Inclusion and Integration of Youth Needs in Youth Empowerment Programmes: A Mixed-Method Study of Nairobi and Trans Nzoia Counties

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Abstract

The youth bulge, a rapid population increase among young people caused by reduced infant mortality without a corresponding decrease in fertility rates, has recently become a pressing 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 in their respective nations. As a result, many state and non-state youth empowerment programmes (YEPs) have been developed in Kenya over the last two decades, even as concerns continue to be raised about their efficacy and sustainability. This paper focuses on exploring the extent of youth inclusion and the 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 youth survey was conducted 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. Descriptive analysis through SPSS and thematic analysis were used to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data, respectively. The study established that

youths participating in Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEPs) are primarily engaged as groups, rather than as individuals. In addition, youth inclusion in YEPs is generally lacking, with a majority of participants in both counties, 53.1% in Nairobi and 59.7% in Trans Nzoia, disagreeing with the statement that youth have a say in the programmes run in their respective areas. Regarding the integration of youth needs, the study found that young people experience limitations in accessing finance and support from programme officers. The study recommends enhancing avenues for youth engagement to facilitate greater efficacy in the conceptualization and execution of YEPs in Kenya.

Introduction

The Constitution of Kenya (GOK, 2010) defines youth as individuals aged between 18 and 35 years. According to the Commonwealth (2020), youth account for 60% of the global population, with a majority residing in developing countries. The inclusion of young people in national socio-economic and political development agendas is pivotal for the advancement of countries worldwide (United Nations, 2020). However, youth are often relegated to the periphery of development, with their vast potential remaining largely untapped (Isioma & Boadu, 2018; Krzaklewska et al., 2023). In Kenya, young people continue to face persistent unemployment challenges and limitations in access to services and opportunities (Kenya Youth Development Policy, 2019). To address these concerns, numerous youth empowerment programmes (YEPs) have been implemented over the past two decades by both state and non-state development actors. Notably, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to these programmes, especially as each is tailored to the context of its immediate environment. YEPs provide different resources, such as finance/funding, job opportunities, entrepreneurial support, and training, amongst others, although concerns regarding efficacy and sustainability persist (Mburu & Makori, 2015; Sikenyi, 2017; Dirastile, 2020; Kasoli & Mutiso, 2020).

Despite decades of rhetoric emphasizing the need to promote youth programmes aimed at addressing youth unemployment, the plight of young people remains in a state of despair (United Nations, 2020). In an attempt to address this concern, critical attention is focused on the main parameter of youth engagement in Youth Empowerment Program (YEPs), specifically their role in decision making to enhance the efficacy of programme design and execution. Youth inclusion in policies and programmes is pivotal for addressing their needs, as it recognizes young people as main actors in their

own lives and in society (Krzaklewska et al., 2023; Kirtzel & Lorenz, 2023; Fucuda & Zusman, 2024; Taole-Kolisang et al., 2024). With this consideration at the forefront, programmes must effectively address the needs, aspirations, and challenges experienced by youth. The concept of youth inclusion is embodied in empowerment, which entails providing young people with the ability to influence and control their own destinies. However, at both the conceptual and strategic levels, youth empowerment is often vague and not well understood by many stakeholders (Xavier et al, 2017; Pilar et al., 2018; Dirastile, 2020). There is a consensus among scholars 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 it is also subject to selective interpretation (Zimmerman, 2000; Pettit, 2012). This underlines the need to contextualize empowerment within YEPs. Furthermore, knowledge regarding the processes and outcomes of youth empowerment programmes remains limited in many contexts (Morton & Montgomery, 2013; Peterson, 2014; Xavier et al., 2017). Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine the extent to which youth are involved in the design and implementation of YEPs and how effectively their needs are integrated into these programs in both rural and urban settings in Kenya, specifically in Nairobi (urban) and Trans Nzoia (rural).

Literature Review

Youth empowerment as the concept is not clearly defined, nor is its adoption in YEPs well laid out. The concept invites diverse interpretations, which significantly impact 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 the efficacy in the execution of YEPs can be observed.

In particular, the understanding of youth empowerment is embedded in knowledge of the 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 fully empowered, a number of conditions need to be taken into account. These include access to individuals in power, access to pertinent information, the ability to choose between different options, support from a trusted person who is independent, and a channel for raising grievances where necessary.

