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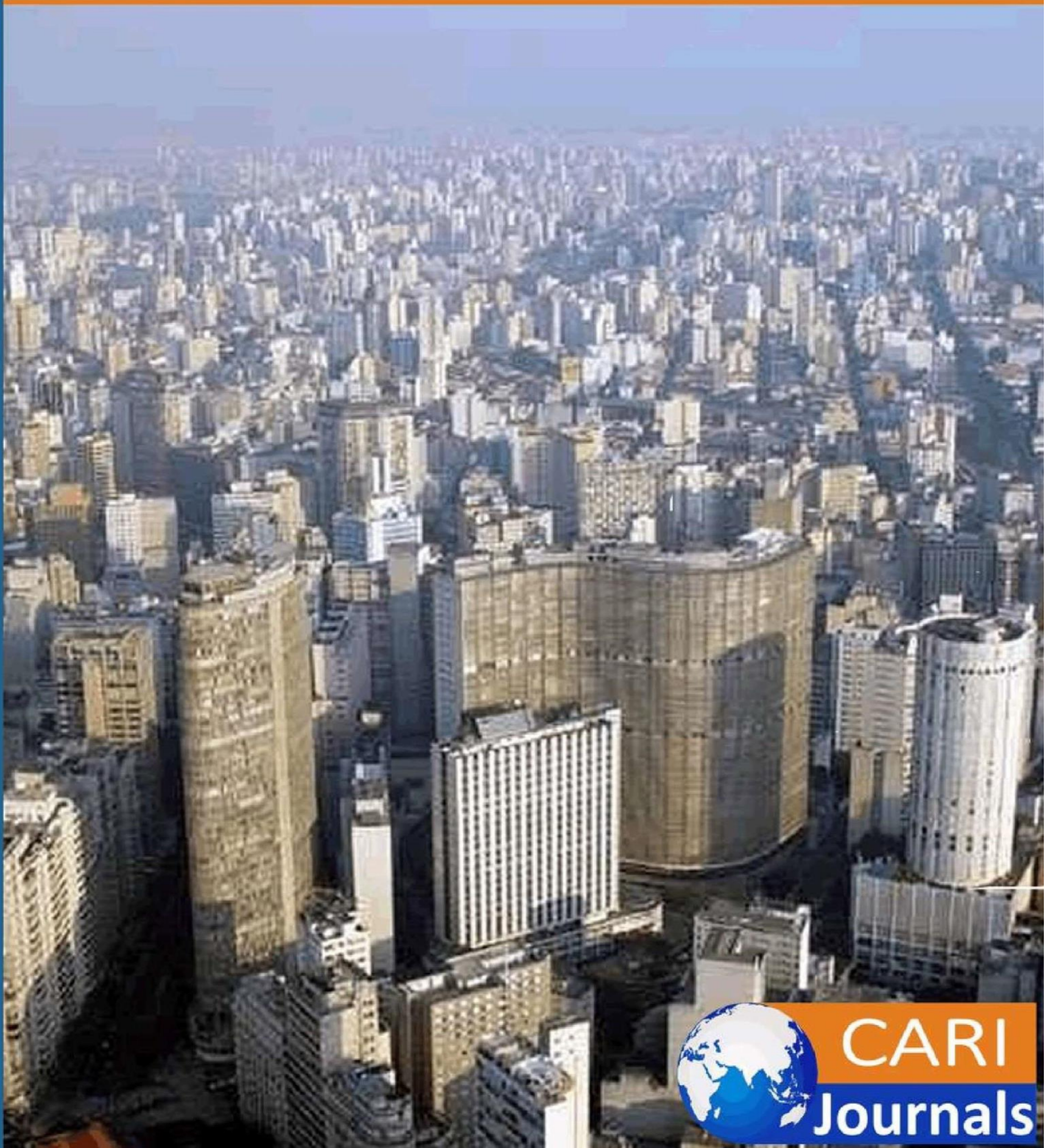

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A perspective review on the paradigm shift in Local Economic Development interventions in developmental Uganda

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to investigate the success of one LED intervention – the youth livelihood program from obtainable literature.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk review method using secondary data from obtainable policy, theoretical and empirical literature.

