

Evaluation of Youth Empowerment Strategies in Rural Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article evaluates strategies for youth empowerment in rural Zimbabwe. Policies and institutions that are mandated to implement such tasks in Zimbabwe are evaluated. The paper also explores the compatibility of the said policies within a rural context. Through in-depth and key informant interviews with youths, government ministries and non-governmental organisations in Mwenezi (corroborated by secondary data), the paper provides a clearer understanding of youth empowerment policies in rural Zimbabwe. The study notes several shortcomings within the policy framework, such as tokenistic consultation in formulating, designing and implementing policies. Shortage of funds and corruption among public officers often hamper implementation, while poor coordination between actor organisations has negatively impacted youth empowerment outcomes. The paper therefore proposes context-specific policies that meet the real rural challenges as experienced by the youth, and not those imagined by policy makers/enactors. In coming up with such programmes, the paper advocates for youth participation at every stage, while also ensuring that relevant institutions are empowered to enhance the welfare/emancipation of the youth. In contributing to the broader discussion on rural African youth empowerment, this paper advocates for the mainstreaming of youth policies that are suitable for rural contexts as a way of enhancing their socio-economic emancipation.

Keywords: empowerment strategies; youth policy implementation; mainstreaming policy; rural Zimbabwe; consultative approach

Introduction

The youth empowerment drive has been quite topical across the African continent (Ile and Boadu 2018). The main reason for the increased interest is that Africa is a young continent, with 60% of the population below the age of 25 (Mariam 2015; Yahya 2017) and investing in its youth is seen as critical in building important human capital. It is



also evident that youths have been side-lined for too long, not only in their personal development but also in the development of their communities. Researchers, policy implementers, socio-economists and youth advocacy groups concur that there is a need for a comprehensive approach involving all youth groups in mainstreaming policies and institutions dealing with the youth. The demographic dividend argument on African youth demonstrates an impetus towards youth-driven socio-economic emancipation (Gay, Lee, and Ngweny 2017, 2). Apart from examining how the Zimbabwe National Youth Policy has been enacted and mainstreamed, this article also evaluates its effectiveness.

In order to understand the operationalisation of the youth empowerment drive in rural Zimbabwe, and the Mwenezi District in particular, the authors contacted and interviewed policy implementers both from the government and the private sector. The qualitative empirical investigation revealed that the prevailing challenges, within the Mwenezi District, debilitate the realisation of socio-economic emancipation amongst the youth. As lauded by other scholars, the establishment of multi-sectoral or stakeholder alliances in the equitable rights and participation discourse is of paramount importance (Berten and Leisering 2017; Chambers and Kopstein 2006). Similarly, this paper explores a multi-stakeholder approach (the mainstreaming of institutions and policies), towards engendering pro-youth, consensual and progressive policies. Through establishing the status of policy frameworks that promote empowerment amongst the youth in Zimbabwe, this paper contributes towards the understanding of the existential link between policy and development within the context of youth socio-economic empowerment.

Related studies have noted, with concern, the conspicuous absence of youth empowerment, even in policies that are meant to advance youth interests. It is noted that such a weakness will prevent proper accountability and commitment on the part of policy makers at both national and local levels (Ile and Boadu 2018). It is also widely shared that the youth have been mere spectators and not active partners. This translates to a policy package devoid of their real interests as their voices are often excluded (Gwirayi and Shumba 2011). This paper builds on such evidence and uses the sustainable livelihood lens to reflect on how policies and institutions can best be used to engender a pro-youth and consensual empowerment policy.

Literature Review

The experiences of the youth in various socio-economic and political conditions, and their outcomes, largely define youth. This study focuses on the out-of-school category, i.e., 18 to 35, which, according to the Zimbabwean Constitution of 2013, is also classified as adult (Bhebhe et al. 2015, 52). This category of the population is arguably underrepresented in policy formulation as well as policy implementation. Even such initiatives as the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Programme have not significantly transformed rural youth's access to strategic economic resources such as

land. This is despite the fact that they represent the most productive and reproductive age category in the entire population.

Youth empowerment means not only greater extrinsic control, but also a greater intrinsic capability—greater self-confidence—and an inner transformation of one's consciousness, enabling one to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology (Batliwala 2000 in Sen and Mukherjee 2013, 7). Youth empowerment is critical because the youth stage marks a transition from being economically dependent to being productive, economically self-reliant and taking on dependents in adulthood (Chalasanani 2013). According to the African Commission (2009), in Africa, young people are the majority as they constitute up to 70% of the continent's population. Youths are also the engine of growth and development in any society because they constitute the bulk of the economically active demography (Idike and Eme 2015). Youths play a critical role in the transition of society from one generation to the next and, for this reason, societies must be conscious of the imperatives of youth empowerment, not only for their future developmental needs but also as a way of preparing them as the next leaders—a move that conforms to the popular sentiment that today's young people are the leaders of tomorrow (Ozohu-Suleiman 2006).

