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## **“Challenges Facing Rural Youth and Young Adults and How Development Stakeholders Can Alleviate Those Hardships in Kenya”**

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*Youth Voice Journal* 2016 - Online

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**Published by:**

**The IARS International Institute**



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Published in the Youth Voice Journal, March 2016

<http://youthvoicejournal.com/>

© IARS 2016

ISSN

(online): 2056 – 2969

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### Abstract

In Kenya, youth aged 15-24 years represent 20% of the population of which about 84% live in rural areas. Consequently, rural areas are in need of numerous programs to enhance the empowerment of youth residing in these locales. Whereas the governments of Kenya and non-governmental agencies have made efforts to mitigate these challenges, there is very little literature on how and whether previous and current youth policy interventions have successfully and specifically addressed these challenges. This study aimed at exploring the challenges and hardships facing rural youth and young adults and how development stakeholders can alleviate those hardships in Kenya. The major findings included a growing population of unemployed but educated youth; lack of capital or income-generating activities; a strong cycle of poverty from parents to children; dismal participation in groups or organizations; inadequate media coverage of rural issues; and inadequate awareness youth interventions. Key recommendations include a) a diversified educational approach with emphasis on entrepreneurship programs, income-generating and other entrepreneurship skills; c) investing in appropriate programs that could be used as a recruitment tool for young people’s involvement in such activities; and d) ensuring that youth have unbridled access to information that is relevant to the socio-economic situation in rural areas. Such nascent efforts are needed to strengthen national policies like Kenya’s Vision 2030 as well as global efforts such as the Sustainable Development Goals that are premised on human capital development through the empowerment of youth, young adults, and other groups that are marginalized.

**Keywords:** Rural Youth, Empowerment, Quality of Life, Youth Policy, Kenya, Rural Development

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### Introduction

A Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) report (2010) established that about 40% of the employable youth were not absorbed by the Kenyan labor market while the overall youth unemployment and underemployment was 60% of the unemployed in Kenya. Similarly, according to the Kenya Integrated Household Budget Survey (KIBHS) on unemployment among youth aged 15-29 years was 21% while another 25% of youth were not engaged in education or other economic pursuits. This should be a major concern for all stakeholders because the 15-29 age bracket group accounts for over 30% of Kenya's population and such prolonged unemployment incidences spell major socio-economic consequences to the development and economic growth of Kenya (GoK, 2009; Hope, 2011; 2012; Njonjo, 2010).

Over the years, the Government of Kenya has tried to implement some development programs targeting youth and young people. Despite the broad economic, social, political, cultural, and social life focus of these programs, the impact of these interventions in the quality of life for youth and young adults is still contested. These programs are poised to succeed if they focus on empowerment, skill-development education initiatives, and generation of employment as a means of improving livelihoods for economic development. Empowerment will prepare young populations to confront poverty, overcome hardships, and improve the quality of life

(Nejati, Pourzzat, and Gholipour, 2012). Ultimately, this could yield stocks of social capital that are crucial to promoting a sense of community, inclusion, community identity, and integration (Goodman, Kaberia, Morgan, and Keiser, 2014; Laverack, 2001; Skinner and Zakus, 2008).

Kenya is pursuing Vision 2030 which seeks to make it an industrialized nation by the year 2030 human resource development, gender, youth and other vulnerable groups are at the core of realizing policy framework (GoK, 2007). As the population grows, there is also mounting evidence about the changes in youth populations in rural communities, and their increasing significance to the development initiatives. For instance youth ages 15-24 years represent 20% of the population, while about 84% of the youth live in rural areas (GoK, 2012; Hope, 2012). However, there is very little literature on how and whether previous and current youth policy interventions have successfully and specifically addressed the challenges facing youthful Kenyan population (GoK, 2009; Hope, 2012).

It is against this backdrop that this study was conducted highlight how the absence of specific interventions fails to address the challenges confronting youth and young adults in rural communities of Kenya. Data was collected from key participants who were purposefully selected using a survey instrument with Likert-type questionnaire that focused on demographics, empowerment, challenges facing youth in rural areas, and the role of development stakeholders in alleviating these challenges. Data collected was synthesized, summarized, and presented as tables, percentages or frequencies distributions. Selected findings include a growing population of unemployed youth in the 15-24 age bracket; lack of capital or income-generating activities; a strong cycle of poverty from parents to children; dismal participation in groups or organizations; inadequate media coverage of rural issues; disparity in the type of programs initiated by development agencies; and inadequate awareness youth interventions.

