



ADVANCING YOUTH WELL-BEING IN UGANDA: A SYSTEMS APPROACH FOR SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMING

A CONSENSUS STUDY OF
THE UGANDA NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES



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Advancing Youth Well-Being in Uganda: A Systems Approach for Sustainable Programming

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ACRONYMS

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
CYDI	Commonwealth Youth Development Index
EPRC	Economic Policy Research Centre
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
NPHC	National Population & Housing Census
NYP	National Youth Policy
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

PREFACE

This report seeks to provide a comprehensive, up-to-date compilation of the body of evidence regarding Youth well-being and development in Uganda.

It seeks to respond to and provide clarity on the following questions:

1. What are the issues affecting the Youth in Uganda, and how do they interact with each other and the prevailing policy contexts in which the youth operate?
2. What response frameworks are used to address youth well-being in Uganda? What are the pros and cons of each framework?
3. What conditions are required to successfully transition to the most holistic and sustainable framework for addressing youth well-being and development in Uganda?

The report draws conclusions from a systematic analysis of the evidence and also identifies research gaps in areas where evidence is limited.

It is hoped that stakeholders will be able to identify themselves with one or more aspects discussed in this report and consider reviewing their approach to youth well-being and development as appropriate.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Demographic Dividend. This is the accelerated economic growth that may result from a decline in a country's mortality and fertility and the subsequent change in the age structure of the population. With fewer births each year, a country's young dependent population grows smaller with the working-age population. With fewer people to support, a country has a window of opportunity for rapid economic growth if the right social and economic policies are developed and strategic investments are made.

Systems thinking is an approach that views problems as part of a larger system rather than focusing on individual parts in isolation (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2019). It involves understanding the relationships and dynamics within a system to address problems more effectively (Arnold & Wade, 2015).

Wellbeing: According to WHO (2024), wellbeing encompasses the quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose, which are determined by social, economic, and environmental conditions. Tchiki (2024) defines well-being as the experience of health, happiness, and prosperity. It includes having good mental health, high life satisfaction, a sense of meaning or purpose, and the ability to manage stress. He further categorizes well-being into emotional, physical, social, workplace, and societal well-being. On top of these elements, Clarabut (2023) adds intellectual, economic, and spiritual well-being aspects.

Youth: The United Nations defines youth as the period between the ages of 15 and 24 years, marking the transition from childhood dependence to adult independence and the realization of our independence as members of a community (United Nations, n.d.). The Commonwealth classifies young people aged 15-29 as youths. The East African Community identifies youths as those between 15-35 years. In Uganda, the National Youth Council classifies youth as individuals aged 18-30, and the revised National Youth Policy uses 15-30 years (Kasumba, 2023).

Youth Development: The global matrices of youth development combine all three concepts of well-being. The Commonwealth Youth Development Index (CYDI) is used to track progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to youth development. It covers six domains of youth development: education, employment and opportunity, equality and inclusion, health and wellbeing, peace and security, and political and civic participation.

African Proverb

A cat that dreams of becoming a lion must lose its appetite for rats

Meaning

To achieve greatness, you must let go of old habits that could hold back your progress.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Uganda, the issue of youth well-being is a multifaceted and pressing concern that demands a comprehensive and systemic approach. This report delves into the intricate landscape of youth well-being in Uganda, emphasizing the urgent need for a paradigm shift from linear, fragmented interventions to a holistic systems-based approach. It underscores the fact that the current linear approach to youth programming, while helpful for reporting and information sharing, falls short in capturing the interconnectedness of the various factors influencing youth well-being. In many such cases, the positive outcomes are short-lived. This gap highlights the necessity for adopting a systems-thinking approach that recognizes the complex interplay of various elements within the youth ecosystem.

The report argues that systems thinking is crucial for navigating the complexities of youth well-being, enabling stakeholders to better understand the system-wide effects of interventions, policies, and behaviors. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between various factors, including social-cultural support, population dynamics, education and skilling, employment, mental health, and high-risk behaviors. The report highlights the centrality of socio-cultural support systems, encompassing family, peers, and community networks, in shaping mental health perceptions and promoting health-seeking behaviors among youth.

The report provides evidence-informed recommendations for a paradigm shift in youth policy and programming in Uganda, urging designers to adopt a systems-design approach to achieve the overarching goal of harnessing the demographic dividend. This shift involves expanding their focus beyond individual program goals to encompass the broader youth ecosystem and its intricate interconnections. In this way, the report provides valuable insights and actionable recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders invested in improving youth well-being outcomes in Uganda. In taking a futuristic view, the report explores the digital revolution's impact on youth education, employment, and mental health, emphasizing the need to bridge the digital divide and

promote digital equity. It explores issues of the governance of youth affairs and the crucial role of youth participation in forming their policies and practices.

