

STRUGGLES OF RURAL YOUTH: FACTORS THAT EMPOWER AND DISEMPOWER YOUTH IN VIHIGA COUNTY, WESTERN KENYA

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Abstract: *The Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) 2008-09 classifies youth as individuals between the ages 18 and 35. In terms of residence, about 61% of Kenya's youth aged 15-34 were found in rural areas which also report high prevalence of poverty and marginalization in terms of information and communication technology (ICT) and other socio-economic opportunities. This kind of marginalization affects youth empowerment making them vulnerable to poverty, unemployment, early forced marriages, HIV-AIDS infection, and abuse of substances like alcohol and tobacco. Consequently, rural areas are in need of programs from local, international, public, private, higher education, and religious sectors to enhance the empowerment of youth residing in these locales. This study explores the struggles and hardships of young people living in rural communities in western Kenya with a view of providing policy frameworks and commendations for county governments, policy makers, and Kenyan community in the diaspora about empowering youth in their local communities for long term development.*

Key Words: Diaspora Community, Rural Youth, Empowerment, Western Kenya

Introduction

For the past six decades, many development programs have failed to connect the needs of rural poor and their social economic needs. The major problem is the failure to appreciate how the local or rural community connects with the global economy (Kallaway, 2001). This triggers a series of problems for many young people and their quality of life. Many youth in rural and urban areas are contending with lack of jobs and idleness which makes them vulnerable to illicit and risk behaviors including alcoholism, drugs and substance abuse (Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, & Lagat, 2012). Some of these problems may have stemmed from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank restructuring programs of the 1990s that affected households with policies that ultimately escalated the unemployment crisis in Kenya (Kallaway, 2001; Prince, 2013). The HIV-AIDS has further exacerbated the problems facing the youth and intensified the socio-economic decline of many households. The loss of parents, siblings, and breadwinners has affected the lives of young people immensely especially access to education opportunities. This is an impetus

for rural-urban migration in search of opportunities by the young people (Prince, 2013).

Other issues confronting the youth include lack of community participation due to inadequate capital, lack of knowledge about existing Government of Kenya youth funds and programs in areas such as trade, youth affairs, sports, commercial banks, all of which are underutilized. When the youth participate effectively in social development and civic life, their health and welfare is enhanced (Campbell, Gibbs, Maimane, Nair, & Sibiya, 2009).

Similarly, skill development is crucial in social change because rural economies require a constant development of skills as an avenue to productivity and generation of livelihoods that are decent. The neglect of skills in developing countries has been widespread despite developing agencies designing policies such as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other poverty reduction programs (Palmer, 2007). The government of Kenya in 2002 established that most industrial vocational entrepreneurship and training institutions lacked appropriate and adequate facilities, and appropriate curriculum which affects

youth graduating from these institutions. This is despite the fact that globally, Technical Vocational Educational Training institutions (TVETs) have proven to be effective in skills and training that are effective in empowering the youth to engage in sustainable livelihoods (Hope, 2011). In order to succeed in these types of environments where youth are consigned to poverty conditions empowerment is needed. Empowerment results from involvement, efficient youth programs, and overall development. Although the Government has come up with programs to aid the youth, such efforts face numerous challenges especially allocating funds on time.

For youth programs to succeed in Kenya, three requirements must be fulfilled namely, empowerment, education, and employment. Developing micro, small, and medium enterprises which serve as a springboard for youth to create jobs rather than seek jobs. Idleness and being out of work or not in school makes youth vulnerable to marginalization and hopelessness (Hope, 2012). The purpose of this study was to explore youth perspectives on empowerment and disempowerment in rural communities in Vihiga County, western Kenya and offer recommendations for Kenyan community in the diaspora about empowering youth in their local communities for long term development.

Method of Study

The study utilizes the descriptive, exploratory research design. To obtain a representative sample, research participants were selected using purposeful sampling which involves the intentional selection of respondents because of their level of knowledge on the study subject and is ideal when the sample is too large.