Further to the above, peace—or the absence of it—is in part dependent on the socio-economic status of the youth. Disgruntled youths are likely to cause social instability as they fight to claim a share of economic resources or opportunities (Ide and Eme 2015). The xenophobic violence that regularly engulfs South Africa, for example, is a result of youths' feelings of disgruntlement and exclusion, with the ensuing violence being a means of venting out their existential anger (Mamabolo 2015). For these reasons, youth economic empowerment is a critical area that every nation should invest in. This suggests that policies and institutions need to be streamlined to ensure that they advance the interests of the youth as a disadvantaged group. In other words, there is a need to enact deliberate policies that spearhead sustainable livelihoods of the disempowered youths who, in the context of this study, are rural youth. Given a conducive policy environment with the requisite implementation of youth projects, youths' livelihoods can be enhanced and supported to allow their emancipation. There are a number of ways through which youth empowerment can be realised. These, according to Chalasanani (2013), include high school education, vocational education or training, awareness and information sharing, employment creation, as well as self-employment.

Previous related studies have noted the strong relationship that exists between empowerment and sustainable livelihood, as emphasised by the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach's (SLA) asset pentagon (Dutta and Guchhait-Barddhaman 2018; Udoh Akpan, and Uko 2017). However, the emphasis on the livelihood asset pentagon overlooks not only the role of policies, institutions and processes in determining access, control and use of assets, but also the choice and interaction of different livelihood strategies (Scoones and Wolmer 2003, 4). Bureaucrats, who work for the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), often influence the empowerment

outcomes among those youths who are actively involved in self-help projects. This reflects the idea that individuals, through their institutions as well as through legislation, are critical in the emancipation of ordinary rural youth. Therefore, it is important to understand issues of rights, power and institutions as they influence policy, which has long-term implications on sustainable livelihood (Carney 2002, 28). This study (through its focus on mainstreaming pro-youth policies), also seeks to determine the implications of adopting a multi-stakeholder approach in the implementation of youth empowerment policies.

Youths experience various controls in their attempt to realise socio-economic emancipation. These controls not only emanate from limitations in the operational environment, but are also imposed by policy implementers. Scoones and Wolmer (2003, 5) argue that poor people in Africa face a “complex and messy institutional context” in establishing livelihoods, and that “lines of authority and control are constructed in overlapping and often contested institutional settings.” Unless interventions are directly integrated within the local institutions/structures of governance, then significant positive change or impacts cannot occur (Toner and Franks 2006, 91). This revelation clearly demonstrates the need for mainstreaming pro-youth policies so that rural youths are “liberated” from the shackles of poverty and exploitation. The integration of efforts, therefore, calls for organisations to work in harmony towards this drive.

Zimbabwean youth in rural areas have experienced challenges in so far as accessing socio-economic amenities. Therefore, the obtaining policy framework does not deliberately seek to promote the welfare of rural youth as a distinct group and is inimical to the realisation of their emancipation. The rural context imposes challenges such as a limited market, higher prices of inputs, and neglect by policy implementers. Within this policy environment, youths in rural Zimbabwe are unlikely to be as competitive as their urban counterparts.

This paper concurs with the view that understanding policy, institutions and processes, and their relationship with governance, rights and power, helps to explain why people choose certain livelihood strategies and helps to identify where strengths lie and where restrictions, barriers and constraints occur (Scoones 1998, 12). It is also evident that an analysis of policies, institutions and processes helps to explain social processes that could influence livelihood sustainability among the rural youth in Zimbabwe. It also elucidates the environment within which the youth livelihood discourse is located, while also helping to establish how a more enabling environment for sustainable livelihoods could be achieved, i.e., how policy implementers could affect interventions.

Previous studies done in Zimbabwe have principally focused on youth employment creation through the provisioning of start-up kits (Bomani, Fields, and Derera 2015; Gwiza and Hamauswa 2015; Zindiye, Chiliya, and Masocha 2012). Most of them foreground the need for business incubation as a means towards supporting entrepreneurship. Nyika (2016) looked at the Integrated Skills Outreach Programmes

(ISOPs) and their capacity to transform livelihoods. ISOPs are outreach skills training initiatives normally implemented in rural areas to equip the rural youth with skills such as the crafting of coffee tables, keeping bees, soldering leaking pots, brick moulding, market gardening, and so forth (Murinda 2014, 23). In addressing existential literature gaps, this study calls attention to the need to mainstream pro-youth policies and institutions in order to enhance youth socio-economic empowerment in rural Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's youth empowerment programmes are embedded in its National Youth Policy (NYP) and its National Development Strategy document. The policy documents outline strategies designed by the Zimbabwean government in its quest to empower the local youth. They also cover the development strategies that the government and other private organisations seek to implement to ensure that youths in Zimbabwe are emancipated. One of the emphases is on training the youth so that they develop some vocational skills. Training and skills are widely recognised for playing a role in equipping the beneficiaries with skills and capacity development, which in turn not only enhances employability but also prepares them for self-employment. Training initiatives also promote the wellbeing of society's vulnerable groups (Masipa and Jideani 2014; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 1998), reduce household vulnerability, enhance earning capacity, self-sufficiency and livelihood diversification (De la Rocha and Grinspun 2001). The International Labour Organisation (2008) is of the view that training initiatives promote a decent work agenda and improve the quality of jobs, which in turn improves the welfare and livelihood of people. As a result, the government considers training as one of the key areas that its empowerment policy should address.

