

Youth-centered support for attaining dignified and fulfilling work in Uganda

October, 2023



pasgr.org
PARTNERSHIP FOR AFRICAN SOCIAL
& GOVERNANCE RESEARCH





Key messages

- ❖ Informal workspaces, where most young people are employed, inevitably create chains of exploitation for young people through low and delayed wages, violation of workers rights through poor working conditions, limited freedom of speech. This hinders the actualization of dignified and fulfilling work.
- ❖ Young people don't entirely play the victim role. They are agentic and innovative to thrive through unfavorable working conditions. Some have resorted to self-employment through entrepreneurship-online businesses, commercial agriculture and small businesses.
- ❖ To realize dignified and fulfilling work, young people need to be supported through skilling, information to foster mindset change, especially shifts in negative perceptions relating to gender and social norms, increased access to funds as well as direct involvement in programs and projects targeting young people.

Introduction

Dignified and fulfilling work involves creating a work environment that encourages respect, acceptance, avoids harassment and discrimination as well as providing work satisfaction for the workers. Dignified work further acknowledges the basic principles of individual and collective labor rights, social security and social protection. In Uganda, young people face various obstacles to achieving dignified work. This is largely because a majority are employed in the informal economy, they have limited social support mechanisms, but also information and other resources. There is insurmountable exploitation, labor rights violations, delayed and partial payments and poor working conditions.

Contextual Overview

Uganda has over the years experienced armed conflicts, natural disasters including landslides and floods and most recently pandemics including HIV and COVID-19. All these circumstances have intensified societal and economic regression. With a population of over 75% being below the age of 35 years, young people have been hit hard as they struggle to contribute towards self-actualization but also collective identity and belonging. Young people form a heterogenous category reflected in their gender, age, location, levels of education, marital status and parenthood status among other critical identity markers.

While work is expected to emancipate and empower individuals and communities as collectives, it at times ends up creating a chain of oppression, exploitation and perpetuating poverty. This is especially true due to non-regulation or poor implementation of existing laws and regulations. Amidst challenges, young people in Uganda have not given up, they demonstrated agency and innovation. They advanced new livelihood strategies which included adoption of technological advances, online businesses, increased involvement in commercial agriculture, and embracement of shifts in gender division of labor. It is thus crucial to provide support to young people towards their realization of dignified and fulfilling work. Young people in Uganda identified support in different areas as discussed below:

- ❖ **Education and skilling:** Skills acquisition as a way of pushing back to mistreatment within the informal sector, the need for skills training was emphasized. This is especially in the form of online businesses management, entrepreneur skills, communication skills, improved methods of agricultural production, marketing, storage and preservation, saving and investment. The understanding is that young people will be able to start and sustain their own businesses. Self-employment was a key indicator of fulfilling and dignified work. In an employment setting education should target both employers and employees to create a communication platform for a thriving workspace. Education was also mentioned in form of comprehensive sexuality education for both in and out of school youth, to be accompanied with youth-friendly services. This would

reduce young people vulnerability sexual harassment and abuse but also contraction of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

- ❖ **Addressing perceptions on gender norms:** There is need to support change of perceptions for both employers and workers especially in relation to regressive harmful gender and social norms. norms shape communally acceptable and respected notions of work which comply with gender relations. Young men are for instance expected to take on leadership and public roles while young women are submissive and dominate roles in the domestic/private space. Men are also socialized as providers and protectors, which puts insurmountable pressure on such men, which results into gender-based violence and abuse especially against women. There is thus need to encourage attributes of positive masculinity that for instance support joint decision making within families, non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms, promote girl-child education, male involvement in domestic and reproductive roles. All these would facilitate attainment of dignified and fulfilling work.
- ❖ **Encourage behavior change among young people:** Young people were also involved in risky and socially unacceptable adventures like prostitution and drug abuse due to the love for money. In Kiboga district, one participant explained that;

“Urban centers’ places of enjoyment including bars and karaoke disco halls have really watered down morals, attracting young girls between 13-18 years into sex workers as an easy way of earning money. Here in Kiboga we have places like Kiganzi, Geyeena, and Kikuubo in Bukomero” Male Participant, Kiboga.

Changing behavior would thus improve on integrity, collective responsibility and care which consequently controls HIV infection as well as violence and crimes. Taking on more socially respected jobs would give the youth belonging and hence fulfillment through crime-free lifestyles.

- ❖ **Support Youth Entrepreneurship:** Despite innovations among young people, for instance in business and entrepreneurship, they noted that lack of resilience to shocks is hindering progress.

“You see at times we work hard and start businesses but so many obstacles break them down. In markets, arson breaks out so regularly and we return to zero, for farmers climate change leads to very low productivity, even pests and infestations which fail the farms’ produce...”
Female participant,

There is thus a need to support young people with insurance schemes to cater for shocks beyond the social networks which seemed to drain business. Such insurance can range from medical, fire, floods especially for the farmers and drought for the animal keepers. Resilience to shocks is key to attainment of successful entrepreneurship among young people.

- ❖ **Youth access to finance:** Financing solutions which are mindful of local contexts are crucial for addressing unemployment and uplifting young people’s work conditions. Young people lamented the high interest rates and collateral levied on available loan schemes hence the need for interest free loans. Such schemes need to be anchored in locally sustainable frameworks and lived experiences but then be supported by government legislation. One participant had this to say:

“I think besides skills, government should provide money and capital to set up our own businesses. The banks have over exaggerated

interest rates with a specified return period which is a big challenge given the market and poor working conditions at hand. The banks have very high interest rates with a limited period of time and once you fail to pay the loan your house, land and other properties are taken”
– Male participant, Butambala

- ❖ **Career guidance and talent development for the youth.** When the youth meet different people who have been successful in life through different careers they can be empowered to work harder and achieve. This can be done through career guidance conferences and networks. Talent development is also crucial as youth tend to focus on sports and other activities like drama for which they are passionate. These can be used as platforms to encourage resilience and reconciliation among different regions and levels of youth. Groups like football clubs can doubly serve as recreation platforms but also in government programming to access loans and benefit from other programs and services. They create youth-safe spaces for discussion and participation, discuss challenges and possible solutions.

Conclusion

The study concludes that young people have an important role to play in addressing undignified and non-fulfilling work situations affecting them in various contexts. Young people should not be considered as entirely victims but rather as active agents of change with self-initiated approaches towards realization of dignified and fulfilling work in Uganda. It is also true that self-initiated strategies are more sustainable as local resources are in most cases applied. Accessing dignified work can further improve social inclusion and build a sense of identity, belonging and community.

The policy brief was written by Victoria Flavia Namuggala, PhD, Monica Nabukalu, Sally Geraldine Nagawa (Makerere University), Uganda Country Research Team, and edited by Joel Otieno and James Ochieng (PASGR). It has been produced as part of the Africa Youth Aspirations and Resilience (AYAR) research in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. AYAR is a three years’ research and uptake project that aims to understand youth aspirations, resilience and perspectives on dignified and fulfilling work. Project is implemented in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal.

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