By embracing a systems thinking approach, Uganda can effectively address the complex challenges facing its youth and unlock their full potential, protecting investments made from foreseeable shocks.

To further equip stakeholders for this transition, the report outlines the precursors for a successful implementation of systems-based strategies and policies, giving special emphasis to the catalytic potential of the digital revolution and opportunities provided through system re-designs in response to climate change. These include aligning global and national aspirations, training and capacity strengthening, particularly in areas of mental health and digital literacy, and incentivizing programmers to consider long-term goals as opposed to short and medium-term outcomes. This approach enables meaningful system integration, cross-sector collaboration, and working in transdisciplinary teams. Stakeholders are more likely to get involved if program management and coordination structures are built into existing government frameworks and policies are coherent and take into account the specific needs of vulnerable youth.

CONSENSUS STUDY PROCESS

Consensus study reports, the signature advisory products of the Uganda National Academy of Sciences, provide evidence-informed policy advice to the Government of Uganda. These reports also act as a bridge between scientific research, policy development, and implementation. While focused on government science advice, the Academy recognizes the diverse sources of information available to policymakers, communities, and other stakeholders. Therefore, consensus study reports also aim to inform various groups, including civil society organizations, businesses, academia, and the

communities they serve. Ultimately, these studies strive to make science a cornerstone of development at the national, continental, and global levels.

Before undertaking a consensus study, the Academy conducts stakeholder engagements to gain a comprehensive understanding of common challenges within the stakeholder groups it serves. It then aggregates and reviews the input received, identifying pervasive themes. For this consensus study, consultations with stakeholders during a workshop held on July 11, 2024, at the Golden Tulip Hotel, Kampala, highlighted that the current approach to youth programming falls short of leveraging the interconnectedness of the systems and structures shaping youth well-being to maximize benefits. This workshop underscored the need for evidence-informed recommendations emphasizing the shift from linear to holistic interventions.

Consequently, the Academy convened a multidisciplinary expert committee to undertake a consensus study on adopting a holistic approach to youth wellbeing in Uganda. Committee members served pro bono and in their capacities as subject matter experts, completing bias and conflict of interest checks.

Through five virtual meetings, the expert committee guided the study secretariat on key themes and sources of evidence that would shape the report. Based on their deliberations, the secretariat conducted more comprehensive searches for relevant literature, including academic databases for peer-reviewed literature, practitioner reports, and grey literature. This resulted in a literature synthesis based on over 134 potentially relevant sources, which formed the evidence base for the expert committee's conclusions and recommendations.

With the literature synthesis complete, the committee drafted an initial report, which they then reviewed rigorously. In this process, the committee identified gaps in the literature and refined their focus on overarching conclusions and recommendations. The committee followed this iterative process for subsequent drafts of the report.

Once the committee had prepared a near-final draft, the Academy appointed an external peer review panel to provide critical

feedback. The secretariat received and compiled review comments, anonymizing the identities of the peer reviewers. The external reviewers' expertise was aligned with that of the expert committee to the greatest extent possible. The committee met again to guide the secretariat on how to address the comments from the reviewers. This step ensured that all comments received a response and that no reviewer's comments dominated the revised report. With these steps complete, the secretariat updated the report and circulated it to the expert committee. Subject to any amendments, the committee members signed off on the final report, allowing for copyediting, layout, launch, and dissemination. The word "consensus" means that members of the expert committee agreed on the overarching messages, conclusions, and recommendations, but it does not imply agreement in every section, paragraph, sentence, or word in the report.

Background and Context: Youth Well-being in Uganda

1.1 UGANDA'S DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

According to the 2024 National Population and Housing Census, Uganda's population stands at 45.9 million persons with an annual growth rate of 2.9%. The youthful population (18-30 years) constitutes 22.7 % (UBOS NPHC Report, 2024).

Demographic trends in Uganda reveal a rapidly growing population with high fertility and declining mortality rates, resulting in a predominantly young demographic. Over half of Uganda's population is under 18, presenting both opportunities and challenges for socio-economic development (Vindevogel & Kimera, 2023). The predominance of youth in the population is a global trend. In 2024, the world youth population aged 15 to 24 is 1.2 billion people strong (United Nations, n.d.), and represents the largest cohort ever to be transitioning to adulthood. Over 85% of them live in developing countries, and, in many places, the numbers keep growing (Advocates for Youth, n.d.).

