7 (6.1)	20 (17.4)	19 (16.5)	64 (55.7)	5 (4.3)	115 (100)
		Trans Nzoia	10 (7.8)	35 (27.1)	9 (7.0)	61 (47.3)	14 (10.9)	129 (100)
3.	Youth decide what youth programmes start in the area	Nairobi	14 (12.2)	47 (40.9)	22 (19.1)	26 (22.6)	6 (5.2)	115 (100)
		Trans Nzoia	15 (11.6)	62 (48.1)	26 (20.2)	18 (14.0)	8 (6.2)	129 (100)
4.	Youth are part of the management of the youth programmes	Nairobi	19 (16.5)	47 (40.9)	22 (19.1)	24 (20.9)	3 (2.6)	115 (100)
		Trans Nzoia	18 (14.0)	63 (48.8)	21 (16.3)	23 (17.8)	4 (3.1)	129 (100)

Figures in bracket indicate row percentage.

*The total excludes 2 missing cases

Source: Primary data from survey

In Nairobi and Trans Nzoia, the respondents overwhelmingly agreed that youth were mostly informed about youth programmes when they started, at 77.4% and 89.9% respectively (sum of 'agreed' and 'strongly agreed'). Further, majority (59.0%) in Nairobi; at least 58.2% in Trans Nzoia, were not consulted before youth programmes start. Thus, nearly three fifth of youth from the two counties at least agreed that they were not consulted before programmes commence. The majority of respondents, 53.1% in Nairobi and 59.7% in Trans Nzoia, at least disagreed that youth decide what youth programmes start in the area. Further, majority respondents (57.4% in Nairobi and 62.8% in Trans Nzoia) at least disagreed that youth were part of management in YEPs.

From Table 1, youth inclusion is minimal in structuring and delivery of YEPs. The youth are mainly recipients rather than drivers of the programmes. The statistical findings are corroborated by narratives drawn from FGD forums with youth, as outlined below:

² Youth involvement in YEPS encompasses the extent to which the youth are informed, consulted, engaged in decision making and management of these programmes; a measure for examining extent youth are involved in structuring and execution of programmes affecting them.

Discussion I

“Programmes are like Panadol; you might not have been directly involved/consulted but it does cure”

Discussion II

“Youth are like cows and the practitioners/policy makers are like the veterinary doctor. The cow doesn't speak, it just gets treated”.

The sentiments by the youth participants reveal a sense of resignation among youth, with feelings that their input in shaping programmes affecting them are largely ignored and that they have to work and take what is presented to them as is.

The sentiments highlighted by majority of the youth involved in this study are a stark contrast to the approach employed by Youth Empowerment for Sustainable Agriculture (YESA), a non-governmental international programme aimed at facilitating the youth to engage in profitable agricultural initiatives (Farm Africa, 2017, 2021). YESA which transitioned to “Growing Futures” facilitates youth participation in engagement of cultivation of vegetables on high demand, such as such as French beans, kale, tomatoes and cabbages. Through its stakeholder involvement approach that involves the youth from the onset of programmes, YESA has shown the benefits of youth inclusion in YEPs. The programme began in 2010 in Trans Nzoia and invested time and resources in identifying the most viable way to engage youth with their participation. Various phases of pilots were conducted in Cherangany for the period 2010 - 2017 to gauge what projects would interest the youth. Pilot projects included chicken rearing, fish rearing, rabbit rearing and horticulture. The general observation in the initial phases of the pilot schemes was that the youth had little patience and were not interested in activities that would take long for them to generate financial returns. Eventually, the programme settled on three-month horticultural crops, namely, snow peas, sugar snaps, French beans and chilies. Further, the programme linked the youth to a ready market (Vegpro Kenya Ltd) which has enabled youth undertake farming beyond the tradition of maize production in the region that takes about 8 months. Thus, youth inclusion in YEPs is not only pivotal in identifying viable options for youth but also key in deriving programmes tailored to specific needs and potential in varied areas. This is in concurrence with Tsekoura (2016), who posits that “empowerment through participation can be achieved when the participants can co-create the content of such processes rather than through populating spaces with predefined aims”. Without youth involvement in decision-making in YEPs, the engagement of youth in these programmes is largely tokenistic and manipulative (Hart, 1992; Pettit, 2012; Dirastile, 2020). YESA

illustrates the pivotal role of youth inclusion and addressing youth's localized needs for optimum and effective delivery of YEPs.

To examine the extent of integration of youth needs, the study identified and postulated ten (10) conditions integral to the empowerment process, according to Hodgson, 1995; Petech et al, 2005; Jennings et al, 2006; Kempe, 2012. The conditions include access to information; training; finance; support from officers; avenue to complain; opportunity to choose; safe and friendly environment; consideration of youths' ideas; youth-led initiatives, and, finally, recognition of local youth groups. To measure this, respondents were provided with general statements to express their extent of agreement on whether or not the itemized youth needs are integrated in YEPs. The findings on the extent to which youth needs have been integrated in youth programmes in Nairobi and Trans Nzoia are captured in Table 2 (figures for the two counties have been merged).