Findings: Results suggest a recurrent problem in the selection of beneficiaries, inept business management skills of the youth selected and/or administrative incompetence of fund administrators. Consequently, the need to refocus the current training on agricultural value addition training with a view of meeting the credit value criteria of Commercial Banks and relevant agencies tasked with disbursement of Youth Entrepreneurship Funds is key.

Recommendations: It is encouraged that training of youth in business development, scaling, marketing, and management be integrated into the BTVET curriculum and supported by mentorship programs upon completion of their formal training. Also, mentorships and business incubators and/or hubs need to be set up and to be accessed by the youth themselves country wide.

Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: This analysis contributes to the LED policy and YLP practice seeing that it targets household level income generation, creation of prosperity and enhanced sources of revenue, as well as giving support to the active poor to progress basing on the available means.

Keywords: *Local economic development, Youth livelihood program, value addition, training, mentorship*

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to analyse the narrative of Local Economic Development (LED) indicating, in each case, selected patterns of change within the LED strategy in Uganda. In his study, Mwesigwa (2020) reveals that the promotion of LED, as one of the key development strategies in Uganda, became particularly evident after government developed the rural growth stratagem and consequently had it integrated in a number of sector initiatives. Giving priority to LED within the auspices of local governments with a view of enhancing economic development in communities as well as enhancing minimum household income. The perception of LED, as a strategy, is an attitude that supports household level income generation, creation of prosperity and enhanced sources of revenue, and give support to the active poor to progress basing on the available means. LED is perceived as a basis of community growth that intends to stimulate improved household prosperity as well as enriching the financial potential of a community. It aims to promote community transformation as well as strengthening practical partnerships among the three sectors, namely public, private and non-for-profit for better incomes.

The LED strategy became central, not only in Uganda but in several African countries over the past decades as a possible means to enhance sustainable community development (Atisa, Zemrani and Weiss, 2021; Henderson et al., 2021; Gill, Mankelow and Mills, 2019; Oppel et al., 2021). This is largely so because the extent to which governments are capable of transforming local communities from poverty to prosperity, in the 21st century, is attracting the attention of a number of scholars and policy makers (Partridge, 2022; Abisuga-Oyekunle, Patra and Muchie, 2020; Osabohien et al., 2019; Sinyolo and Mudhara, 2018; Fosu, 2018). This interest appears to be contingent upon a number of factors. The first is that global discourse is undergoing a rapid change in a number of aspects as revealed by available studies. For example, a study by Pitan (2016:1) suggested that there are signs that patterns of development are rapidly changing with new sectors emerging, and with technology, globalisation and demographic changes significantly reforming the development trends. The implication of this change is that it is no longer enough for governments to put in place development policies as means to enhancing societal transformation but they should also seek means to engaging the target groups so that they can become of the development process rather than remaining as passive recipients. This has been revealed by recent studies regarding the participation of farmers in Vietnam (Van Nguyen and Lv, 2021); youth participation through agriculture in Nigeria (Osabohien et al., 2021); and smallholder farmer's participation in modern agri-value chain in China (Wang et al., 2021).

The second is that the prevailing global economy is no long generating an atmosphere for expanded employment opportunities for the most demanding group, the youths, especially those that are graduating from universities and other tertiary institutions across nations (Lim, Soon and Duan, 2021; Rotimi, Enimola and Ochidi, 2021; Mwenje, 2021; Mgaiwa, 2021; Kang and Xiong, 2021). In fact, the patterns of global development appear to move away from that notion to one where fewer human labour is required. Talk about the fourth industrial revolution; the robots, self-driven cars, e-commerce, e-learning, the list is endless (Teo et al., 2021; Luz et al., 2021; Rotatori, Lee and Sleeva, 2021; Mwesigwa, 2020). All these are increasingly limiting opportunities for direct human labour and instead increasing opportunities for fewer highly trained experts to serve a large mass in a more efficient way.