The NYP document recommends youth involvement in all stages of empowerment programmes, from planning, decision-making, implementation to evaluation (National Youth Policy 2013). This is corroborated by the National Development Strategy's vision of increased youth participation in development and decision-making processes. The two synthesise the idea of mainstreaming youth concerns in national programmes. The thrust is to "systematically integrate youth issues into all policies, plans, programmes and strategies at all levels and within all sectors and institutions of government, NGOs and the private sector" (National Youth Policy 2013, 10). This emphasises the need to institute a consensual, collaborative and progressive pro-youth development agenda for Zimbabwe. However, the reality on the ground is that centrally planned policies have no input from the youth themselves. Charumbira and Chituri (2013) support this assertion and argue that policy formulation and implementation devoid of grassroots consultations often result in policies that fail to cascade down to the intended beneficiaries.

Paying lip-service to the pro-youth development agenda creates implementation gaps as well as disillusionment amongst the youth (Gaventa and Runciman 2016). In Zimbabwe, the National Youth Policy (2013, 27) suggests that the government, as the duty bearer, has set up some mechanisms to facilitate youth policy mainstreaming, with

specific mention of strategies such as making “provision for the appointment of youth representatives or focal persons in all government departments to ensure that youth issues are mainstreamed in all facets of development.” However, this strategy has not been implemented, with the majority of Zimbabwean youths still being disenfranchised from the mainstream economy.

Other than the NYP, the government and the donor community have also initiated various programmes aimed to engage the youth in a variety of projects (Ncube 2015; Nkonya et al. 2017). These include the Graduate Entrepreneurship Employment Programme (GEEP); Kurera/Ukondla Youth Fund (administered through Central African Building Society); Training for Rural Economic Empowerment (TREE); Youth Empowerment Fund (YEF); Wealth Creation Fund (administered through Stanbic, Commercial Bank of Zimbabwe, Industrial Development Bank of Zimbabwe banks) and the Skills for Youth Employment; and Rural Development Programme (Bhebhe et al. 2015). These programmes are seen as critical in the promotion of self-reliance, critical thinking and wellbeing amongst the youth. Institutions, such as the Zimbabwe Youth Council, designed to enhance the welfare of youth in rural areas, are also critical in answering how livelihood outcomes can be shaped in rural Zimbabwe. This reveals that there is a need for a nexus between and among policies, institutions and processes that can facilitate the socio-economic empowerment of rural youths.

Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA), which enables an assessment of the degree to which institutions and policies can enhance socio-economic empowerment. The SLA is an enhanced way of thinking about the objectives, scope and priorities of development aimed at better meeting the needs of the poor by looking at their vulnerability context and exploring their access to critical livelihood assets (Ashley and Carney 1999). The SLA emphasises the role of policies and institutions in constructing livelihood assets, and the need to understand how these factors shape, affect or influence livelihoods, made this framework relevant to this study. Several scholars are also emphatic on the importance of institutions, arguing that they are the social cement that provides a means of exercising power, while also linking stakeholders to various forms of capital (Davies 1997; Saha 2019). In this study, young people’s access to livelihood capitals is conceptualised as the means to exercising power or a form of empowerment.

According to Scoones (1998), understanding institutional processes facilitates the identification of restrictions or barriers and opportunities (or “gateways”) to sustainable livelihood. In Mwenezi, the study identified how the ministerial district officials and NGOs are mostly responsible for implementing youth socio-economic (empowerment) policies, while the youth are actively engaged in sustainable livelihood strategy negotiations with local stakeholders. An institutional analysis helped shed light on the social processes that underlie livelihood sustainability in rural areas. For that reason, the SLA was most ideal for the study on Mwenezi, as it helped the researchers gain an

insight into the existential social relations and institutional power dynamics, synonymous with youth self-help initiatives.

Methodology

This qualitative study used secondary data from documents such as the National Youth Policy of 2013, the National Development Strategy One (2021-2025), the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act of 2008, and documented research studies. The study also integrated primary data from semi-structured key informant interviews held between September 2017 and March 2018 in the Mwenezi District.

The key informants included three key officials in the Ministry of Youth, Ministry of Women Affairs, and Ministry of Small Enterprises and Development, as well as workers in the non-governmental organisations involved in youth empowerment in the district, namely Mwenezi Development and Training Centre (MDTC) and Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED). Interviews also involved youths who took part in some of the empowerment programmes that were rolled out in the Mwenezi District.

Interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data generated by the interview transcripts. The main themes revolved around the need for a multi-sectoral approach in implementing youth empowerment policy, the gap between policy formulation and implementation, the need for transparency and accountability amongst policy stakeholders, and the challenges involved in policy implementation.

Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to probe into the experiences of street-level bureaucrats responsible for the implementation of youth empowerment policies in rural Zimbabwe. This section, therefore, presents and discusses the results of data obtained from the semi-structured key informant interviews that were undertaken between September 2017 and March 2018 in the Mwenezi District.

Youth Empowerment Programmes in Rural Zimbabwe

Implementing National Youth Policy: Multi-sectoral Partnerships

Government, church organisations and NGOs have collaborated in various programmes within the Mwenezi District, in line with the idea of mainstreaming youth policies and ensuring that they engender socio-economic empowerment for the unemployed rural youth. The study found that the three key ministries are coordinating with Plan International, Care International, Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED) and MDTC in the implementation of government programmes targeting the youth in the Mwenezi District. However, because the respective ministries have different result focus areas, the emphasis and target or scope have been quite varied. The following are the major empowerment programmes offered to rural youths in Mwenezi:

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- Training in various vocational skills (building, motor mechanics, welding, hotel and catering, tailoring, cosmetology, driving and agriculture).
- Entrepreneurship training with courses like bookkeeping (record keeping), stocktaking, marketing and finance sourcing.
- Funding of youth income-generating projects.
- Implementing youth advocacy and leadership development, by the Zimbabwe Youth Council.
- Coordinating awareness campaigns on health and wellbeing, by National Aids Council and the Ministry of Health.
- Implementing the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Programme, under the community share ownership trusts.
- Registering youth clubs and associations under the Zimbabwe Youth Council.

While the acquisition of skills is in keeping with the promotion of sustainable livelihoods, youths are not adequately supported to implement their projects. This has resulted in idle skills amongst the youth who, although now equipped with cosmetology, motor mechanics and dressmaking skills, still have no start-up capital to put their skills to practice. The literacy levels have also militated against the implementation of entrepreneurial skills, such as book keeping, because of youths' limited comprehension of financial matters. The main gap is clearly the funding of these programmes, hence the projects' sustainability after pulling out of the NGOs is questioned.

Mukuhlani (2014) raises similar sentiments in reporting a study on youth empowerment through small business development within peri-urban areas in Gweru. As such, skills alone (human capital), in the absence of funding (financial capital), do not translate to complete empowerment, and hence the need to ensure that youths have access to other important livelihood assets to realise total emancipation.

The respondent from the Ministry of Youth indicated that in implementing the National Youth Policy, they often mobilise the youth, train the youth, source funding for their programmes, while also doing follow-ups to ensure the effective implementation of projects. In supporting income-generating projects for the unemployed youth, the government participants also mentioned how their ministries are responsible for coordinating responses through collaborations with NGOs. The research findings also confirm that the three ministries have teamed up with Plan International in the training of 300 youths in 2017, as illustrated in table 1 below.

Table 1: Training provided for youths in three wards in 2017

Type of project training	Ward	Number of beneficiaries
Building	1,2 and 5	62
Motor mechanics	5	21
Cosmetology	1,2 and 5	73
Hotel and Catering	5	25
Tailoring	1,2 and 5	69
Agriculture	2	20
Driving	1,2 and 5	30
Total		300

While the figures in table 1 look impressive, numbers alone do not always translate to total socio-economic transformation. The study noted that some of the graduates or beneficiaries have not positively benefited from taking part in some of these empowerment activities, and their livelihood situations remain unchanged. For example, youth who underwent training in cosmetology, hotel and catering, and motor mechanics, among other skills, noted that what they were trained in is not relevant, since these services are not available in their rural context. To utilise these skills, one has to move to an urban centre, which is, however, against one of the core objectives of rural empowerment, i.e., to empower rural people and their communities so as to curb rural to urban migration. One respondent noted: “I am now a qualified cosmetologist but there are no opportunities in this township where I stay.” Other issues raised by the youths who benefited from the more relevant skills or trades, such as horticulture, were that the market is not readily available and thus they are forced to either ferry their produce to town (which attracts additional costs), or sacrifice their profits by selling them at giveaway prices. This inadvertently weakens the livelihood outcomes, despite the youth having acquired the requisite skills.

Although some of the activities being implemented by the ministries’ project officers were not readily available, one participant mentioned that cumulative statistics are recorded in reports to capture the daily routine of work done. The Ministry of Youth representative had this to say:

Alongside vocational skills training, once the youth is trained, we can issue loans if the funds are available. We have loans as the government from the Ministry of finance. We also have loans and start-up kits from other stakeholders like non-governmental organisations who also help us a lot in the training exercise so that these youths can start their own business.