Major recommendations include a diversified approach with emphasis on entrepreneurship programs that can offer alternative sources of income as opposed to seeking for employment; the national and county governments designing 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; investing in appropriate programs that could be used as a recruitment tool for young people's involvement in such activities; and ensuring that youth have unbridled access to information and knowledge that is relevant to the socio-economic situation in rural areas. This study is significant policy-makers, academics, community development practitioners, and county and national governments in Kenya. The article structure includes an introduction, profile and description of study area, literature review, methodology, and findings, discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

### **Profile and Description of Study Area**

The three poorest districts in Kenya, with over 50% poverty rate are found in Western Kenya which is primarily rural, densely populated, with low crop yields, poor infrastructure, and has a 21% rate of malnourishment in children less than 5 years old. Rural livelihoods are compounded by low farm sizes (average 0.1 hectares) which forces households to engage in non-agricultural activities as coping mechanisms. However, relatively deep soils with fertile clay and loam textures and a bimodal rainfall regime make Western Kenya conducive for agricultural production. Low household incomes, diminished crop yields, and limited household incomes are a major characteristic hence most livelihood activities that local people engage in are pertinent to poverty alleviation (Chianu, Ajani, and Chianu, 2008).

Threats to land resources are exacerbated by the need to increase food production.

Vihiga County has a population of over 554,622 and covering an area of 531 square kilometers

and a population density of up to 1500 per square kilometer. There are about 500 primary and secondary schools in the district. According to the 2007 Kenya Integrated Household Budget Survey (GoK, 2009), poverty rate in Vihiga County was 41.8%, compared to the national poverty rate of 47.2%. The mean household size in western Kenya is 5.7, and in Vihiga County it is 5.1 members.

The locations targeted had notably high population, small land holdings which have increased pressure on available land resulting in food insecurity. Additionally the areas had between over 30% HIV/AIDS prevalence rate escalating the prevalence of child-headed households. Artisanal and small-scale gold-mining plays a significant role in the socio-economic development of the area since close to 10,000 people are either directly or indirectly involved in gold mining. Many young children are removed from school to provide informal labor in the gold mines in order to supplement the over 90% production of women (Amutabi and Lutta-Mukhebi, 2001). Vihiga County lies along the Equator between 34° 30 mins E and 35° 0 min E, and 0° 15 mins N and 0° 5 mins S. in the western part of Kenya. It borders the Counties of Kisumu to the South, Nandi to the East, Kakamega to the North and Siaya to the west.

With an annual rainfall of between 1800 mm and 2000 mm the area is quite conducive with an average temperature of 24 degrees centigrade. The age groups 0-14 and 65 years and above is taken to be the dependent population and is divided by the population aged 15-64 years to obtain the dependency ratio. In Vihiga County, the age-dependency ratio is 93.8 against the national ratio of 84. This is attributed to the high rate of unemployment among the youth, high population coupled with small fragmented pieces of land which is overused and HIV/AIDS, which has led to increasing number of orphans who are in need of care, shelter, food and clothing (GoK, 2009).

Due to size, geographical distance, rainy weather conditions, and high population data collection was conducted from locations and villages that were also selected purposefully from the Vihiga County. Participant recruitment took place from 21 villages namely Bahati, Bumbo, Bumira, Chepkwonyi, Cheptul, Essabwa, Jivovoli, Jivuye, Kamkoi, Kapsoi, Kisasi, Koibarak, Mahanga, Makuchi, Mulundu, Mulwevo, Musasa, Musukura, Shiru, Sigong'o, and Vulondolova villages. These villages were found in seven (7) locations including Banja, Busali East, Central Bunyore, Hamisi, Muhudu, Shamakhokho, and Shaviringa Locations of Vihiga County, Western Kenya. These locations were chosen purposefully because they were believed to represent the rampant high youth unemployment rates, substance abuse like alcoholism, and high population growth rate in Vihiga County (Ijaza, Mwangi, and Ng'etich, 2014).

### **Literature review**

For the past six decades, many rural development programs have failed to connect the needs of rural poor and their social economic needs partly due to the failure to synchronize the local and global economic connections (Kallaway, 2001). For instance, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank restructuring programs of the 1990s affected numerous households with policies that ultimately escalated the unemployment crisis in Kenya (Kallaway, 2001; Prince, 2013). This triggers a series of problems for young people and their quality of life in rural and urban communities who become vulnerable to illicit and risk behaviors including alcoholism, drugs and substance abuse (Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, and Lagat, 2012).

To the Kenyan economy, the bulging youth population is an asset because youth form the majority of the population both in urban and rural areas. In rural areas, informal employment has become the main source of livelihood for youth and young adults (see Table 1). However, most youth face challenges and other risks due to inadequate policies and failure to prioritize the

strategies, policies, and programs aimed at empowering the youth. This spells enormous consequences economically, politically, culturally, and socially to the development agenda of the country (Hope, 2012; Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, and Lagat, 2012).

