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Moving Uganda's national development planning to the grassroots: What's in it for youth?

AUTHOR

Gerald Karyeija

Uganda Management
Institute

Ragnhild Muriaas

University of Bergen

Almost 40% of Ugandan youth are neither employed nor studying. The government is going all in with its Parish Development Model (PDM), aiming to tackle this and reduce youth unemployment. But is it the best approach for helping more young people enter the labour market? There is little evidence so far that this new grassroots model will cater for the youth who had been given specific attention earlier.

Key messages

- As youth unemployment is high and previous job creation programmes have had mixed results, it was necessary for the Ugandan government to introduce another youth-inclusive government programme.
- The deepening decentralisation PDM reform launched in February 2022 promises to continue targeting youth employment, but there is limited clarity on how this will be realized. There is a need for the PDM to increase the percentage of youth beneficiaries since they are most in need of jobs and wealth creation opportunities.
- Although the PDM appears to contribute to solving the youth unemployment problem, it is difficult to change policy direction without stirring up tension.
- Patronage, corruption and limited funding have created distrust in youth unemployment programmes.

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A youth population explosion

Uganda's population is one of the youngest in the world with 77% of its citizens below the age of 30. Estimates show that 39% of them are neither employed nor actively getting education or training. Persistent youth unemployment within a rapidly growing population poses serious development challenges, despite the over 6.5% average economic growth in Uganda. This youth population explosion poses a serious threat because unemployed youth is related to other problems such as societal exclusion, unrest, decreased productivity, increasing poverty, brain drain, human trafficking, and depression.

The National Resistance Movement (NRM) has worked to actively involve youth, a group they consider to be marginalized, in decision-making processes and for themselves to find solutions that can get them out of unemployment, through the formation of youth interest groups, such as Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations, and creation of job opportunities for self-employment. The risk with such programmes is that they may pacify youth or that they are used to distribute benefits

only to those loyal to the regime. Considering this, the efficiency of unemployment schemes can be put in question, particularly as more general labour market initiatives could also come to the benefit of youth without a youth-specific framing.

Over the years the government has introduced 11 youth programmes to assuage unemployment. This has been supplemented by 30 different regional projects led by NGOs and development partners. The critical question remains: Have these programmes been successful and is it likely that the new decentralization strategy is better equipped to solve the problem of youth employment?

The need for reform

Several youth employment schemes in Uganda have been reported as successful. An evaluative study revealed that the Youth Opportunities Program (YOP) beneficiaries had 41% higher income and were 65% more likely to practice a skilled trade compared to the rest. The Youth Livelihood Program (YLP) has disbursed UGX 314.672 billion since its inception in 2013 to 2021, and over UGX 39.102 billion has been recovered out of the UGX 75.175 billion that is due (52%) (1 USD is approximately 3666 UGX at the time of writing). The programme contributed 4% to job creation in Uganda with over 200,000 direct jobs and 500,000 indirect jobs in 2018. Access to financial services has improved by 4.5%, youth asset acquisition has been enlarged, many businesses have been formalized, and there

is visibly enhanced social capital among the youth which can be seen through shared experiences and mutual help when in need.

Despite these notable accomplishments, our research show that youth involvement has been hampered by limited funding from the government, the youth's lack of job experience, a mismatch between the skills on offer and the demand in the market, poor mobilization, inappropriate targeting, inadequate information and wrong people being chosen to participate in such programmes.

Thus, the scheme doesn't target the right people and lacks the support system that can make it possible for the right kind of youth to benefit from the programme.

We interviewed 18 stakeholders about the youth employment schemes that were in place before the PDM reform—including 11 youth leaders in both the government and the opposition parties—that in different capacities have been involved in programmes dealing with the challenges and benefits of recent youth employment schemes. A youth politician and grant beneficiary observed that both the necessary support system and the marginalized youth are missing. Thus, the scheme doesn't target the right people and lacks the support system that can make it possible for the right kind of youth to benefit from the programme. The youth have no income, no education, and need administrative support. Another youth politician in opposition questioned the rationale of requirements that only give funding to groups of five unskilled and unemployed youth. One of the youth leaders noted thus: "If someone has never worked, you cannot tell that person how to use such money". Research participants complained about the "monotony" in the projects - too many "chicken rearing programmes and too few available markets". Hence the government has to build platforms that expose the youth to a "variety of business ideas" and try to build a "conducive environment for businesses to grow." This called for more skilled youth to enter the programmes and "better avenues for skilling on the ground to ensure that there is a productive use of money meant for venture capital".