Governments, especially those in the less-developing world, have been criticised for the fact that their development policy mix has little or no relevance to the economic needs of the economically vulnerable communities such as the youths and women in their countries (Scholvin, 2021; Ozcelik et al., 2021; Ruthowski and Ruthowski, 2021). As a consequence, this has left a number of nations with surging numbers of both unemployed and unemployable youths. In uganda, indications from past studies show that the high rate of poverty experienced by the youths and the rural communities is not only as a result of opportunities, but also because of a dearth of strategies and programmes that can facilitate the most vulnerable to individually or collectively breakthrough the poverty trap such as self-employment initiatives (Lakwo and De Haan, 2021) and vocational skills training (Lakwo, 2021). Evidence in support of this assertion shows that of the high number of poor households, a good number of them are poor possibly because of their lack of necessary supportive programmes and strategies in terms of income generating activities (Noah, Charles and Yiga, 2021) or formal and non-formal skills improvement (Mugabi et al., 2021). Also, it has been claimed that a greater ratio of the poor youths in Uganda are either unemployed or unemployable. According to Banga et al. (2021), a number of youths and women who find work are not gainfully employed, and for those who find fulfilling employment in spite of everything, their employers raise serious concerns about their attitude and fitness for work hence the need to focus on financing youth enterprises for self-employment. Similarly, it has been suggested that there is an overall skills mismatch of over sixty percent among employed youths, with critical deficiencies in a number of aspects such as critical thinking, entrepreneurial and technical abilities. The suggestion appears to be consistent to other revelations from similar studies, such as Mugabi et al. (2021) and Apunyo et al. (2022). The extent of poverty in the less-developing world is further supported by the fact that a good number of young people in Uganda are unemployable.

The notion of poverty, especially at the household level, has become a great concern to a number of scholars and commentators (including the President of Uganda who has asserted that while government desires macro-level growth and development, more interest should be focussed on the micro-level particularly household poverty because any national development that fails to translate into household betterment is not a relevant interventions. Usually, it is the expectation of members in the various households to enhance their incomes. Obtainable studies confirm the rationality of this expectation from the perspective of the human development theory, which explains that improving the lives people lead is key rather than assuming that economic growth will lead, automatically, to greater opportunities for all, that is, income grow this an important means to development, rather than an end in itself. Also, human development is about giving people more freedom and opportunities to live lives they value. But with the current problem where lack of opportunities contributes to poverty (with all its attendant consequences, such as dependency ratio, social ills and delinquent behaviour, this expectation is a mere illusion for many households.

In view of the scale of household poverty in Uganda, this paper analyses selected interventions that have been adopted in the country since the year 2000. Although efforts have been made by scholars such as… to develop interventions aimed to raising household wealth, it appears a number of these interventions are not home-grown and fall short of sustainability and so none of them seems completely sustainable for Uganda where the conditions appear different. In Uganda, available studies on household wealth enhancement are few, and such studies mostly outline different attributes that can lead to economic growth and poverty reduction at both household and community levels. They fail to discuss how and why previous interventions have failed to attain the goals otherwise envisaged by government.

The LED discourse

This study analyses selected LED strategies that have dominated recent literature in both policy and academic literature on sustainable community transformation. It is envisaged that by analysing selected strategies will offer a profound glimpse on whether LED remains as relevant as it was thought to be at both continental level and national level. This is so because LED moves into encouraging popular participation as well as social dialogue, linking communities and their obtainable resources for improved service and a greater excellence of life for both women and men, girls and boys. Organisations, such as the International labour organisation, aims to enhance a LED-encapsulated notion of decent work for all by focussing specifically on growth, poverty reduction and social inclusion. As a consequence, ILO positions LED strategies among nations that suffer the world-wide employment disasters (in form of gross unemployment especially among young people), raising the consistency and efficacy between national policy agendas and community pragmatisms.

The concept LED has increasingly become one of the most popular terms before and during Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) age. This is largely so because of the belief that achieving sustainable development calls for deliberate attention to the local communities who form the largest global population. As a result, transforming such communities would yield great milestone to the global, regional, and national leaderships geared towards promoting descent citizenry. This suggests that through LED, the ability of a target community is enhanced with a view of improving its monetary prospect and the value of life for residents. This is achieved in way that through LED strategies an essential impact is made towards a country's economic path something that has become more important seeing the rise in global competition, immigration and emigration, advances in scientific technologies and substantial spatial variances and disparities (Regasa, Fielding and Roberts, 2021). In spite of everything, a successful local development is admirable because of its propensity to moderate disproportions between poor communities and the wealthy communities, enhance the amount of locally created employment and businesses, grow the general stock of private sector players, increase the flow of info between shareholders and developers, as well as increasing the consistency and poise with which local economic approach is followed. This can likewise lead to improved analytical valuation of local economic resources and benefits, and result into stronger analysis of the development strategy.