Table 1

*General Characteristics of the Youth Population in Kenya*

Indicator	%
Proportion of youth (15 – 24-year-olds) in the total population	20.6
Proportion of total youth female	51.2
Proportion of total youth male	48.8
Proportion of female youth in informal employment in urban areas	64.0
Proportion of male youth in informal employment in urban areas	5.3
Proportion of female youth in informal employment in rural areas	73.0
Proportion of male youth in informal employment in rural areas	11.7
Youth total unemployment rate, 2006	25.8
Youth urban unemployment rate, 2003	40.6

*Adapted from Hope (2012)*

Poverty, disease, and inadequate access to educational opportunities cause distress for young people. A study in Western Kenya found that in rural areas, potential exposure to incidents that were potentially traumatic had a prevalence of 90% amongst young people who had experienced various forms of political violence or HIV-AIDS burden (Atwoli et al., 2014; Karsberg and Elklit, 2012). Young people are likely to engage in risky healthy behavior as a stress-coping mechanism when facing these kinds of challenges. This is likely to diminish the decision-making ability, self-efficacy, as well as motivation for changing behavior of individuals (Puffer et al., 2011). The HIV-AIDS pandemic has further exacerbated the youth experience and intensified the socio-economic decline of many households in rural areas. The loss of parents, siblings, and breadwinners has affected the lives of young people immensely especially access to education opportunities triggering an impetus for rural-urban migration in search of opportunities (Puffer et al., 2012; Prince, 2013).

School-going youth are affected by individual level determinants such as school and community-level factors which influence the risk perceptions of school-going youth. Examples of community level factors include public acknowledgement of HIV-AIDS related death during funerals, community socio-cultural practices that contribute to the prevalence of diseases, adolescent sleeping arrangements, early marriages, a younger daughter replacing a deceased sibling, widow inheritance, and other festivals in the community. Youth are also recipients of multiple intervention programs by governments and non-governmental organizations mitigating such challenges at the individual and community level. Interventions are more likely to be effective by understanding how schools and communities affect risk perceptions and behavior change (Juma, Askew, Alaii, Bartholomew, and van den Borne, 2014; Maticka-Tyndale, Mungwete, and Jayeoba, 2014; Tenkorang and Maticka-Tyndale, 2014a).

Community-level factors have contributed to the rising numbers of HIV infections in various ways. For instance, community festivals in concert with African cultures act as hotspots for HIV-transmission because of the tendency to engage in casual sexual practices and frequent abuse of substances like alcohol. The festivals and traditions are therefore likely to contribute to risky behaviors although transforming such traditions is still a challenge (Tenkorang and Maticka-Tyndale, 2014b).

Some of the development interventions have done little to influence the behavior of young people although there has been a significant change in knowledge and attitudes (Tavrow, Karei, Obbuyi, and Omollo, 2012). This calls for school and community-based interventions and skill-set building for young people (Njue, Voeten, and Remes, 2009; Tenkorang and Maticka-Tyndale, 2014b). For instance, over 7.2 million children are enrolled in primary schools and this offers an extra-ordinary platform for improving the health of students, families, and communities which is a cost-effective way according to health experts – that of achieving

behavioral change through health education (Onyanygo-Ouma, Aagard-Hensen, and Jensen, 2005).

Another element affecting young people is the involvement in their local communities. Youth participation in community events spurs positive change in the community and harnesses social capital which is needed in community development (Nejati, Pourzzat, and Gholipour, 2012). Lack of youth participation by the youth is further curtailed by inadequate capital, assets including land and skills or access to financial services (Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, and Lagat, 2012). Lack of participation reduces social capital stock and ultimately development in the community (Nejati, Pourzzat, and Gholipour, 2012).

Compared to adults, it is also evident that the rate of involvement by the youth in certain sectors is abysmal for instance the dairy sector compared to adults. There are many school dropouts from primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions in Kenya which can be attributed to failing exams as well as widespread poverty. The main preferred economic ventures include motorcycle or bicycle taxi (Boda Boda) services, poultry, and tailoring. There is also rampant 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 (Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, and Lagat, 2012). To thrive in the agricultural sector, capital, land, and skills which are a challenge to most youth seeking to access loans from financial institutions (Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, and Lagat, 2012).

However, effective participation by youth was found to be curtailed by some of the practices by government, non-governmental, and other development agencies working with the youth in the health sector's programs for HIV-AIDS interventions (Campbell, Gibbs, Maimane, Nair, and Sibiyi, 2009). A study in South Africa on rural youth participation in HIV-AIDS management programs identified three obstacles. First, adults were reluctant to recognize and

appreciate the potential and input of young people or regard them as equal stakeholders. Secondly, external agencies involved allocated inadequate support for youth to participate meaningfully in their programs. The third obstacle was the lack of incentives that would encourage the youth to participate in community programs. When the youth participate effectively in social development and civic life, their health and welfare is enhanced (Campbell, Gibbs, Maimane, Nair, and Sibiya, 2009). The limited focus of youth programs is an additional concern as most youth intervention programs focus on HIV-AIDS, peer education, and mobilization of young people in the community. There is also lack of incentives due to lack of funding for sustaining such programs (Prince, 2013).