The respondent from the Ministry of Women Affairs and the one from the Ministry of SMEs indicated that they do not work with the youth per se, and they had sketchy details on the strategies for youth empowerment being implemented. However, they indicated

that amongst their clients, there are people who fall into the category of youth. The Women Affairs representative said:

In 2017, we have managed to do eight training programmes. Each training programme had 40 participants training at a time. The ministry has also trained the beneficiaries in Income and Savings Lending Schemes. (ISALS)

Such training is understood to be supported in the policy documents of the concerned ministries. This reinforces the argument that mainstreaming of youth policies is a critical step towards engendering socio-economic empowerment among the youth. Acquisition of skills is something the youth regard highly and it gives them the means with which to sustain their livelihoods. This view is also shared by Moore (2015), who argues that youths need such skills in order to make informed choices and have the assets (knowledge, confidence, networks, and physical and financial resources) to transition successfully into sustainable work for themselves or others. These are also elements that are articulated in the SLA (Ashley and Carney 1999).

Training and Skills Development

The sustainable livelihoods framework is built on the premise that individual youths need assets to achieve a positive livelihood outcome that is also sustainable. Training, knowledge and skills, which, together with good health and the ability to labour, are conceptualised as human capital by the livelihoods approach, and are examples of assets important to achieve the desired livelihood outcomes (Petersen and Pedersen 2010). The participants from the interviewed ministries applauded the role of NGOs in ensuring that youth vocational skills training became a reality. It is also prudent to note that such interventions from civil society were only possible thanks to the conducive environment created by the central government, i.e., where the operation of non-state actors in districts such as Mwenezi is allowed.

The arrangement is compatible with the SLA, which gives pre-eminence to policies and the institutional environment for positive livelihood outcomes. Street-level bureaucrats from both the government and the corporate world therefore constitute the principal partners whose involvement is key in implementing youth livelihood programmes. It is prudent to understand that youths in rural areas may have limited power to influence their external environment and have to depend on the government to support them. This is where the SLA becomes useful, because it provides a way to incorporate a systemic and holistic way of describing the factors that affect the livelihoods of the poor (Petersen and Pedersen 2010, 6).

Through Plan International (as the lead funding organisation), youths from various wards were mobilised to Mushagashe Training Centre where the actual training was undertaken. As illustrated in this scenario, the challenges to youth socio-economic aspirations can be successfully overcome through what Verma and Peterson (2018, 467) term “multi-stakeholder partnerships.” Multi-stakeholder partnerships are

collaborations that take on board youth interest groups, the private sector and the government in enhancing youth emancipation. Government ministries are part of the structures and institutions that shape the livelihood outcomes among the youth. Indeed, they determine ownership rights and laws to secure the rights of the individuals in a sustainable livelihoods framework (Petersen and Pedersen 2010). Contrary to the NYP talks about marshalling the requisite resources necessary for undertaking youth programmes, evidence in Mwenezi showed that the youth are mainly relying on donor sponsorship to undergo vocational training.

The government key informants reiterated that the training of youths in different life skills in the district is part of the drive to unlock opportunities for the rural youth in Zimbabwe. However, they had divergent views on how to go about the process as they represent different ministries with different visions. For example, the Women Affairs (Gender) representative emphasised the aspect of women's emancipation with little regard to age, thereby excluding the male section of society (as well as not focusing on the 18–35 age category i.e., the main delineation of the study). Further to this, the participant from the Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) argued that their prerogative had nothing to do with youth, but rather the capacity building of Small and Medium Enterprises. The SMEs Ministry participant, however, acknowledged that the bulk of their clientele comprised people classifiable as youth (18–35 years) (Africa Union 2006; National Youth Policy 2013, 5).

Youth Socio-economic Empowerment: Implementation

Findings indicated that the failure to involve rural youths in the policy formulation process, as well as in the policy implementation stage, has adversely affected the effective implementation of such policies. It is evident that top-down, externally driven interventions are unable to resolve the appetite for socio-economic empowerment. Thus, youths as beneficiaries need to participate in the policy formulation and implementation so that their interests are considered. This line of argument is also shared by the critical social empowerment theorists, who jettison the idea of programming for the youth without their involvement (Jennings et al. 2006). Recommendations were that, in making the policy relevant and appealing to the intended beneficiaries, there was a need to make the policy consensual.

Civil Society Interventions

It was generally agreed among the respondents of this study that implementing youth projects in the Mwenezi District is a feasible solution to the challenge of youth unemployment. Civil society respondents echoed the same sentiments as government ministry informants, i.e., they emphasised the need to mainstream youth empowerment policy. They also agreed that pro-youth development initiatives could improve the livelihood of the whole family. One respondent from Plan International said:

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These are the people who are still energetic and they are at their most productive stage. Supporting youth will create opportunities for them as well as those of their families. Our organization therefore takes pride in supporting youth entrepreneurship through vocational skills training.