A study by Wiyono, Mahanani and Kurniawan (2021:91) reveals that the LED strategy allows members in the local communities to get and to partake in community development activities and to become frontrunners in choosing and processing locally-based resources, including social and natural, to create financial bonds. This is justified by the fact that economic growth grounded on community resources is expected to engage workforce from the same members within the local communities and generate new occupations, increase the local capitals as well as decreasing the scale of regional disparities. This way, LED offers an opening for local governments, groups and the private sector to join forces to reinforce the local budget by nurturing invention in their local potential (Talebian, Hanachi, Taymourtash, 2022:4). As a consequence, this process boosts competitiveness and promotes long-term economic growth.

Available statistics suggest different LED models in different countries. For instance, a study by Vanderleeuw et al. (2022:9) indicates that LED intervention in the state of Texas (United States) has been executed and improved through city-level economic growth companies with a view of creating equity among participants.

Theorising LED strategies

This study adopts the model of Community-Driven Development (CDD) that espouses four key principles, namely; transparency, which is presented as a central concept in both community-level development and national, regional and global necessity for sustainable development agendas (Gupta, Boas and Oosterveer, 2020; Mason, 2020; Tran and Anh La, 2021), participation (an now coupled with e-participation mechanisms) is strongly connected to community or organisational welfare, as a direct association and as one facilitated (Graham et al., 2022; Hovdhaugn and Opheim, 2018), accountability, which is not just a requirement but a cross-cutting issue in every aspect of government intervention (Yates, Gebreiter and Lowe, 2019) and enhanced local capacity in terms of long-term education and short-term training (Mataya, Vincent and Dougill, 2020; Susskind and Kim, 2021). This is so because when there is clear and transparent rules, access to information, and appropriate technical and financial support, poor communities can effectively organise to identify community priorities and address local problems by working in partnership with local governments and other institutions to build small-scale infrastructure and deliver basic services. In spite of everything, the World Bank recognises that CDD approaches and action are important elements of an effective-reduction and sustainable development strategy. In a number of countries, CDD operations are the only safety net available to reach remote and vulnerable groups in a timely and credible manner. They have a strong track record in moving funds quickly and flexibly in response to disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A case in point, as a complement to household cash transfers, community-level grants that are based on community emergency plans can be distributed to rural villages and urban neighbourhoods since community leaders often know best what the specific needs are in each community.

Statement of the problem

The main focus of this paper is the prevailing situation of local economic development (LED) implementation in Uganda, which is a major contributory factor to household poverty in the country. There are indication that household poverty being experienced in Uganda is structural in nature, that is, a number of households are poor for lack of development programmes to provide economic empowerment. This situation is a big challenge for the relevance of LED strategies that have been implemented since 2000 namely Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA), National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), Women Empowerment Programme (WEP), Prosperity-For-All (PFA) and Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP), to mention just a few and thus, needs immediate attention. In light of this challenge, this paper investigates a selected LED intervention (Youth livelihood program) in Uganda so as to help facilitate policy makers and implementers on better ways to eradicating household poverty in the country. As a consequence, this study is nested in the framework of analysing the goals, achievements, challenges and way forward in one of the LED interventions so far adopted by the Government of Uganda – the Youth Livelihood Program (YLP). In the process, we reveal the numerous contradictions inherent LED interventions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk review method using secondary data from obtainable policy, theoretical and empirical literature on LED in Uganda and other nations of the world. In this method, information was gathered from obtainable sources, for example, policy documents, academic journals, empirical reports and the internet. This process was followed by cross-referencing and organisation of data, in themes, since much of the materials can be gathered and later used as a stock at any stage of the study process. Also, a document review guide, with five sections covering: the LED discourse, theories on LED, the YLP program, contradictions inherent the YLP and possible way forward for YLP, was used. Since the study took a desk review, data analysis was conducted concurrently from the start until the end.