Similarly, skill development is also crucial in social change. 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 (Odongo, 2008; Palmer, 2007). Also related to skill development is the aspect of education. In practice, Kenyan youth have an abundant access to formal education curricula but inadequate access to skills that suit educational background and the demands of the youth as well as the labor market (Hope, 2012). A major setback of the education system is the mismatch level and type of skills that is imparted by the training institutions and the requirements of the labor market. A gap exists that calls for realignment in order to meet the economic demands as well as the rate of youth participating in the economy and improving the youth opportunity (Hope, 2012).

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 of

the fact that in low and middle-income countries, 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). Education is crucial to youth development and it has to be relevant education and training what is needed is relevant policy framework on education and training for effective human capital development for the country. Proper education makes youth agents of change in the development process. A range of skills are needed for gaining a particular job of interest. This is crucial to reducing youth inequality in of accessing opportunities (Hope, 2012).

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. Representation, groups, skill development, and capacity development are catalysts for youth participation (Nejati, Pourzzat, and Gholipour, 2012). Empowerment can take place at the individual or community level and requires organizational structures such as committees, church, and youth groups (Goodman, Kaberia, Morgan, and Keiser, 2014; Laverack, 2001). In young people, social support family, peer, or school settings and positive self-esteem offers protective effects on violent behavior and substance abuse (Christens and Peterson, 2012).

Moreso, empowerment is crucial in resolving issues affecting the youth enhancing their skills and capabilities and enables people to change situations such as poverty and overcome hardships. It fosters access to cultural, economic, scientific, and political activities which improves skills, capabilities, and the quality of life (Nejati, Pourzzat, and Gholipour, 2012). At the grassroots level, sports activities serve as a motivation to young people as well as building blocks for social capital by promoting a sense of community, community identity, inclusion, and integration (Skinner and Zakus, 2008).

Inclusion or exclusion from sports clubs affects daily life, social networks, and ultimately the sense of belonging. One of the most important things to inclusion in a sports activity is trust which is essential to social capital and manifests in the way people operate, live in safety, and forge new identities and lifestyles (Skinner and Zakus, 2008). Woodcock, Cronin, and Forde (2012) studied how Moving the Goalposts, (MGT) a sports project aimed at equipping girls and women with crucial life skills including self-confidence, self-efficacy, and knowledge for accessing resources for youth in Kilifi and Kaloleni Districts of coastal region of Kenya. Girls participating in this program were exposed to knowledge and resources in health, education, community, and small business initiatives. Some of the life skills gained included teamwork, leadership, organization, confidence, and self-esteem which are central for female empowerment (Woodcock, Cronin, and Forde, 2012).

The government of Kenya has tried a raft of youth interventions over the years albeit numerous challenges still confront the youth (GoK 2006; Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, and Lagat, 2012). The Kenya National Youth Policy of 2006 targeted 15-30 year-olds and recognizes youth as residents with equal opportunity to participate in the economic, social, political, cultural social life (GoK, 2006). This policy targeted youth and young people who were disabled, homeless, HIV-AIDS, unemployed, and out of school. Creation of employment, health, education, training, sports, recreation, environment, art and culture, and empowerment were the hallmarks of this policy. The Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF) was established in 2007 to provide loans, attract and facilitate micro, small, and medium enterprises to support marketing products and generate employment (Hope, 2012). In 2009, another program Kazi Kwa Vijana (KKV) for anti-poverty and hunger projects was enacted by the Kenyan Government (Sulo, Chepng'eno, Chumo, Tuitoek, and Lagat, 2012).

Despite such nascent efforts, the government of Kenya still faces numerous challenges implementing youth programs especially allocating funds on time. The programs are not owned by the youth and the implementation lacks transparency and efficiency. For youth programs to succeed in Kenya, three requirements must be fulfilled namely, empowerment, education, and employment (Hope, 2012). Employment is crucial to livelihoods actualization into adulthood even though most youth in urban and rural areas are still unemployed. Kenya needs to invest in job creation which is depended on economic growth, establishing an environment that is conducive for entrepreneurship in the informal sector. Similarly, the public sector needs to create an environment that is enabling for the development of 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 while informal employment provides alternatives for others (Hope, 2012; Njonjo 2010).

## **Methodology**

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges and hardships facing rural youth and young adults and how development stakeholders can alleviate those hardships in Kenya.

### *Research design*

The study utilized a descriptive, exploratory research design. Research participants were selected using purposeful sampling which involves the intentional selection of respondents because of their level of knowledge on the study subject. Purposeful sampling is ideal when the sample is too large (Patton, 2001) as is the case with youth and young adult population in rural

areas Kenya. Recruitment and participation was voluntary without any incentive for participation. The criteria for selecting participants included youth and young adults who were opinion leaders, college and high school students, school dropouts, business people, and youth group leaders. This study utilized the United Nations conventional definition of youth as being between the ages of 15-24 years. However, another bracket young people aged 25-35 years was also included and is herein referred to as young adults in concert with the existing youth interventions in Kenya that respond to youth in the age bracket 15-30 years (GoK, 2009, Hope, 2012). This age bracket was intentionally selected to give experiences that reflected their youthful years and broad perspectives and insights on the issues that affected youth in their community from their current situations. This group was referred to as young adults and their perspectives are integral to mitigating the quality of life for youth and adult populations in rural communities of Kenya.