Similar sentiments were echoed by the respondent from CAMFED, who said female youths need to be given start-up capital to initiate income-generating projects. In concurrence with work on rural Zimbabwe by Chiweshe, Chakona, and Helliker (2015), the CAMFED respondent said that traditionally, females were oppressed and denied socio-economic opportunities, hence the need to mainstream youth empowerment policies. She added:

While policies address youth as one common group, female youth have been subjected to exclusive exploitation that demands affirmative action to advance their interests.

From a comparison of the two interview excerpts, it is discernible that the organisations conceptualise institutional or policy mainstreaming differently from government. What is common, though, is that the NGO sector also campaigns for the reinforcement of structures to ensure that the welfare of the youth is guaranteed.

Findings on how the concerns of the rural youth are being addressed by NGOs projects indicate some marked variances. The CAMFED respondent revealed that the concerns of the rural female youth are largely being addressed. The organisation helped the beneficiaries with capital, a gesture that has positively influenced the female youth who typically encounter financial constraints in implementing self-help projects. One female participant said:

I am really thankful to CAMFED for they gave me the start-up capital to buy a sewing machine as well as garments to start my sewing project.

Youth concerns were highlighted as having been addressed through:

- Accessing start-up capital through loans that are not charged any interest.
- Gaining financial independence and emancipation.
- Experiencing freedom from masculine oppression and dominance.
- Increasing self-esteem among female youth beneficiaries.
- Finding a voice to speak their minds within their villages.
- Experiencing business expansion and employment creation.
- Gaining critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

On the other hand, the key informant from MDTC indicated some limitations that pertain to meeting the concerns of the youth, i.e., most of the projects, such as tailoring, require markets. He also highlighted the challenge of funding, especially start-up capital, saying that funding needed for the procurement of materials has been a

challenge. As mentioned, these challenges render many (post-vocational training) skills obsolete amongst the youth, as without requisite funding, the skilled youth remain idle.

With regards to changing the policy framework, the civil society participants' responses indicated a lot of scepticism. They said that their "hands are tied" as their mandate is to complement the government rather than compete with the government. However, they expressed the need to embrace the rural youth as an independent population with its own special interests, different from those in urban areas. They also suggested that training be extended to the unemployed youth in the rural communities, to put them on par with their counterparts in the contemporary world. More so, they highlighted the need to integrate aspects of critical thinking or problem solving within the youth training curriculum. In a similar vein, the study identified a need to prioritise practical subjects at school so that, when leaving formal school, the youth will be in a position to implement the self-help projects (even without any funding or further training).

The respondents, however, expressed ignorance on government legislations that promote youth empowerment. They could not give examples of provisions that need to be emphasised or gotten rid of. One respondent said:

Unfortunately, on that aspect ... umm I would rather refer you to the relevant ministry. I am not sure of the correct provisions.

While the NGO respondents shared the idea of mainstreaming policies, they differed on emphasis, as has already been highlighted. This signifies the need to capture the interests of multiple groups when addressing the policy objectives of mainstream youth empowerment.

Government Interventions

It was shared by the interviewees that many youths appear to be reluctant and defiant instead of being forthcoming, mostly because the projects are driven from outside their communities. Active participation by the rural youth is commensurate with critical social empowerment among the youth. Moreover, government ministry officials said that the policies need to be accompanied by resources. The resources singled out include material, financial and human resources. The researchers noted that the government personnel might be qualified in their job but do not have the resources to implement the policy provisions concerning the rural youth. In trying to improve the effectiveness of policy as well as enhancing awareness among the beneficiaries, an emphasis was made on the importance of adequate resource provisioning.

In the wake of the above, the interviewees (key policy implementers) suggested the adoption of a raft of measures to ensure that the self-help projects being implemented by the government become workable and promote sustainable livelihoods for the youth. This was done within the confines of a policy framework created by the government in a bid to cushion the youth against the vagaries of unemployment and poverty. In the

wake of an existential lack of requisite skills amongst the youth to sustain viable projects, with the end result being the abandonment of previously initiated projects, interventions to mitigate against this included:

- Selecting people or mobilising people to engage in projects that they have skills in and can implement.
- Running training workshops on entrepreneurship and business management.
- Encouraging youths to do projects that they have an interest in.
- Doing away with the idea of giving cash for the self-help projects (giving cash might tempt the beneficiaries to use the cash for other unrelated purposes; hence giving equipment was seen as an alternative).
- Supporting beneficiaries who have running projects rather than those in need of start-up capital.
- Doing feasibility studies before the projects are given some funds.

These measures are understood to be progressive in the sense that they promote the efficiency of the youth projects. According to the respondents, ever since the paradigm shift, the number of projects being abandoned has significantly reduced. In a sense, they said promoting the marketing and diversification of activities reaped benefits for the youth to sustain their livelihoods as well as helping in the acquisition of livestock, immovable property and cash. Training also equipped the youth with critical skills, increased their self-esteem, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. While key attributes such as critical thinking and improved self-esteem could be difficult to authenticate, it is imperative that the key informants were in agreement that policy-driven youth entrepreneurship leads to the acquisition of such skills.