The Youth Livelihood Program (YLP)

Though a number of studies have revealed that acquisition of entrepreneurial skills and income precede increased autonomy, cultural freedom and democratic participation (Welzel, Inglehart and Klingemann, 2003:7), the Arab Spring demonstrated how "well educated and tech-savvy" youths have the potential to effectively mobilize themselves "using new communication tools to evade the repressive apparatus of the state" (Durac, 2013:178). Increased telephony and internet penetration have enhanced the rapidity of globalization creating new aspirations among citizens despite the fact that the mandates of governments to provide basic public utilities (such as security, water, and electricity) and employment largely remain unchanged notwithstanding a fast-growing population of unemployed youth people (Babatunde, 2015:108). There is also consensus that a youth bulge, if well managed, can be a precursor for demographic dividend and a sprawling danger for both political and/or civil unrest largely instigated by unemployed youth if poorly managed (Babatunde, 2015:107; DeJaeghere, Morris and Bamattre, 2020:667).

Uganda has an annual population growth rate of 3.27 per cent (World Bank, 2020). The level of youth unemployment in Uganda is still a contested issue though some civil society actors estimate it to range between 64 to 70 per cent (Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment [ACODE] 2014:2). Cognizant of these two challenges, the Government of Uganda (GoU), devised a range of interventions geared towards "developing a pool of non-formal employable skills in the country by promoting non-formal skills development, promoting institutionalized entrepreneurship, development, training and promoting start-ups and youth entrepreneurship products" (GoU, 2010).

Mwesigwa and Mubangizi (2019:1) cite the Youth Livelihood Program (YLP) as being undergirded by three key pillars; "skills development, livelihood support and institutional support". Regarding the first pillar, the case of Uganda can be described as a "double youth burden" on account of youth bulge and a significant number of youths with a very low uptake of entrepreneurial activities. This has been attributed to poor attitude towards business, inadequate entrepreneurial training, low savings, inadequate collateral, deficiencies in communication, limited access to mentorship programs, and inadequate access to appropriate business-related information (Kitambo, Omona and Mugumya, 2020; Listerri et al., 2006; cited in Ahaibwe 2014:6). Estimates by Ahaibwe (2014:4) suggest that more than $100 million was invested by the GoU in Youth Entrepreneurial Programs (YEPs) like Youth Opportunities Program (YOP) and Youth Venture Capital Fund (YVCF) during the preceding three financial years. The motif of these interventions was to take advantage of the potential in micro - small - and medium - enterprises to generate employment opportunities for the youth.

The Government of Uganda decided to embrace the Business Technical and Vocational Education Training (BTVET) curriculum to address the supply side of the youth unemployment dilemma. Two decades later, there is little evidence of a significant cascade of business abilities and principles to learners at the lower levels. According to Schoof (2006 cited in Ahaibwe; 2014:8), efficacy of BTVET curricular is hinged upon impartation of business planning, management, marketing and technical skills to learners.

A second follow up study of the YOP in Northern Uganda, whose objectives were to empower youth to "start skilled trades, work more, and raise incomes" revealed that there was no significant difference between recipients of funds under the program and non-recipients. Recipients weren't able to leverage on the grant and create sustainable businesses compared with non-recipients nearly a decade later (Blattman, Fiala and Martinez, 2020:289). A study by Kitambo, Omona and Mugumya (2020:64) revealed a culture of dependence, negative attitudes towards agri-business and work had developed during the post-Lord's Resistance Army conflict. Whether this is peculiar to the post conflict Northern Uganda or symptomatic of lacunas in the national YEP regime is a gap to be filled by research.

The contradictions inherent the YLP

The idea behind the YVCF was to empower graduates develop and grow viable Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that would catalyse youth employment initiatives. YVCF was launched in an election year and its politicisation, elitist capture, bypassing of cabinet guidelines and ultimately marginalisation the very youth it sought to benefit (in violation of the National Youth Policy) are not surprising (Guloba et al., 2015:17-18). Thought the objectives of the fund were to achieve nation-wide diffusion, be transparent, be highly accountable and be sustainably revolved to other youth groups, the findings of an earlier study by Ahaibwe (2014:15-17) on this very fund are astonishing.