Further, Kempe (2012) postulates three factors that could influence youth empowerment in Kenya: 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 a need to examine whether they are incorporated into the conceptualization and execution of YEPs in Kenya, and to what extent the execution of YEPs meets these conditions.

While the adoption of YEPs in Africa is widespread, massive unemployment among youth and the related challenges remain a major problem in the continent. Existing empowerment programmes are marred by reports of ineffective implementation and sustainability challenges (Mburu & Makori, 2015; Sikenyi, 2017; Kasoli & 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 programme in the country, being the longest surviving state initiative, established in 2006. The fund is widely distributed across the country and has received significant political goodwill and support from key government ministries and statutory bodies since its inception [Youth Enterprise Development Fund Strategic Plan (2020/21-2023/24)]. The YEDF is predominantly known for the provision of micro-credit and training aimed at job creation. However, it has been widely criticized over the years for poor implementation of set programmes. According to Mburu and Makori (2015), the implementation of YEDF initiatives in Nairobi has been hampered by challenges related to training, finance, leadership, and policy. Furthermore, weak support structures within the fund not only contribute to the exclusion of many youths but also compromise the successful utilisation of loans granted to beneficiaries (Sikenyi, 2017). Other State YEPs include the National Youth Council, established in 2009; the National Youth Service, relaunched in 2014; the Uwezo Fund, launched in 2014; and the Kenya Youth Employment Opportunities Project (2016-2021).

To fully appreciate the inefficiency in YEPs, it is critical to assess the knowledge, attitudes, and practical aptitudes of the youth involved in both state and non-state programmes. Additionally, there is a need to explore beyond the known impediments to the implementation of YEPs and examine the role of youth in the structuring and execution of these programmes. Notably, politicization and/or political interference are key impediments to the 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 are often abandoned when the champions of these initiatives exit office (Isioma & Boadu, 2018).

The role of youth agency is integral to the decision making, structuring, and execution of YEPs; however, empirical knowledge on the

extent of youth involvement remains limited. Youth agency refers to the desire and ability among young people to make decisions and drive change in their own lives within their settings (communities or larger spheres of influence). Focus on youth agency can be explained through Anthony Gidden's Structuration Theory, which examines processes and outcomes in YEPs. The theory emphasizes the duality of structure and the interaction between human agency and structure (Giddens, 2009). The structural environment constrains individual behavior but also enables it. Thus, the theory provides a framework for examining the interaction between youth (human agency) and YEPs (structural environment) in assessing processes and outcomes. Arguably, the environment in which the YEP is implemented is likely to influence youth involvement and the 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 from Nairobi and 129 from Trans Nzoia. Data collected included demographics, the mode and extent of youth involvement in YEPs, and the degree to which youth needs have been integrated in these programmes. Furthermore, observations, 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 used to select respondents, FGD participants, and key informants. The sampling frame of youth respondents was derived from multiple YEPs that were purposely selected and included in the study based on the 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 contributing 436 and Trans Nzoia 524. The two counties were purposively selected to provide a comprehensive overview of the inclusion and integration of youth needs in YEPs. The study drew a sample size of 282 respondents, which was considered adequate for generalizing the findings for urban and rural settings, using Yamane's (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,

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

Descriptive analysis through SPSS was used to analyse the quantitative data. The descriptive data entails analyses of a single variable, providing a summary and patterns of data using percentages, frequency distribution, and tables (Babbie, 2013). In particular, the Likert scale was used to capture the views of the youth in standardized response categories in the survey questionaire, to determine the relative intensity of different items. The Likert scale is a composite measure of several items that have a logical or empirical structure among them (Babbie, 2013). The scale was particularly useful in capturing and presenting patterns of youth involvement and the integraton of youth needs across Nairobi and Trans Nzoia counties. On the other hand, thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted manually to complement the numeric data obtained in the study.