Challenges in Implementing Youth Empowerment Policy

Youth socio-economic empowerment is premised on the available policies and how these policies are implemented. Although the key informants in this study acknowledged that available policies and policy documents are sound and attractively phrased, mention was also made of how it is unfortunate that the potential to fully empower the youth is limited by a myriad of challenges. These challenges include limited financial resources, political interference from the ZANU PF officials, defaults in paying back the loans, and looting by public officers. There is a feeling that youth beneficiaries have rarely been from the poverty stricken, remote and rural areas. Rather, it is claimed that patronage and nepotism have affected access to the funds (Warikandwa and Osode 2017, 23). Thus, the policy initiative has been riddled with some controversies from the onset. Despite these misgivings, the participants said the policies are, nevertheless, enhancing youth socio-economic empowerment mainly through:

- Providing the opportunity for training in vocational skills.
- Supporting youth projects with funding modalities.
- Guaranteeing a conducive operational environment for project implementation.

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- Running awareness campaigns and information dissemination.
- Providing a sound institutional framework and active political, administrative and technical support.
- Running a number of programmes out of these policies, e.g., youth advocacy and leadership development.

While there is an argument in support of the youth policy's contribution to youth socio-economic empowerment by researchers (Mambo 2010; Murinda 2014, 25), who suggest that these policies have nurtured some successful youth projects, especially the Zimbabwe Youth Employment Network (ZIYEN), some reservations were also expressed by the key informants. They indicated that the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act (IEEA) is not yielding much result for the youth in Mwenezi. Although Section 3(1) (a) of the IEEA [Chapter 14, 33] of 2007 stipulates that "at least fifty-one per centum of the shares of every public company and any other business shall be owned by indigenous Zimbabweans" (Warikandwa and Osode 2017, 2), the visibility of the IEEA is almost non-existent. Apart from participants complaining that most of the youth in the district do not even know about the existence of the IEEA, the Ministry of Youth respondent lamented over how the revenue realised from Community Share Ownership Schemes, such as the Mwenezana Estate (a sugar cane plantation in the district), was too little to bring any significant change.

Three key informants from different ministries reported similar challenges inhibiting the smooth implementation of the youth empowerment policy. It was revealed that implementing policies is not easy, given how there are contestations that arise from the divergence in focus areas or scopes amongst stakeholders. The respondent from the Ministry of SMEs said:

We struggle to find the youth when we want to train them. Conflicting programmes sometimes fall on exactly the same day. This happens on most Wednesdays when people will not be attending their fields or other chores ...

Political Interference

The Ministry of SMEs' interviewee argued that the implementation of the youth programme is politicised. It is argued that members of the ruling ZANU PF determine who gets what, when and how. Such power dynamics are clear evidence that structural limitations determine the youth livelihood outcomes. Thus, policies and institutions, as emphasised in the SLA, determine the ability of the youth to access livelihood opportunities in the Mwenezi District. In essence, the three respondents were sceptical of how the policies can suite local communal environments, all with uniquely divergent attributes of their own. While the officers acknowledged that the policy is clearly worded, they said the government should be more serious, especially on the allocation of funds for the execution of self-help projects in the district. Political interference and a lack of resources were mentioned as some of the impediments to the effective implementation of programmes.

It was also claimed that officials from the governing party (ZANU PF) usually interfere with the projects implemented by the Ministry officials as well as those programmes funded by NGOs. Other scholars, such as Alexander and McGregor (2013), also identify this as common conduct amongst African political parties, whereby resources and opportunities are exploited for political control. Evidence of this interference was most notable when it came to shortlisting or selecting beneficiaries for funding or training programmes. In Lesotho, for instance, interference from political leadership was also found to be a problem incapacitating poverty reduction programmes (Hapazari and Hapazari 2019). In Zimbabwe, the ZANU PF party was equally blamed during the interviews for demanding that its loyal followers be given all the opportunities.

Limited Resources: Challenges in Securing Funding for Youth Projects

Regarding the issues of how youth policy can be mainstreamed to ensure that projects are successfully implemented, the three key informants expressed different views. Responses were that their ministries have different sources of finance (Youth Fund, Women Development Fund and SMEs fund). The Ministry of Youth indicated that funds allocated into their coffers by the Ministry of Finance as well as other stakeholders, such as Old Mutual, are usually disbursed in the form of loans to the youth. Information obtained from the Ministry of Women Affairs highlighted that up until November 2017, around 41 groups had benefited from the Women Development Fund. For example, the Rutenga Quarry Group got equipment worth US\$10,000. The Ministry of SMEs highlighted that the Oil Producing and Exporting Countries (OPEC) Fund for International Development (OFID) gave them US\$7.8 million for three poverty-stricken provinces, namely Masvingo, Manicaland and Matebeleland North. The proceeds were thereafter designated to both cooperatives and individuals undertaking community development projects, such as livestock production, horticultural projects, metal fabrication, wood carving and tailoring projects, among others. All three key informants shared the view that the introduction of self-help projects, funded by NGOs and the government, was indeed part of the youth empowerment policy.