A large, youthful population can act as a powerful engine for economic growth if the country effectively utilizes their skills and potential. Economists often refer to this potential economic benefit associated with a youthful population as the "demographic dividend." Uganda's Vision 2040 and the second National Development Plan (NDP II) identify harnessing the demographic dividend as a key strategy to enhance productivity, employment, and inclusive growth. Comparative cross-country analyses suggest that while demographic transitions can spur economic growth, they must be complemented by inclusive development policies tailored to each country's specific needs (Woldegiorgis, 2023). This approach underscores creating an enabling environment for youth to thrive, including improved access to education, healthcare, and

employment. Addressing Uganda's slow fertility transition has been highlighted as one of the key enablers to capitalize on this demographic dividend and achieve full economic potential (Kizza et al., 2020; Rutaremwa & Kabagenyi, 2016).

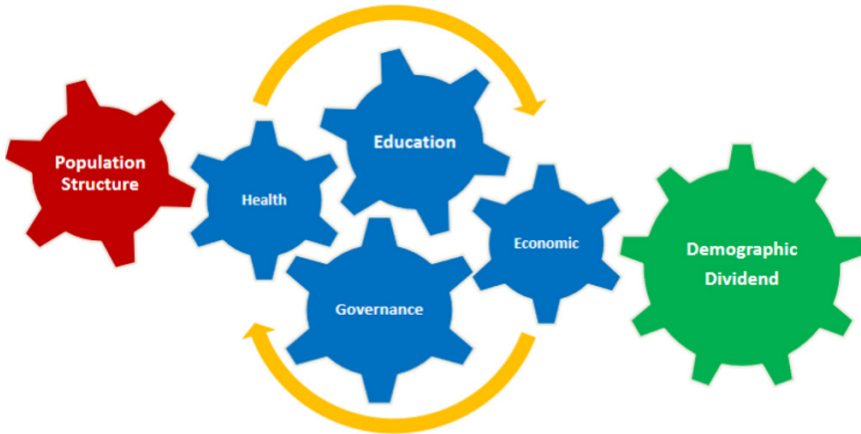


FIGURE 1 Pillars of the Demographic Dividend

Source: Gribble, 2013.

1.2 CHALLENGES FACING UGANDAN YOUTH

The problems of Uganda's youth have been widely documented. These issues include alcoholism, peer pressure, drug and substance abuse, unemployment, dropping out of school, involvement in gang activities, addiction to gambling and betting, difficulties in starting and sustaining a family, unwanted or teenage pregnancies, a lack of positive role models, peer and societal pressure, and an abundance of unfiltered and non-electronic information. (Luwangula et al., 2021). In addition, HIV/AIDS poses a significant challenge to young people, accounting for 37% of all new HIV infections among young people aged 15-24 years, and 79% of these infections are among young women (Uganda AIDS Commission, 2021). Studies on youth participation in governance, decision-making processes, policy formulation, and government programs have found it to be

limited due to many local-level participatory structures described as inactive or ineffective (Afrobarometer, 2023; Oroma, 2017; Vijana Corps, 2023).

1.3 STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING YOUTH WELL-BEING IN UGANDA

Various strategies have been explored to improve youth well-being in Uganda:

- **Targeted Interventions:** Program developers design programs to address the psychological and social well-being of specific groups, such as unmarried teenage mothers in rural areas (Leerlooijer et al., 2014). These interventions recognize that certain groups of young people face unique challenges and require tailored support. They may include counseling, life skills training, and access to healthcare and education. An example is Wakisa Ministries in Uganda, whose mission is the promotion of dignity and self-esteem of young girls with crisis pregnancy while addressing their emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. By providing temporary shelter, counseling and care services, opportunities for Christian growth and discipleship, and equipping them with life and vocational skills, Wakisa Ministries transforms the lives of this vulnerable group.
- **Community-Based Programs:** The Wellbeing Club Uganda demonstrates the effectiveness of community-based interventions in promoting positive well-being and leadership among adolescents (Bintliff et al., 2024). These programs leverage existing social structures and resources within communities to promote well-being and empower young people. They often involve peer support, mentorship, and community engagement activities. A similar family-centered service model was adopted by the Better Outcomes for Children and Youth in Eastern and Northern Uganda (BOCY). USAID and WEI Bantwana, in partnership with five local non-governmental organizations, government, and

private sector entities, implemented this six-year project to target highly vulnerable HIV-infected and affected children and their families. The project helped vulnerable children and their caregivers prevent and respond to the risks and realities of violence and HIV while moving them along a path toward economic and social stability (Bantwana World Education Initiative, n.d.)