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, the majority (67.2%) of youth respondents were aged 26 years and above, with a mean age of 27 years in both counties. In term of gender, there were more males (59.4%) than females (40.6%) in the selected YEPs in both counties. The 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 education[1] and above were more prevalent in Nairobi (67.9%) compared to Trans Nzoia (48.9%). This implies that beneficiaries of YEPs were mainly those with a basic level education (high school) and were around 27 years old, mostly driven by societal obligations, as the majority reported being married. Furthermore, findings showed that the majority (60%) of the youth from both counties had a modest average income of Kshs 9,000 (US$ 70) and below per month.

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[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 the minimum requirement to join university take, on average, 4 years to attain a degree.

The study set out to understand how urban and rural youth are engaged in Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEPs). Knowledge of the mode and extent of youth inclusion in YEPs is critical for the advancement of effective structuring and execution of youth-targeted programmes. Drawing from the findings, the mode of youth involvement in YEPs in both counties was largely in groups rather than as individuals. Group engagement entails YEPs involving youth only as a collective, not as individuals. The group must be registered either with the Department of Social Services or the Registrar of Societies, with a membership of at least 15 persons, 70% of whom should be aged between 18 and 35 years. Notably, group engagement is more pronounced in the rural setting, constituting 76% youth respondents in Trans Nzoia compared to 63.2% in the Nairobi population. This was corroborated by narratives drawn from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with youth, YEP officials, and State Youth Officers, who noted that *"YEPs often prefer working with youth in a group setting rather than as individuals for logistical and traceability purposes."* However, the youth were also of the opinion that *'Programmes should also be more open to dealing with youths in their own individual capacity other than in group orientation."* Nonetheless, as revealed in the study, while the adoption of group engagement may hold promise, it is not a panacea for promoting empowerment in YEPs. Group fallouts are an impediment to effective and sustainable implementation of YEPs, with the existential challenge of sustaining youth groups being a 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 to which youth agreed or disagreed with general statements about their involvement in YEPs[2]. The statements sought to capture knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding youth involvement in YEPs, encompassing information, consultation, decision making, and management. The responses are represented in Table 1.

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[2] Youth involvement in YEPS encompasses the extent to which young people are informed, consulted, and engaged in decision making and management of these programmes. This serves as a measure for examining the degree to which youth participate in the structuring and execution of programmes that affect them.

Table 1. Youth involvement in Youth Empowerment Programmes in Kenya

General statements	County	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
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)
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)
Youth decide which youth programmes should 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)
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, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that youth were mostly informed about programmes when they started, at 77.4% and 89.9% respectively (summing the 'agreed' and 'strongly agreed' responses). However, a majority (59.0% in Nairobi and at least 58.2% in Trans Nzoia) indicated that they were not consulted before these programmes commenced. Thus, nearly three-fifths of youth from the two counties agreed that they were not involved in the consultation process prior to programme initiation. Furthermore, the majority of respondents, 53.1% in Nairobi and 59.7% in Trans Nzoia, disagreed with the statement that youth decide which programmes start in their area. Additionally, a majority of respondents (57.4% in Nairobi and 62.8% in Trans Nzoia) disagreed that youth were involved in the management of YEPs.

From Table 1, it is evident that youth inclusion is minimal in the structuring and delivery of YEPs. The youth are primarily recipients rather than drivers of these programmes. These statistical findings are supported by narratives drawn from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with youth, as outlined below:

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 expressed by the youth participants reveal a sense of resignation, with feelings that their input in shaping programmes affecting them is largely ignored, and that they must accept what is presented to them as it is.

The sentiments highlighted by the majority of the youth involved in this study starkly contrast with the approach employed by Youth Empowerment for Sustainable Agriculture (YESA), a non-governmental international programme aimed at facilitating youth engagement in profitable agricultural initiatives (Farm Africa, 2017, 2021). YESA, which transitioned to "Growing Futures," facilitates youth participation in the cultivation of high-demand vegetables, such as French beans, kale, tomatoes, and cabbages. Through its stakeholder involvement approach, which includes youth from the onset of programmes, YESA has demonstrated 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 ways to engage youth in their participation. Various phases of pilots were conducted in Cherangany from 2010 to 2017 to gauge which projects would interest the youth. Pilot projects included chicken rearing, fish farming, 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 a long time to generate financial returns. Eventually, the programme settled on three-month horticultural crops, namely, snow peas, sugar snaps, French beans, and chilies. Furthermore, the programme linked the youth to a ready market (Vegpro Kenya Ltd), which has enabled them to undertake farming beyond the traditional maize production in the region, which takes about eight 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 potentials in varied areas. This aligns 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 by 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 the 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), and 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 recognition of local youth groups. To measure this,

respondents were provided with general statements to express their level of agreement on whether the itemized youth needs are integrated into YEPs. The findings on the extent to which youth needs have been integrated into youth programmes in Nairobi and Trans Nzoia are captured in Table 2 (the figures for the two counties have been merged).