Patronage and corruption were mentioned as challenges by several respondents. One respondent remarked: "we have seen a lot of corruption at the sub-county level, we have categorized that as abuse. (...) some politicians have also tried to gain social capital out of it". This was also admitted by a higher-level politician, who stated: "Sometimes you might not get the impact, but I know that many programmes of Uganda are entangled in corruption".

A youth worker noted that programmes were politicized and some youth felt excluded. He explained: "Youth who

are not supporting the party in leadership may not want to even go and access these programmes". He felt obliged to "sensitize them, to talk to them, to see that they maximize these programmes". It was noted that much as the design and implementation mechanisms do not provide for the structural exclusion of non-regime sympathizers, the implementers use their discretion and autonomy to help youth that are loyal to the regime more than those that are not.

The new policy

On the initiative of the government, Uganda has undergone a series of public reforms to bring about public sector efficiency in service delivery. Despite the various reforms and alternative service delivery mechanisms, there are notable performance crises, incompetency, poor accountability, increased corruption reduced trust in public institutions and declining the service standard. The PDM, launched in February 2022, is the latest reform. It is aimed at lifting 39% of Uganda's population from subsistence to a money-driven economy.

The reform is launched because there seems to be a general understanding that the PDM will bring services closer to the people as the administrative hub for all government services. At least 30% of the PDM revolving fund is earmarked for youth, making them major beneficiaries. The remaining amount of the fund results in 30% for women, 10% for persons with disabilities, 10% for the elderly, and 20% for men and the rest of the population. These other categories are ambiguous, as youth may belong to several. For example one can be both young and disabled, hence some may benefit even more from the funds.

Parish Development Committees (PDCs) shall be working together with the citizens to identify and respond to their own needs. The PDM gives youth a voice and place in governance whereby communities are expected to elect members of the PDC based on "sound mind, character, personality and integrity". This slot allows them to participate in the implementation, monitoring, evaluation and accountability of the program. The question is, if the PDM must be implemented, will it overcome the challenges faced by other government programmes such as Youth Livelihood Program, Youth Venture Capital Fund, and *Emyooga* (a presidential initiative on wealth and job creation). So far, youth leaders are doubting this.

In its maiden year, the government fronted the third pillar of financial inclusion out of the seven pillars, as a flagship for the PDM and subsequently invested 17 million UGX for each parish which has been raised to 117 million UGX for each of the 10,594 parishes. Each parish has a population size ranging from 450 to 30,000 people.

There is little evidence so far that this new grassroots model will cater for special groups that have been given specific attention earlier. As the government implements PDM, clear guidelines have been put in place, parish

chiefs have been recruited, money has been budgeted for, community mobilization is ongoing, and many other efforts are made to ensure organizational readiness to implement it. Citizens at the parish level decide development priorities. Still, there are a number of issues that need to be dealt with to ensure that PDM delivers what it promises. So far there have been several challenges. As, for instance, the financial inclusion pillar has obscured the other six pillars, sections of the society take PDM to be a revolving fund, the competence of the parish chief is being questioned, and it is a concern that the monitoring framework is not clear. Some issues have been solved while others remain unsolved. There should therefore be a comprehensive PDM implementation study to examine further the challenges faced in translating PDM intentions into desired changes in society, including the youth. The study findings shall inform better implementation mechanisms.

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Policy recommendations

- The national government should develop a national tracking mechanism for youth employment in order to get a realistic understanding of the job situation among youth.
- The government should distribute the PDM money equitably since demographics vary per parish.
- The government should create and deploy youth initiatives across all state departments. Interventions should not be piecemeal, but instead be interlinked and comprehensively delivered to improve uptake.
- Youth employment programmes should be designed and delivered in collaboration with statutory organisations such as the National Youth Council and the Uganda National Students Association.
- The government, donors and agencies must conduct feasibility studies, baseline surveys and pilots to ensure the long-term viability of youth initiatives and to determine whether they will succeed.

Further readings

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CMI (Chr. Michelsen Institute)
Phone: +47 47 93 80 00
Phone from abroad: +47 55 70 55 65
E-mail: cmi@cmi.no
www.cmi.no

P.O. Box 6033,
N-5892 Bergen, Norway
Visiting address:
Jekteviksbakken 31, Bergen

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