Prior to participation, a consent form was provided for the participants to approve of their voluntary participation in the study. A pilot study was conducted in the local villages and the findings were used to revise the survey questions to make them clear, suitable, and to guarantee informed responses from the research participants but the findings were not included in the final results of this study.

#### *Data Collection*

Data was collected from a sample 57 key participants who were purposefully selected. Participants completed a Likert-scale questionnaire that collected data on demographic issues, empowerment, challenges facing youth in rural areas, and the role of development stakeholders in alleviating these challenges. Survey interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes long.

Demographic information consisted of gender, marital status, education level, monthly income generation, and ages. To gain insights on empowerment, the key participants were asked about their employment status, sociopolitical control, leadership, and self-esteem issues. On employment, the participants chose the perceived three (3) main causes of unemployment from a list of five (5) items ranging from education system, lack of entrepreneurship skills or mismatch of skills, lack of employment opportunities, and lack of capital for income-generating activities. The employment status of parents was used to determine if there was any trend linked to youth unemployment. To understand the job-search process, participants were also asked about the length of time they had been unemployed and how long they had been searching for employment. Leadership capacity focused on the ability and frequency to talk before a group of other young people. Sociopolitical control explored participation in community activities and decision-making processes by the youth and young adults. Self-esteem focused on aspects that bolster self-worthiness including whether participants perceived themselves as being fun around others and also if parents believed in their future success.

Membership in youth groups and organizations and frequency of attending meetings provided additional insights on empowerment, self-esteem, and leadership among the rural youth and young adults. Key informants were also asked about regional and national media coverage of events for rural youth and young adults and the effect of such coverage on empowerment, self-esteem, achievement, self-worth, and relevance of such coverage to their rural communities. They chose the perceived three (3) main effects from a list of five (5) items namely self-worth, achievement, importance, relevance to the community, and recognition. The key informants were also asked about leaders or professions perceived to play role model or mentorship for youth and young people. These professions were teacher, community nurse, farmer, business person, politician, and church pastor.

Factors that affected the quality of life were assessed by perceived sources of happiness, activities that were helpful for young people, level of satisfaction from to living in their community, factors influencing successful adulthood life, and cultural factors limiting aspirations of youth and young populations in rural areas.

Challenges to quality life for young people in rural areas centered on illicit behavior, hardships faced, whether working with young people in rural areas was difficult. On illicit behavior, the key informants chose the three (3) out of seven (7) leading causes of illicit behavior namely drugs and alcohol, lack of money and education, lack of jobs, lack of knowledge about career possibilities, lack of skills, lack of parental guidance, and absence of role models and other mentors. The four main factors that were likely to result in hardships included inadequate access to the information, inadequate health services, absence of community youth programs, and lack of entertainment. Response by development stakeholders to youth and young people's needs was also explored. The key informants identified the development programs from a list that included HIV-AIDS awareness, entrepreneurship, sports, entertainment, and recreation. They also gave their perspectives on whether there were enough programs from to youth and young people in the rural communities. Additionally, the knowledge of youth development programs by the local, county, and national agents of development was also explored.

Data collected was synthesized and summarized for analysis using SPSS statistical software for descriptive statistics and presented as tables, frequencies distributions, and percentages.

## Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges and hardships facing rural youth and young adults and how development stakeholders can alleviate those hardships in Kenya. Data collection involved the completion of a Likert-scale questionnaire with broad categories focusing on demographic issues, empowerment, challenges facing youth in rural areas, and the role of development stakeholders in alleviating these challenges. Some respondents aged 25-35 years were intentionally selected to give experiences that reflected their past youthful years were youth and broad perspectives on the issues that affected youth in their community as well as insights from their current situations. This group was referred to as young adults and their perspectives are crucial to improving the quality of life for youth and young adult populations in rural communities of Kenya. Data collected was synthesized and summarized for analysis using SPSS statistical software for descriptive statistics and presented as tables, frequencies distributions, and percentages.