Table 2: Consideration of youth needs in programmes in Nairobi and Trans Nzoia County

S/No	General statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
1.	Youth have access to information about programmes	7 (2.9)	81(33.2)	17 (7.0)	124(50.8)	15 (6.1)	244 (100)
2.	Youth have access to training through programmes	6 (2.5)	57 (23.4)	39(16.0)	130(53.2)	12 (4.9)	244 (100)
3.	Youth have access to financial support	14 (5.7)	97 (39.8)	28 (11.5)	88 (36.0)	17(7.0)	244 (100)
4.	Youth have access to support from officers	16(6.5)	113(46.5)	23(9.4)	72(29.6)	19(8.0)	243* (100)
5.	Youth have channels for complaining when things go wrong	25 (10.2)	68 (27.9)	43(17.6)	102(41.8)	6(2.5)	244 (100)
6.	Youth have an opportunity to choose what they want to do.	12(4.9)	98(40.1)	30(12.3)	90(37.0)	14 (5.7)	244 (100)
7.	Youth have a safe and friendly environment to express themselves	14(5.7)	111 (45.5)	27(11.1)	80(32.8)	12 (4.9)	244 (100)
8.	Youth feel that their ideas are considered	15 (6.1)	77 (31.6)	44 (18.0)	103 (42.2)	5(2.1)	244(100)
9.	Youth initiatives are 'led' or 'driven' by young people	22 (9.0)	76(31.0)	45(18.5)	90 (37.0)	11 (4.5)	244 (100)
10.	Local youth groups are recognized	9 (3.7)	46(18.9)	53 (21.7)	118 (48.4)	18 (7.3)	244 (100)

Figures in bracket indicate row percentages

* The total excludes missing case

Source: Primary data from survey

From Table 2, majority (56.9%) of the respondents were at least in agreement that youth have access to information on programmes being set up. Further, majority (58.1%) of the respondents at least agreed that youth have access to training through youth programmes. On access to financial

support, majority (45.5%) of the respondents at least disagreed that youth have access to financial support through programmes. In terms of support from officers, majority (46.5%) of the respondents at least disagreed that youth have access to support from officers. On avenues for raising complaints, at least 44.3% of the respondents were in agreement that youth have channels for raising their sentiments when things go wrong. On exercising choice in YEPs, there was a minimal distinguishing margin between those who at least agreed and those who disagreed that youth have an opportunity to choose what they want to do at 42.7% and 45.0% respectively. A conducive environment for expression is critical but the findings revealed that a majority (51.2%) of the respondents at least disagreed that youth have a safe & friendly environment to express themselves. 44.2 % at least agreed that youth feel their ideas are considered. On whether youth initiatives were youth 'led' or 'driven' there was a minimal distinguishing margin between those who at least agreed (41.5%) and those who disagreed (40.0%). In terms of mode of engagement, at least the majority (55.7%) of respondents were in agreement that local youth groups were recognized. Overall, the areas in which youth were in agreement that their needs had been integrated include access to information, training, ways to complain when necessary and recognition of youth groups. The areas youth were in disagreement that their needs had been integrated include access to financial support, access to support from officers and having a safe and friendly environment to express themselves. Notably, there was minimal distinction on extent agreement and disagreement on youth having an opportunity for choice and whether youth initiatives were youth 'led' or 'driven'.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reveals that across Nairobi and Trans Nzoia counties, youth are engaged in YEPs largely as groups, with very few participating as individuals. Also notable, youth inclusion in YEPs is wanting, with the young people mostly not being involved in decision-making in structuring and execution of YEPs in their respective domains. On integration of youth needs in YEPs, the research showed that access to programme officers is a challenge and the youth mostly do not have a safe and friendly environment to express themselves. The findings highlight areas for improvement such access to finance, support from YEPs Officers and provision of safe and friendly environment for youth to express their needs. The YEPs ought to continually improve the interaction space and engagement with youth to enhance sense of ownership for the propagation and sustenance of the empowerment process. Borrowing from the Safe Plan Youth empowerment Programme in Uganda (USAID 2019), providing youth

with an avenue to make choices creates a sense of ownership and a feeling of belonging, which is critical in propagation of the empowerment process.

Anchored on the findings, the study recommends promotion of the role of youths in the implementation of YEPs. Youth sentiments should be taken into account in identifying and selecting viable options in YEPs, so that the needs of the youth are well addressed. Secondly, before and even during implementation, the YEPs should provide a conducive environment for youth to express themselves. Importantly, the youth should always have access to and engage freely with programme officers. Finally, YEPs should expand the levels at which youth empowerment is to be promoted, a move towards accommodating empowerment at individual level, beyond group orientation.

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