- **Economic Strengthening:** Family-based economic strengthening interventions can improve the mental health of vulnerable youth, such as female adolescent orphans affected by HIV/AIDS (Kivumbi et al., 2019). These interventions aim to improve the economic security of families, which in turn can reduce stress and improve the overall well-being of young people. They may include providing financial assistance, livelihood training, and access to microfinance opportunities. The Youth Livelihood Program of the Government of Uganda serves as an example, providing funds to vulnerable young people. It has three components: (i) Skills Development: supports the poor and unemployed youth to learn marketable skills that can create opportunities for self-employment; (ii) Livelihood Support: gives young people the tools they need to start businesses that can make them money; and (iii) Institutional Support: improves fund management and encourages good governance and accountability (MOGLSD, 2014). The Uganda Youth Venture Capital Fund supports young entrepreneurs by providing them with access to finance and business development services. This fund recognizes the important role entrepreneurship can play in driving economic growth and creating jobs (Ahaibwe & Kasirye, 2015).

1.4 UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Fostering resilience and well-being among Ugandan youth requires consideration of the broader context in which they live.

- **Socio-ecological Frameworks:** These frameworks emphasize the interconnectedness of human societies and their environments in shaping resilience (Bamutaze, 2015). In Uganda, for example, young people living with HIV/AIDS benefit from having access to basic needs like food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and jobs, as well as structural supports like financial help and education (Vindevogel & Kimera, 2023). These frameworks highlight the importance of understanding the complex interactions between social and ecological factors in promoting youth well-being.
- **Processual Frameworks:** These frameworks highlight the temporal and relational aspects of well-being, recognizing how past experiences, such as gendered violence, can impact well-being later in life (Rishworth & Elliott, 2022). They emphasize the importance of addressing past traumas and promoting healing to foster long-term well-being.
- **Cultural and socio-political Dynamics:** Cultural and socio-political factors significantly influence how individuals respond to adversity. In Uganda, traditional healing practices, socio-political organization, and the legacy of conflict can all impact mental health (Isiko, 2019; Vorhölter, 2014). Understanding these dynamics helps create culturally sensitive interventions that address the specific needs of Ugandan youth.
- **Relational Factors:** Social relationships and support networks are crucial for youth well-being, particularly in post-conflict settings (De Nutte et al., 2017). Interventions like the Girl Up Club in Kampala recognize the importance of social support in promoting girls' education and empowerment (Wolf, 2015). Strong relationships with family, peers, and mentors provide young people with a sense of belonging, security, and guidance.
- **Social Cohesion:** Promoting social cohesion within communities is essential for well-being. Interventions like community health clubs can strengthen social bonds (King et al., 2010). At the national level, addressing equity and

well-being is crucial for social cohesion across East Africa (Kamau, 2023; UNAS, 2022). Social cohesion fosters a sense of trust, cooperation, and mutual support, which contributes to individual and community well-being.

1.5 FACTORS INFLUENCING THE WELL-BEING OF UGANDA'S YOUTH

The most important problems that young Ugandans want their government to address in order of priority are health, water supply education, infrastructure/roads, unemployment, and corruption (Afrobarometer, 2023). The youth seem to be acutely aware that the state of affairs in their environment has a direct impact on their well-being as individuals.

Prevalent socio-economic inequities expose susceptible youth to even greater vulnerabilities, further compounding their challenges. Young girls who live in poverty are more likely to engage in transactional sex, which puts them at risk for sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS and early, unplanned pregnancies. This forces them to drop out of school, makes them less competitive in the job market, and makes it harder for them to find work, which keeps them and their children in cycles of mental and material poverty that last for generations (Kimera et al., 2020; Manzi et al., 2018; Wamajji & Mubangizi, 2022). Un- and improperly skilled young people are more vulnerable to unemployment or low-quality jobs, leading to a lack of stable sufficient incomes to cover their basic needs and those of their families, leading to feelings of inadequacy and mental stress, which may lead to high-risk behaviors such as gambling, drug and substance abuse, and criminal behaviors. Others may develop idle or sedentary lifestyles, lose morale for life, and develop suicidal ideations (EPRC, 2024; Hawkins et al., 2020; Kasoma, 2023; Makanga, 2023; Mpanga, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the difficulties Ugandan youth face. While necessary to control the virus's spread, lockdown measures triggered widespread job losses and business closures, impacting family incomes and livelihoods, and leaving many young

people vulnerable to economic hardship (Parkes et al., 2020).

Ultimately, promoting the well-being and resilience of Ugandan youth requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the complex interplay of individual, social, economic, and cultural factors. Strengthening mental health services, improving mental health literacy, leveraging digital technologies, and fostering social cohesion are all vital strategies. Tailoring interventions to the specific challenges and opportunities within the Ugandan context remains crucial (Asiimwe et al., 2023; Kyegombe et al., 2020; Lanyero, 2021).