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

General statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Youth have access to information about programmes	7 (2.9)	81(33.2)	17 (7.0)	124(50.8)	15 (6.1)	244 (100)
Youth have access to training through programmes	6 (2.5)	57 (23.4)	39(16.0)	130(53.2)	12 (4.9)	244 (100)
Youth have access to financial support	14 (5.7)	97 (39.8)	28 (11.5)	88 (36.0)	17(7.0)	244 (100)
Youth have access to support from officers	16(6.5)	113(46.5)	23(9.4)	72(29.6)	19(8.0)	243* (100)
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)
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)
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)
Youth feel that their ideas are considered	15 (6.1)	77 (31.6)	44 (18.0)	103 (42.2)	5(2.1)	244(100)
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)
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, the majority (56.9%) of the respondents agreed that youth have access to information about the programmes being set up. Furthermore, a majority (58.1%) agreed that youth have access to training through youth programmes. Regarding access to financial support, a majority (45.5%) disagreed that youth have access to financial assistance through these programmes. In terms of support from officers, a majority (46.5%) disagreed that youth have access to such support. On avenues for raising complaints, at least 44.3% of the respondents agreed that youth have channels for expressing their sentiments when things go wrong. When it comes to exercising choice in YEPs, there was a minimal distinction between those who agreed (42.7%) and those who disagreed (45.0%) that youth have an opportunity to choose what they want to do. A conducive environment for expression is critical, but the findings revealed that a majority (51.2%) of the respondents disagreed that youth have a safe & friendly environment to express themselves. Additionally, 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 margin

between those who agreed (41.5%) and those who disagreed (40.0%). In terms of modes of engagement, a majority (55.7%) of respondents agreed that local youth groups were recognized. Overall, the areas where youth agreed that their needs had been integrated include access to information, training, avenues for complaints when necessary, and recognition of youth groups. The areas where youth disagreed that their needs had been integrated include access to financial support, support from officers, and having a safe and friendly environment to express themselves. Notably, there was minimal distinction in the extent of agreement and disagreement regarding 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 is that youth inclusion in YEPs is lacking, with young people mostly not involved in decision making regarding the structuring and execution of YEPs in their respective domains. Regarding the integration of youth needs in YEPs, the research showed that access to programme officers is a challenge, and youth mostly do not have a safe and friendly environment to express themselves. The findings highlight areas for improvement such as access to finance, support from YEP Officers, and the provision of a safe and friendly environment for youth to express their needs. YEPs ought to continually improve interaction spaces and engagement with youth to enhance their sense of ownership in the propagation and sustenance of the empowerment process. Borrowing from the Safe Plan Youth Empowerment Programme in Uganda (USAID 2019), providing youth with avenues to make choices creates a sense of ownership and belonging, which is critical for the propagation of the empowerment process.

Anchored on the findings, the study recommends promoting the role of youth 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 adequately addressed. Secondly, both before and during implementation, YEPs should provide a conducive environment for youth to express themselves. Importantly, youth should always have access to and engage freely with programme officers. Finally, YEPs should expand the levels at which youth empowerment is promoted, moving toward accommodating empowerment at the individual level, beyond a group orientation.

For future researchers, the study recommends a longitudinal study based on selected YEPs over time to ascertain the actual transformations realised upon the inclusión and integration of youth needs in programmes.

Conflict of Interest: The authors reported no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

Funding Statement: The authors did not obtain any funding for this research.

Human Participants: This study has been approved by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) in Kenya, and a permit has been issued to conduct research on youth participation in the implementation of youth empowerment programmes in Nairobi and Trans Nzoia Counties. Furthermore, authorization was obtained from the County Commissioners and the County Directors of Education in Nairobi and Trans Nzoia Counties before embarking on data collection.

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