### *Demographic information*

The demographic information focused on the ages, gender, marital status, and income levels of youth and young adults living in rural areas. The participants were drawn from different age brackets. Nine (15.8%) 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. The gender of the participants included 38 males (66.7%) and 19 females (33.3%) while the marital status included 73.7% single while 26.3% married cases. As for education attainment 8.8% had a primary school education, 35.1% secondary school graduates, and 56.1% had tertiary level education. The monthly income levels were so meager due to a myriad of factors associated with being resident in rural economies. Accordingly, 43.9% had a monthly income

level of up to Kenya Shillings 1000 while only 8.8% had income above Kenya Shillings. 10,000 (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Monthly Income Levels of Youth and young adults in Rural Communities of Western Kenya*

Income level	Frequency	Percent
1000 and below	25	43.9
1001-3000	7	12.3
3001-7000	7	12.3
7001-10000	2	3.5
Above 10000	5	8.8
No Response	11	19.3
Total	57	100.0

*Note.* The exchange rate at the time of data collection was 1 USD = 90.5100 KES

The study further interrogated the research participants on factors influencing the empowerment of youth and young people by focusing on employment status, self-esteem, leadership capacity, and socio-political control in rural communities of Kenya. Unemployment level amongst youth and young adults in rural areas was found to be alarming as 80.7 % of the respondents were unemployed while only 19.3% were employed. The length of unemployment further corroborated these findings as 59.6% of the respondents had been without work since they left school, 8.8% since the last job held, 3.5% were still in school, and only 1.8% were self-employed. The job search process seemed to be a lengthy stretching several months (12.3%) or even several years (57.9%). The main factors perceived to be major causes of unemployment in rural areas were lack of capital and income-generating activities (35.1%), lack of employment opportunities (26.3%), and poor entrepreneurship skills (17.5%) as exhibited in Table 3.

Table 3

*Major Causes of Unemployment for Rural Youth and Young Adults in Kenya*

Causes of Unemployment	Frequency	Percent
Theoretical education system	8	14.0
Poor entrepreneurship skills	10	17.5
Mismatch between skills and labor market	2	3.5
Lack of employment opportunities	15	26.3
Lack capital for income-generating activities	20	35.1
No response	2	3.5
Total	57	100.0

The employment status of the parents of the research participants was also solicited to determine if there was any link, pattern, cycle, or trend in rural poverty. Only 42 % of the respondents' fathers were employed while 58% were unemployed. Similarly, only 31.6 % of the respondents' mothers were employed while 68.4 % were unemployed. To explore leadership, socio-political control, and even self-esteem, the respondents were also asked about being fun around others and their ability and frequency to speak before other young people. Being fun around others was interpreted as an indicator of self-esteem among young people. According to the findings, 10.5% strongly disagreed, 15.8% disagreed, 15.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, 38.6% agreed, and 12.3% strongly agreed.

Overall, there was an indication that most youth could speak before others. These abilities were never (10.5%), rarely (17.5%), occasionally (26.3%), frequently (17.5%), and every time (28.1%). Parental influence is significant to understanding the aspect of self-esteem of the research participants in this study. About 1.8% disagreed, 1.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, 47.4% agreed while 49.1% strongly agreed that their parents believed they would succeed later in life. Another element of socio-political control/leadership, and self-esteem explored participation in community development decision-making programs, youth groups and

organizations, and attending group meetings and activities. The participation rate was never (3.5%), rarely (15.8%), occasionally (29.8%), frequently (12.8%), and always (38.6%).

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. Participation in youth groups and organizations was dismal as only 45.6% belonged to groups and organizations while 54.4% did not belong to any youth clubs or organizations. Despite the absence of programs, there was a strong interest to join and participate if such programs were enacted. The preferred programs were education (29.8%), sports (29.8%), agriculture (15.8%), health (17.6%), while 7% chose other programs besides those listed. The frequency of attending group meetings and activities by young people was very dismal with the participants attending meetings rarely (45.6%), weekly (19.3%), monthly 19.3%, every three months (7%) and other times (5.3%).

The role of the media in highlighting the issues affecting youth and young adults in rural areas was also explored. To that extend, 70.2% reported lack of media coverage of local events while only 29.8% reported having encountered media coverage at local events in the community. The perceived effects that media coverage would confer in the rural communities included achievement (39%), importance (31%), and self-worth (30%). Another element that could bolster youth empowerment efforts stemmed from role model mentorship initiatives. The participants were asked if they had any role models in the community and 71.9% had role models while 28.1% did not have any role model in the community. The most preferred role models based on the common professions in the community were business people (42.1%), teachers (17.5%), community nurses (14.1%), and pastors (10.5%). Farmers (7.0%) and

politicians (5.3%) were the least favored role models for youth and young adults in rural areas of western Kenya.

The quality of life focused on factors causing happiness, activities that contributed to happiness, level of satisfaction living in the community, successful adulthood, and the role of cultural practices on youth aspirations in rural communities. The main factors that could contribute to the happiness were the presence of social amenities in the community (31.6%), participating in youth activities (22.8%) and income-generating activities (29.8%) for youth and young adults in the community (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Perceived Causes of Happiness for Youth and Young Adults in Rural Kenya*

What causes happiness in community	Frequency	Percent
Social amenities in the community	18	31.6
Participating in youth activities	13	22.8
Effective local administration	5	8.8
Employment and income-generating activities	17	29.8
Cultural practices	2	3.5
Other	2	3.5
Total	57	100.0

The activities identified as being helpful to young people were involvement in youth clubs or organizations (43.9%), sports (31.6%), and having a strong voice in community and provision of good services. When asked about the level of satisfaction from living in their communities, only 8.8% were completely satisfied, 26.3% somewhat satisfied, 22.8% completely dissatisfied, and 21.1% were somewhat dissatisfied. 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. According to the findings, the

three major factors that specifically affected to quality of life of youth and young adults were lack of enough motivation to succeed (39.02% ), corrupt local leaders (35.36% ), and not wanting to work hard (25.60%).