1.6 UNIQUE VULNERABILITIES TO CHALLENGES AFFECTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN UGANDA

The challenges affecting youth in Uganda are contextual, highlighting the differences in circumstances among various youth categories. For example, urban and rural youth in Uganda face distinct challenges and opportunities impacting their well-being. Urban youth often have better access to educational resources, healthcare, and employment opportunities than their rural counterparts due to the concentration of services and infrastructure in urban areas. However, they also face unique challenges like higher living costs, increased exposure to crime, and urbanization pressures, which can lead to mental health issues (Bbaale et al., 2023; Hawkins et al., 2020). Conversely, rural youth are more likely to experience limited access to quality education and healthcare, hindering their overall development and prospects. The lack of information about available programs and opportunities further exacerbates this issue, particularly for women and marginalized groups. Also, rural youth often rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, making them more vulnerable to climate change impacts.

Evidence from the 2015 Violence Against Children Survey (UBOS, 2018) showed that young girls are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, while physical violence predominantly affects young boys. Government-sponsored National Youth Funds discriminate based on factors such as age, location (rural

vs. urban), and type of business (services vs. others) (Ahaibwe & Kasirye, 2015). Tulibaleka et al., (2022) further highlight the unique challenges faced by refugee youth in integrating into the labor market, the absence of elderly support and guidance, and the persistent uncertainty about their futures

Therefore, youth in Uganda are not a homogenous population group, and they are impacted differently by various yet interrelated challenges. Designing equitable, holistic, effective, and sustainable interventions to these challenges requires deep contextual reflection.

Designing effective youth employment programs in low-income countries like Uganda requires careful consideration of the specific needs and circumstances of the target population. Program designers need to consider factors such as education levels, skills gaps, access to markets, and social barriers to ensure that programs stay relevant and impactful (Fox & Kaul, 2018).

A recent review of Uganda's youth employment programs and policies emphasized the need for a more integrated and effective approach to tackling youth unemployment. This includes strengthening coordination among different programs, improving the targeting of vulnerable groups, and addressing systemic issues that hinder youth employment, such as skills mismatches and limited access to finance (Bbaale et al., 2023).

1.7 YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND COORDINATION

Addressing these challenges and harnessing the potential of Uganda's youth requires comprehensive and coordinated strategies. A multi-sectoral approach that involves government agencies, civil society organizations, and the private sector working together remains crucial. The Government of Uganda, through the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development (MOGLSD), developed the Uganda National Youth Policy (2016) which aimed at ensuring youth wellbeing and unlocking the potential of youth for sustainable wealth creation and general development (MOGLSD, 2016). The policy is operationalized through the National Youth Action

Plan (NYAP), 2016. The NYAP recognizes the importance of an effective coordination mechanism among the various stakeholders in achieving NYP goals and has developed a framework to assist in this endeavor. (Figure 2). To increase clarity, use active voice: Three thematic working groups—youth and health, skills and livelihood, and participation and governance—combine actors.

The National Coordination Mechanism aims to streamline efforts and avoid duplication of services by various actors in the youth development sector. It also seeks to integrate youth perspectives and needs into national development plans and policies (Shaft, 2021). Decentralization and youth participation in local governance remain crucial for meaningful youth engagement. Giving young people a voice in decision-making processes that affect their lives allows them to actively contribute to shaping their communities and the country's future (Shaft, 2021).

Organizations like Uganda Youth Development Link help young people transition from care into employment using a social-ecological approach. This approach recognizes the interconnectedness of individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors that influence youth development and seeks to address challenges at each of these levels (Bukuluki et al., 2019).

In the end, a systems approach to youth well-being calls for changes in policy and programs that support unified plans that link various sectors and stakeholders (Bantwana World Education Initiative, n.d.; Bbaale et al., 2023; Leerlooijer et al., 2014; Makumbi & Muyinda, 2017).