Participant recruitment took place from 21 villages found in seven (7) locations including Banja, Busali East, Central Bunyore, Hamisi, Muhudu, Shamakhokho, and Shaviringa Locations of Vihiga County, Western Kenya. Participants completed a Likert-scale questionnaire addressing unemployment, empowerment, and struggles or hardships that cause disempowerment for young people in rural areas and how Kenyan diaspora community can support programs in their local communities. A pilot study was conducted and the findings used to revise the instrument. Data collection took place over a three-week period in the months of July-August 2014. Data collected analysis was done using SPSS statistical software for descriptive statistics and presented as tables, frequencies distributions, and percentages.

Findings

The participants were drawn from different age brackets. Nine (15.8%) participants were in the 15-19 age group, twenty three (40.4%) from the 20-24 age group, fifteen (26.3%) from 25-29 age bracket, and eight (14%) from the 30-34 age group (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Age Groups of the Key Participants in the Youth Empowerment and Disempowerment Study in Vihiga County, Western Kenya*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 15-19	9	15.8	15.8	15.8
20-24	23	40.4	40.4	56.1
25-29	15	26.3	26.3	82.5
30-34	8	14.0	14.0	96.5
No Response	2	3.5	3.5	100.0
Total	57	100.0	100.0	

In terms of gender, 38 males (66.7%) and 19 females (33.3%) participated in the study. Forty two (73.7%) were single while fifteen (26.3%) were married. The education levels of the participants was varied as five (8.8%) had a primary school education, twenty (35.1%) were secondary school graduates, and thirty two (56.1%) had tertiary level education. Their income levels were so meager due to a myriad of factors associated with being resident in rural economies. Accordingly, 25 participants (43.9%) had a monthly income level of Kes. 1000 and below while only 05 (8.8%) had income above Kes.10,000.

According to the findings, perceived major causes of unemployment by the youth in rural were lack of capital and income-generating activities (35.1%), lack of employment opportunities (26.3%), and poor entrepreneurship skills (17.5%). The youth were asked if they knew any member from their community living and working in foreign countries or as part of the diaspora community. Thirty nine (68.4%) knew someone living abroad while seventeen (29.8%) did not know someone from the local community living, working, or studying in a foreign country. They were asked to gauge the impact of diaspora community on local development initiatives and forty two (47.4%) perceived the diaspora community had no effect while only five (8.8%) stated that the diaspora community had a major effect on the development initiatives in their communities.

The study participants expressed interest in various programs to be supported by community members living and working in the diaspora. The main programs that the rural youth would like to see diaspora involvement were education (52.6%), health 15.8%, and poverty reduction 14% respectively. Amongst the genders, females were more inclined to participate in community programs compared to men. For instance, 42.1% female and 31.6% of the male participants indicated that they always participated in the community programs. A Chi-square test of significance revealed a possible relationship ($X^2 = .097$) between gender and the rate of participation in community development programs by young people.

Most youth in the rural areas do not seem to have adequate awareness about the government of Kenya's youth programs and funds. According to the findings, thirteen participants (22.8%) were not at all aware, twenty (35.1%) slightly aware, fifteen (26.3%) moderately aware, while only three (5.3%) were fully aware about existing government of Kenya sponsored resources for the youth. There were very few sponsored programs in the communities and football matches (50.9%) and

HIV-AIDS awareness (45.6%) were identified as the main sponsored programs targeting youth in the rural communities. The participants were asked if they had any role models in the community and forty one (71.9%) had role models while sixteen (28.1%) did not have any role model in the community. The order of preferred role models were business people (42.1%), teachers (17.5%), community nurse (14%), pastor (10.5%), farmer 7%), politician (5.3%), among others. Farmers and politicians were amongst the least favored role models.

The activities identified as being helpful to young people were involvement in youth clubs or organizations (43.6%) and sports (31.6%) which were also likely to contribute to happy living in the community. A majority of the youth seemed to be dissatisfied living in the rural communities as thirteen (22.8%) were dissatisfied, twelve (21.1%) were somewhat dissatisfied, and only five (8.8%) were completely satisfied living in their local communities. The key participants were asked to choose the three main factors that affected the quality of life in the rural areas from a list that included family or home responsibilities (1), no college or place to get training near home (2), not enough motivation to succeed (3), not wanting to work hard (4), parents-family disapprove of my plans (5), corrupt local leaders (6) and other (7) factors. Not having enough motivation was chosen 32 times, corrupt leaders selected 29 times, and not wanting to succeed chosen 21 times.