Similarly, the participants were asked to select the three main factors that would influence their successful life in adulthood. Being content and satisfied were (40.5%), having good health (32.9%) and a happy family life (26.6%) were chosen. The respondents were also asked if cultural factors were an impediment to the aspirations of youth and young adults in the communities. According to the respondents 12.3% strongly disagreed, 31.6% disagreed, 8.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, 36.8% agreed, 5.3% agreed, and 5.3% gave no response to the view that culture was an impediment to upward mobility of youth and young adults in rural communities. A number of issues were identified as being responsible for the hardships experienced by youth and young adults in rural communities According to the findings, the major sources of hardship in the rural areas were inadequate access to information (52.6%) and absence of community youth groups (22.8%) as depicted in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Perceived Sources of Hardships Facing Youth in Rural of Western Kenya*

Sources of Hardships	Frequency	Percent
Inadequate information access	30	52.6
Inadequate health services	8	14.0
Absence of community youth groups	13	22.8
Lack of entertainment and recreation opportunities	4	7.0
Other	1	1.8
No response	1	1.8
Total	57	100.0

The study also determined some of the challenges to quality life for young people with regards to illicit behavior, hardships faced, whether working with young people in rural areas was difficult. Based on the aforementioned, the key informants identified several links to youth

engagement in illicit behavior. The participants were asked to choose three main factors that cause young people to engage in illicit behavior from a list out of seven (7) leading causes of illicit behavior namely drugs and alcohol, lack of money and education, lack of jobs, lack of knowledge about career possibilities, lack of skills, lack of parental guidance, and absence of role models and other mentors. Lack of jobs (39%), drugs and alcohol (35%), and lack funds to pursue educational (26%) were the leading causes of illicit behavior among youth and young adults.

The activities of development stakeholders in trying to alleviate youth issues were also explored by looking at the sponsored events, programs, and knowledge of youth programs and policies. The participants were asked if they felt there were enough development programs targeting youth and young people in the rural communities and 31.6% strongly disagreed, 45.5% disagreed, 8.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, 10.5% agreed, and 3.5% strongly agreed.

The study participants expressed interest in programs that could be prioritized and supported by external development agencies. These programs were education (52.6%), health (15.8%), and poverty eradication (14%) respectively. There were very few sponsored events for youth and young people in the communities as the focus was on HIV-AIDS awareness (45.6%) and sports (50.9%) while 3.5% chose "others". There was a similar disparity in the type of programs initiated by development agencies for youth living in rural areas. The emphasis was on sports programs (47.4%) and HIV-AIDS interventions (38.6%) while crucial ones like entrepreneurship (7%) were not quite visible. Entertainment was favored by 1.8%, while 5.2% gave no response.

Despite limited focus on youth, rural communities have continued to attract various development agencies from national and international levels whose impact over the years was still contested. The key informants were asked to measure the impact of such kind of external development agencies on local development communities and the responses were no effect

(47.4%), minor effect (22.8%), neutral (8.8%), moderate (7%), major effect (8.8%), and no response (5.3%). Most youth and young adults in the rural areas do not seem to have adequate awareness about the government of Kenya's interventions for youth and young adults.

According to the findings, 22.8% were not at all aware, 35.1% slightly aware, 26.3% moderately aware, while only 5.3% were fully aware about existing government of Kenya resources for the youth.

### **Discussion, conclusion and recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges and hardships facing rural youth and young adults and how development stakeholders can alleviate those hardships in Western Kenya. Bolstering empowerment, socio-political control, self-esteem, leadership skills, and participation in community development processes by youth and young adults is of national importance. However, there are numerous challenges that are curtailing such progression of rural youth which is detrimental to the quality of life for youth and young adults in Kenya.

It is evident that the demographics of rural areas in Kenya are changing due to the increasing educated youth population below 24 years. This type of population growth presents multi-faceted implications on the youth, communities, and the nation of Kenya. To the youth, the issue of economic and geographic marginalization will be a constant challenge that will affect their upward mobility efforts. To the rural communities, declining employment opportunities affects the quality of life for young people in rural areas. The presence of many young people without meaningful engagement economically stalls the growth of rural economy ultimately a decline in the standards of living and other vital social amenities. The cycle of poverty from parents to the youth in rural areas should be a prime focus of county and national

poverty eradication campaigns. The implication is that this trend is likely to be passed on the youth generations hence a perpetual cycle of poverty for the rural areas.