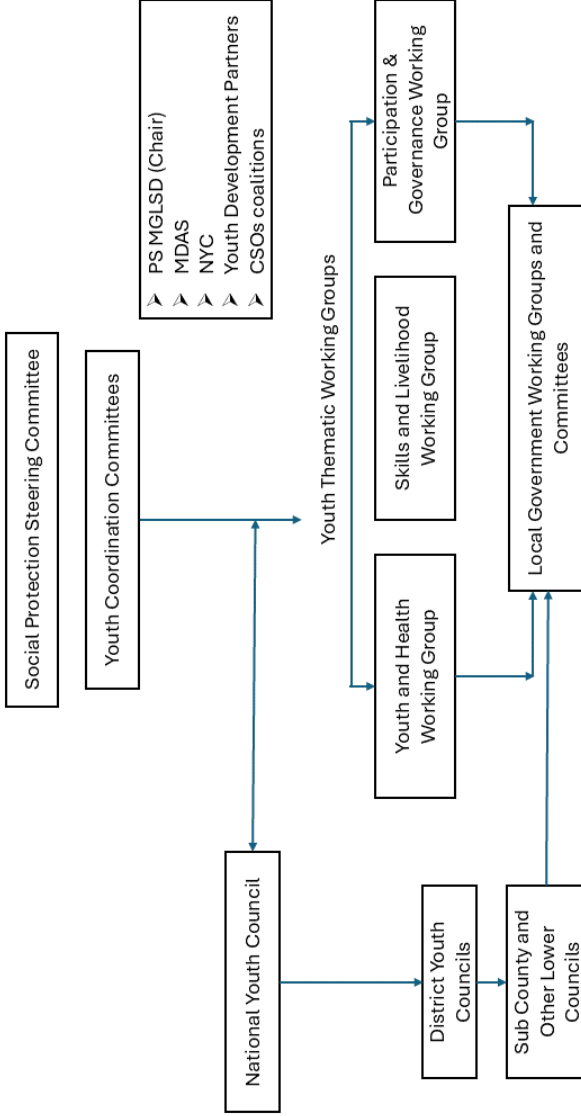


FIGURE 2 The National Youth Coordination Mechanism
 Source: MOGLSD, 2016.

Theoretical Framework

2.1 DEFINITIONS AND PRINCIPLES

2.1.1 What is Systems Thinking?

Systems thinking is an approach that views problems as part of a larger system rather than focusing on individual parts in isolation (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2019). It involves understanding the relationships and dynamics within a system to address problems more effectively (Arnold & Wade, 2015). Systems thinking principles can be applied in a wide variety of contexts, including education and organizational management (Arnold & Wade, 2015). Practicing systems thinking involves developing skills to analyze complex systems and identify leverage points for positive change (Anderson & Johnson, 1997). The perspective of systems thinking has evolved over time, with a growing recognition of the need to consider the interconnectedness of social systems (Ackoff, 1994). Systems thinking provides a powerful framework for addressing complex challenges in any field by taking a holistic view and understanding the interdependencies among systems.

Systems thinking emphasizes understanding the broader context and dynamic interactions within a system rather than focusing on isolated parts. This approach involves a shift from linear cause-and-effect thinking to a more circular perspective, considering feedback loops and time delays (Rosas & Knight, 2019). Feedback loops can reinforce or balance change within the system. Understanding these loops is crucial for predicting system behavior and designing effective interventions. Leverage points represent specific areas where small changes can lead to significant improvements. Identifying and acting on these points remains crucial for systemic change, particularly for youth well-being, where targeted interventions can have ripple effects across education, employment, and mental health. Defining

system boundaries clarifies what the analysis includes, helping to understand the problem's scope and identify relevant stakeholders. For youth well-being in Uganda, this means considering not just immediate factors but also the broader socio-cultural and economic context.

Systems thinking provides a robust framework for addressing the complex challenges of youth well-being in Uganda. By focusing on feedback loops, leverage points, boundaries, and integrating digital and socio-cultural factors, this approach offers a comprehensive strategy for creating sustainable and effective interventions. This holistic perspective remains essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and promoting a more equitable and sustainable future for all. In Uganda and across Africa, systems thinking has been shown to work in agribusiness (Aboah & Enahoro, 2022; Banson et al., 2015); solid waste management (Kubanza & Simatele, 2017); health (Rwashana et al., 2014); environmental policy (Namanji et al., 2017), and SDGs (Castellani et al., 2022). By recognizing the interconnectedness of various factors and promoting collaboration, Uganda can create a supportive environment where young people thrive, contributing to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and driving sustainable development.

A systems-based approach offers a powerful alternative, recognizing that youth well-being sits at the intersection of multiple, interconnected systems (Basu et al., 2020; Tirrell et al., 2023). This means considering not only individual factors like mental health but also the influence of family dynamics, community support, cultural norms, and broader societal structures. For example, the digital revolution, while offering new opportunities for education and connection, also presents challenges like cyberbullying and the digital divide, impacting youth mental health and requiring careful navigation (Makumbi, 2022; Pearson et al., 2017). Addressing these issues effectively requires a coordinated effort across sectors, integrating technology, education, and mental health support.

2.1.2 Applications in Social Systems

Interconnectedness: Systems thinking emphasizes that components of a system are interconnected and interdependent. Rwashana et al., (2014) adopted a system thinking approach to understand the dynamics of neonatal mortality in Uganda, highlighting how technical, policy, behavioral, and cultural issues interact. Similarly, Bortz et al., (2019) integrated theories of differentiation, attachment, parenting style, and identity development to understand adolescent experiences within family systems.