Youth living in rural areas undergo various struggles. The participants were asked to choose three main factors that cause young people to engage in illicit behavior in their communities. Lack of jobs was chosen 32 times, drugs and alcohol was identified 27 times, and lack of education 19 times. According to the findings, another source of hardship for living in the rural areas was the inadequate access to information (52.6%), absence of community youth groups (22.8%), inadequate health services (14%), lack of entertainment and recreation opportunities (7%), among others.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to answer three research questions namely factors causing youth empowerment and disempowerment, struggles and hardships of living in rural communities, and the role of Kenyan diaspora community in alleviating hardships for the burgeoning youth populations in rural counties of Kenya. The findings concur with other studies targeting youth struggles (Hope, 2012; Kallaway, 2001; (Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, & Lagat, 2012). There are a lot of young people living in rural communities and this should be a concern to all stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of rural development programs. Rural areas are already marginalized geographically and in terms of resources which affects the quality of life for the residents, presenting the youth with immense struggles towards upward social mobility.

The government of Kenya has made crucial national and international policy frameworks aimed at providing basic education opportunities although the major question is whether the education system empowers the youth for the struggles that rural life presents. A theoretical system devoid of the relevant skill-based curriculum that would prepare young people to

engage in meaningful employment upon graduating is what is needed (Hope, 2011). Most rural economies are supported by agricultural production and as the study pointed out, farming garnered only 7% as one of the preferred professions in the rural areas. Besides farming being a capital intensive venture, rural communities are coping with effects of population and subsequent reduction in land acreage as family land is been subdivided to accommodate the increasing family sizes. This coupled with additional cultural factors surrounding land ownership in rural areas is a source of disempowerment for young people in rural areas. If these trends continue unabated, young people are bound to play a peripheral role in the growth and development of their rural economies for lack of income options.

Despite unemployment being a national problem, it is more pronounced in the rural areas due to limited economic opportunities (Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, & Lagat, 2012). It is contingent upon national and county governments to design youth policies and programs that can empower youth with income-generating and other entrepreneurship skills that could improve the quality of life in the rural areas. This is corroborated by the choice of business people (42.1%) as the most preferred role models in the rural areas for young people. Young people should be regarded as assets to rural economic development (Hope, 2012; Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, & Lagat, 2012). In this regard, a need exists to ensure that youth have unbridled access to information and knowledge that that is relevant to the socio-economic situation in rural areas. However, there is a paucity of information concerning government of Kenya youth programs that are supposed to empower them. Access to information is a major element of empowerment and should thus be prioritized by development agencies working with young people. Corruption is a vice that has stymied the development of such programs in Kenya. As the youth pointed out, the second factor affecting quality of life was corruption by those placed in leadership positions. We need to stem out such vices from our societies so that development and other forward trajectories can be attained.

Another source of hardship in the rural areas is the absence of enough programs for young people. It is evident that the focus of national, non-governmental, and donor agencies has been on HIV-AIDS and sports programs all of which are aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles for the youth (Prince, 2013). Whereas these are vital programs, there is need to diversify these programs to incorporate income-generating and other entrepreneurship development initiatives so that young people are empowered holistically.

The role of developing Kenya's national and county economies should not be a preserve of the national and county governments only. It is imperative to harness efforts across the spectrum so as to realize major milestones in the country's development initiatives such as the ambitious Vision 2030. Kenya's diaspora community continues to play a significant role in the economic development through financial and human capital development. At the grassroots level, there is need for concerted efforts involving the diaspora community in improving the efforts in the local community development

initiatives. The diaspora community can build on the existing programs by using networks and partnerships in foreign countries to sponsor projects at the grassroots level. This is one way of ensuring that young people are motivated to succeed in their communities and it will go to great lengths in strengthening global efforts such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed at poverty eradication (Palmer, 2007).

Rural life can present a host of challenges and opportunities to all the stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of youth policies and programs. Addressing such development challenges is immanent in the design and implementation of programs that address the educational, empowerment, and skill development needs of young people. The young people need to play a vital role beyond being recipients of development aid. It is also important to harmonize the efforts from the government, non-governmental organizations, donor agencies, and the diaspora community in the nascent efforts of developing rural county economies to curb the rural-migration impetus currently being experienced.

Conclusion

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