Although the key informants in this study largely concurred that the national policy provides for the training of the youth in various vocational skills such as carpentry, metal fabrication and garment construction (National Youth Policy 2013, 15), the government lacks the requisite capacity to fund such training. In the Mwenezi District, policy implementers help fund critical youth programmes that include, but are not confined to, vocational skills training. Thus, as stated above, the Ministry of Youth and the Ministry of SMEs have had to heavily rely on financial assistance from the NGO community (Bornstein 2004; Sithole et al. 2013). Findings in this study also indicate that, although quite willing, youths are unable to pay for the available entrepreneurial skills training. In response to this, the Ministry of Youth and the Ministry of SMEs explored strategic partnerships with willing partners from the NGO community and committed to ensuring that such training is successful. Also, youths have had to rely on family, friends, government loans, grants, as well as funds from NGOs, to finance their self-help projects such as dressmaking, poultry production, carpentry and horticultural

production. The assistance of family and friends, in the context of the livelihoods approach, constitutes part of social capital, while loans from the government and other funders make up financial capital, both of which are regarded as important resources, critical in the creation of sustainable livelihoods.

Although the respondents acknowledged the critical role played by the corporate world, they were quick to note that such support is limited to specific wards or genders, which adversely affects the progress of policy implementation in rural Zimbabwe. Also mentioned were challenges related to communication, transport, resources, as well as understaffing. It was reported that all the district offices have mobility challenges since they do not have cars, and, coupled with the other existential challenges, policy implementation initiatives are rendered impractical. The quest to understand the effectiveness of a multi-stakeholder approach (as a panacea to some of the said shortcomings), led the researchers to seek the perspectives of representatives from the NGOs.

Conclusion

An evaluation of the key strategies being used by different stakeholders to enhance the emancipation of youth demonstrated that collaboration is critical. The government on its own has no capacity to steer pro-youth development projects. This is because it lacks the necessary human resources, finance and technical expertise. Although the National Development Strategy document clearly outlines the various strategies to be used, it is bereft of the much needed funding. The involvement of NGOs and other partners is critical, as demonstrated by the interventions made by Plan International, CAMFED, MDTC and Care International to train and fund the youth in the Mwenezi District. However, it should be noted that many of the training programme beneficiaries are yet to execute some entrepreneurial projects, as they lack start-up capital. The absence of start-up capital inadvertently means that the skilled youth may remain idle, even after having acquired training. In the wake of such challenges, the capacity for training to transform youth livelihoods has been largely compromised.

The selective approach of the donors in identifying beneficiaries has also extended and intensified clusters of inequality. Location according to wards is evidently critical for one to benefit from the Plan International sponsored projects. One's gender also determines one's qualification for CAMFED grants. This is against the spirit of gender-blind development and it has negatively affected the perception of youths in the district on policy implementation. While the logic behind such programming rests with the relevant organisations, youths trapped in poverty barely understand such segregation. Besides, some female beneficiaries of the grants have also developed signs of dependency, a significant drawback to independent development.

Although mainstreaming and involvement of the youth is clearly spelt out in the National Youth Policy and NSD1, the study noted that the youth in rural areas have been side-lined in the formulation and implementation of these policies. The key

informants agreed that circulars from the directorate in their ministries determine the day-to-day operations of their respective ministries. As an antithesis to what Berten and Leisering (2017) term “inter-organisational exchanges”, such vertical top-down approaches to policy formulation and execution are problematic as they muffle the needs and interests of the rural youth. Thus, it is important that both Government and NGOs improve their development approach and institute a stream of needs assessment exercises to address the implementation gaps that consequentially arise from centrally planned policies. There has been an improvement with the setting up of community information centres that enable the sharing of critical information, which improves coordination among various stakeholders.

In this light, the study concludes that pro-youth policies have the capacity to transform the lives of the youth who are leading hopeless lives due to unemployment and poverty in the rural areas. It takes a government that embraces collaboration with other stakeholders to transform the livelihoods of the youth facing artificial barriers and enormous compliance costs. The rural youth can be rescued through deliberate policies that remove burdensome regulations, inhibiting the implementation of successful entrepreneurial projects. Ideally, youth in remote and rural contexts need to be given some preferential treatment because they already grapple with many challenges regarding access to information, credit and markets. Officials working in government and those from NGOs concur that there is a need to mainstream pro-youth policies and institutions in rural Zimbabwe in general, and the Mwenezi District in particular.

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