Feedback Loops: Systems thinking highlights the presence of feedback loops, where effects become causes that, in turn, influence the original causes. Moore et al. (2018) developed a Systems Thinking Scale for Adolescent Behavior Change, recognizing that systems thinking can impact diet and physical activity, which in turn affect weight status and overall well-being. Shrier et al., (2020) applied systems thinking to consider how clinic system elements and their interactions impact the implementation of depression interventions for adolescents.

Non-Linear Change: Systems thinking accounts for non-linear change, where small interventions can have large, disproportionate effects. Felmingham et al., (2023) demonstrated the value of systems thinking in municipal public health to improve well-being, including for young people. They found that stakeholder engagement helped tailor interventions to the local context, maximizing their impact. Namatovu and Magumba (2023) used a systems thinking approach to decipher barriers and facilitators of eHealth adoption in Uganda, recognizing that small changes in implementation strategies could significantly enhance the effectiveness of these health technologies.

Resilience and Adaptive Capacity: A systems perspective emphasizes the concepts of resilience (withstanding challenges without lasting harm) and adaptive capacity (the ability to change and grow in response to adversity). Widnall et al., (2023) used systems thinking to understand how a school health research network can improve adolescents' health and well-being. They recognized that schools are complex systems requiring interventions that enhance

resilience and adaptive capacity. Rosas (2017) discussed how the concept of health-promoting schools reflects a comprehensive and integrated philosophy to improve student and personnel well-being, aligning with systems thinking principles. Mosebo (2015) examined how urban Karimojong youth in Uganda enhance their well-being through livelihood strategies and social connections, highlighting the importance of adaptive capacity in the face of adversity.

Equity and Contextual Considerations: Systems thinking prompts us to consider the broader social, economic, and cultural contexts in which youth develop. It highlights how structural inequities and power imbalances impact the opportunities and challenges young people face. Cahill and Gowing (2020) emphasized that young people themselves must be involved in shaping discussions about the factors that enhance or harm their well-being. Cox et al., (2024) took a systems thinking perspective in reviewing the facilitators and barriers to help-seeking for self-harm in young people, underscoring the need to address systemic issues that create inequities in access to support. Namanji et al., (2017) examined the extent to which decentralized natural resources management in Uganda incorporates systems thinking, highlighting the importance of considering how power dynamics impact policy implementation and environmental outcomes.

Dynamic and Evolving Nature of Youth: Adolescence and young adulthood are periods of rapid, dynamic change. Systems thinking, with its emphasis on ongoing flux and adaptation, is well-suited to capture this evolution. Kunnen (2012) presented a dynamic systems approach to adolescent development, recognizing that young people's experiences and the influences on their well-being shift across different stages of development. Chung (2013) assessed World Vision's holistic approach to children's well-being in Uganda, illustrating how programs must adapt to the evolving needs and contexts of the youth they serve.

Collaboration and Integrated Action: Systems thinking promotes a collaborative mindset, recognizing that no single entity can address complex issues in isolation. It encourages the integration of efforts across sectors (e.g., education, health, social services) to create a

more supportive, coherent environment for young people. Domegan et al. (2016) advocated for a stronger role of systems thinking in social marketing to address complex social issues impacting youth, including through multisectoral collaboration. Stepler et al. (2010) applied systems thinking to their humanitarian engineering and social ventures in Africa, recognizing the value of collaboration with diverse stakeholders to understand the system and design effective interventions.

2.1.3 Linear vs. Systems Approaches

Linear approaches to addressing youth well-being in Uganda face inherent limitations due to their inability to capture the complexity and interconnectedness of socio-cultural, economic, and technological factors. Traditional linear models often focus on isolated interventions, leading to fragmented efforts that fail to comprehensively address the root causes of issues (OECD, 2020). This fragmentation is particularly problematic in the context of youth well-being, where multiple factors such as education, employment, and mental health are deeply intertwined.

One significant limitation of linear approaches is their tendency to overlook the dynamic interactions within systems. For instance, interventions aimed solely at improving educational outcomes without considering the broader socio-economic environment may not yield sustainable results. Fostering systems thinking through the development of socially sustainable business ideas that utilize intelligent technologies can provide a more holistic understanding of these interactions. This approach enables a more comprehensive analysis of how different elements within a system influence each other, leading to more effective and sustainable solutions.