There were regional and gendered disparities in access to funds with approximately 80% of funded SMEs located in urban localities and approximately 70% of recipients being male. Selective application of fund procedures ultimately weakened accountability while mobilization strategies to enrol youth onto the program turned out to be weak. Selection and disbursement ignored a number of agro-based enterprises in favour of retail SMEs on account of perceived agricultural risk albeit the low multiplier effect of retail trade ultimately rendering the YVCF sub-optimal. On the administrative front, the entire fund was acutely understaffed with a single desk officer managing the program and it might have been responsible for several other administrative shortfalls.

Although entrepreneurial training was a core component of the YCVF, it was later scrapped. Stanbic and DFCU banks now have business incubator programs. On account of most businesses in Uganda lacking sustainability and the deep-seated challenge of inexperienced youth in business management, the onus was upon participating banks to create mentoring programs. It may be hypothesised that the cancelation was either prompted by a lack of preparedness by participating banks at the time or was it symptomatic of misalignment of policy priorities when it comes to multi-sectoral involvement to address a matter of public policy concern.

The Office of the Auditor General (OAG) (2021:291), reported that 51% of recoverable loans under the YLP disbursed to 13,095 youth groups had been returned to the consolidated fund by close of the financial year 2020/21. Of the returned amount, 53% had been revolved to other youth groups. The YLP was meant to be an upgrade from the lessons learned from the YVCF and the YOP yet, the results were similar across the board. Notwithstanding the limited reach of the YLP, the high rate of default on loan re-payment and low absorption capacity of the loans targeting unemployed youth do not suggest a progressive intervention. This phenomenon was a serious problem and yet policy formulators seemed to prefer populist approaches as opposed to robust and far-reaching ones. It appears that there was either a problem in the selection of beneficiaries, inept business management skills of the youth selected or administrative incompetence of fund administrators.

The way forward

Closing the policy formulation-praxis void in Uganda, is a matter that needs urgent attention. Left unchecked, persistent structural, human resource and technical capacity gaps have negative consequences on the well-intentioned public policies (such as YLP) especially if their obvious goal is to reverse marginalization and elitism. The institutional frameworks that guide implementation, monitoring and evaluations of local economic development (LED) strategies need to be robust and inter-linked. Without effective institutional mechanisms, the evident gaps noted in this paper will keep recurring. The GoU can benchmark from similar but better managed programs like those in Kenya and Botswana Where Youth Programs are characterized by ex-ante training, monitoring, networking and mentoring opportunities, government designated service providers, robust monitoring and evaluation regime and support from external consultants (Ahaibwe 2014: 10-11).

There is need to refocus the current BTVET Training on agricultural value addition training with a view of meeting the credit value criteria of Commercial Banks and relevant agencies tasked with disbursement of Youth Entrepreneurship Funds. Adoption of value addition-based enterprises with better records management will enhance their credit worthiness to commercial banks and other financial institutions that give credit. Programs like the Parish Development Model (PDM) and Development Initiatives in Northern Uganda (DINU) need to put emphasis on value addition and post-harvest handling training for youth engaged in agri-business ventures. These LED interventions need to be synchronized with ongoing programs such as the Agriculture Cluster Development Project (ACDP) under the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries and programs by Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives aimed to strengthen Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies' (SACCOs) training of farmer groups in record keeping at the grassroots.

CONCLUSION

The success of LED interventions, as revealed in this study, is hinged on a number of factors that call for deliberate attention by government officials at every level. For instance, a number of vocational training colleges offering BTVET programs are far from the youth located in remote areas yet these would be used to bolster the YLP strategy but also the overall LED intervention in Uganda.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

It is encouraged that; firstly, it is paramount that training of youth in business development, scaling, marketing, and management be integrated into the BTVET curriculum and supported by mentorship programs upon completion of their formal training. This corroborates with a proposal made by ACFODE (2014) arguing for widening of the youth training curriculum to encompass "computing, craftsmanship, technical and electrical engineering disciplines" if the number of youths getting into employment are to be scaled up considerably. And secondly, mentorships and business incubators and/or hubs need to be set up and to be accessed by the youth themselves country wide. While access to the YVCF was limited to urban areas, innovative methods to take advantage of scientific technologies can be embraced to deepen financial inclusion especially by relying on the mobile telephone applications and their penetration.

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