Kenya has to grapple with the effects of rural-urban migration as young people migrate in search of better opportunities. This will continue to put a stress on urban areas to create more opportunities for young people while the rural areas will continue suffering the drain of skills to urban areas. The migration to urban areas implies that business people, community leaders, who are supposed to develop vibrant rural economies, will be lost. It is not also a guarantee that urban areas, already stretched, will provide the much-needed resources and opportunities for young people. Replacing these generations will not be an easy task and it will alter the demographics of rural areas significantly.

The consequences of this kind of demographic shift on rural societies will continue to place high toll on the emotional and social welfare of all those involved. This has a strong impact on the social capital of communities as family bonds are disrupted and stretched by the loss of family members. Thus, the rural economy is faced with a lot of uncertainty as youth make choices between living in marginalized environments and moving to urban areas in pursuit of economic opportunities. Overall, the effects of an aging youth population coupled with rural-urban migration will exacerbate the socio-economic decline of rural areas.

Measures are needed at the individual and community level that empower this segment of the population to be able to accord them quality life. Among the factors affecting the empowerment of young people in rural areas is lack of capital, employment opportunities, income-generating opportunities, and entrepreneurship skills. Most rural areas lack the right kind of educational institutions that would prepare young people for rural life. More funding needs to be dedicated to the Technical Vocational Educational Training institutions (TVETs) that are crucial to the development of sustainable livelihoods for rural populations. Additionally,

there is a need to probe the existing education policies with the aim of integrating specialized training and skill development needed to empower youth in rural areas. This will help explain any possible gaps in the high school or tertiary level programs that fail to empower youth to attain employment.

A similar finding was the presence of more males in rural areas compared to females. This brings into limelight the need to focus on designing programs that specifically seek to empower males in such environments. There is a disparity in the type of programs initiated by development agencies with emphasis on sports programs and HIV-AIDS interventions. Strengthening entrepreneurship and skill development will contribute to the much needed economic empowerment of young people in rural communities. This will lend credence to the efforts of development agencies in rural communities. There is also need to work with young people to initiate relevant groups and organizations that will increase youth participation community development programs. We can empower young populations by initiating programs that will stimulate the involvement of young people. Without such initiatives, the capacity of young people to develop their skills and mitigate the challenges of living in deprived environments will be diminished.

Lack of media coverage of issues in rural areas is another element that contributes to the marginalization of youth in rural communities. There is need for dissemination of information about programs, opportunities, and challenges to youth in a timely manner in order to provide linkages between development agencies and rural communities with the needed resources for improving the rural economy. To the youth and communities, it is likely to confer a sense of achievement, importance, and self-worth.

It is also crucial to examine the reasons why farming was the least preferred profession by young people in rural areas of Kenya. Farming is capital and labor-intensive and requires

skills which most young people tend to be deprived of. A paucity of skills and capital contributes to the perception that farming is not a profitable venture despite the existence of potential markets for agricultural products.

The embrace of culture as an asset and not an impediment to development matters in their communities by youth is notable. Usually, some cultural practices in rural communities can be retrogressive but not in this case. It is therefore important to determine what cultural practices can be incorporated in development programs.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to take notice of the growing educated population of youth in the 15-24 years age bracket with but with high level of unemployment. This is crucial to the future of rural economies which are marginalized by limited opportunities for young people. If not addressed in a timely manner, this segment of the Kenyan population will continue experience low quality of life which in return has an effect on all segments of the population whether rural or urban. Seemingly, the education policy needs to be refined to incorporate training in income-generation and entrepreneurship skills for young people in rural areas.

Additional attention needs to be devoted to improving farming as profession for youth but one that is curtailed by lack of skills and capital needed to make such a venture profitable. This will go a long way in mitigating some of the factors contributing to the prevalence of the cycle of poverty from parents to children. There is also a need to address the absence of relevant community programs which curtails the participation rate of youth in community development programs. It is through involvement in these kinds of activities that lends a voice to the young people and empowers them to play a leading role in their communities.

The utmost lack of coverage of issues affecting youth in rural areas and subsequent inadequate access to information by youth contributes to the relegation of issues affecting youth in rural areas with regard to achievement, importance, and self-worth. National and county governments have not done enough to sensitize youth on existing interventions hence the low perception about the impact of development agencies on the quality of life of youth in rural communities.

Rural life presents 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 role of developing Kenya's national and county economies should not be a preserve of the county and national 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. External development agencies 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 all stakeholders in improving the efforts in the local community development initiatives. Building on the existing programs by using networks and external partnerships to sponsor projects at the grassroots level is important. 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) whose key targets are poverty eradication, universal primary education, fighting diseases like HIV-AIDS, and reducing hunger among others (Hope, 2012; Odongo, 2008; Palmer, 2007). These efforts are also in tandem with Kenya's Vision 2030 which is premised on human capital

expansion as well as empowerment of youth, young adults, and other groups that are marginalized.

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