Moreover, linear approaches often fail to account for the feedback loops and emergent properties characteristic of complex systems. Managing the interactions between technological innovation and economic progress requires a concerted approach that considers the interdependencies between various sectors. This is particularly relevant in the context of the digital revolution, which

has profound implications for education, employment, and mental health. A systems-based approach can help identify and leverage these interdependencies, leading to more integrated and effective interventions.

Another limitation is the inability of linear approaches to adapt to changing conditions and emerging challenges. Nurturing system thinking by selecting appropriate working methods and topics can help students develop the skills needed to navigate complex and evolving environments. This adaptability is crucial for youth well-being, where rapid technological advancements and shifting socio-economic landscapes require flexible and responsive strategies.

Furthermore, linear approaches often result in inefficient resource use. Systems thinking can help decision-makers spend public money more wisely by identifying synergies and trade-offs between issues that are typically treated separately. Integrated solutions are more cost-effective than sectoral ones, as they can address multiple issues simultaneously and reduce unintended consequences. This is particularly important in resource-constrained settings like Uganda, where maximizing the impact of available resources is essential for sustainable development.

In addition, linear approaches may not adequately address the socio-cultural dimensions of youth well-being. The reflexive thematic approach allows for data interpretation using a theoretical framework that considers the socio-cultural context (OECD, 2020). This approach can provide deeper insights into the specific needs and challenges faced by youth in Uganda, leading to more culturally sensitive and effective interventions.

Finally, linear approaches often lack the capacity to foster collaboration and coordination among different stakeholders. Developing system coordination and coherence for promoting well-being deserves more attention (Kinnula et al., 2024). A systems-based approach can facilitate collaboration by providing a common framework for understanding and addressing complex issues and thereby enhancing the effectiveness of interventions.

The limitations of linear approaches in addressing youth well-being in Uganda highlight the need for a shift toward systems-based

approaches. By considering the dynamic interactions, feedback loops, and socio-cultural dimensions of complex systems and by fostering collaboration and efficient resource use, systems thinking can provide more comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the challenges faced by youth.

2.1.4 Advantages of Systems-Based Approaches

Systems-based approaches offer multi-faceted advantages in addressing youth well-being in Uganda. Unlike linear approaches, which often focus on isolated interventions, systems-based approaches consider the complex interplay of various factors affecting youth well-being. This holistic perspective is crucial for creating sustainable and impactful solutions.

One primary advantage is their ability to integrate multiple dimensions of youth well-being, including social, environmental, and political factors. This integration allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by young people. For instance, it is important to consider longer-term outcomes of well-being by taking into account these diverse factors (DeJaeghere et al., 2020). This comprehensive view is essential for developing interventions that are not only effective in the short term but also sustainable in the long run, representative of a complete life course approach.

Moreover, systems-based approaches are particularly effective in addressing the multifaceted nature of youth employment challenges. Evidence suggests that comprehensive programs, which address multiple constraints simultaneously, are more effective than those targeting a single issue (World Bank, 2019). This is especially true in low- and middle-income countries, where market and non-market failures often hinder youth employment. By adopting a systems-based approach, policymakers can design interventions that address both supply- and demand-side factors, creating a more conducive environment for youth employment. Traditional linear models often rely on simplified assumptions that do not capture the richness of real-world behaviors. With current computing power and data

availability, it is possible to develop more sophisticated models that better reflect reality (OECD, 2020). These advanced models can incorporate factors such as heterogeneity, uncertainty, and strategic interactions, providing a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the systems being studied.

The digital revolution has also highlighted the importance of systems-based approaches in education and employment. The growing number of mobile technologies offers unique opportunities to enhance accessibility and usability in education. For example, a mobile-based e-learning system can promote lifelong learning and improve youth engagement and performance in employability skills development (Med & Lukyamuzi, 2019). This approach not only addresses technological barriers but also integrates informal learning systems, making education more accessible and relevant to the needs of young people.

Furthermore, systems-based approaches facilitate better communication and coordination among stakeholders. Effective communication is crucial for the success of any program, especially in times of crisis. Efficient communication across all levels of implementation can determine the success or failure of a program (White et al., 2023). By fostering a shared understanding of each other's capabilities and limitations, systems-based approaches enable stakeholders to work together more effectively, enhancing the overall impact of interventions.

Additionally, systems-based approaches are essential for visualizing sustainable futures and providing a roadmap toward these goals. Building the capacity for national development pathways that evaluate the economic and ecological implications of strategic choices in an integrated manner is crucial (OECD, 2020). This diagnostic support is crucial for countries to make informed decisions that align with their long-term development objectives.

The emphasis on youth well-being in various sectors, such as education, justice, and child welfare, highlights the importance of addressing well-being in a complementary manner. By working in alignment on youth well-being issues, unnecessary system costs can be reduced, and youth outcomes can be improved (Campie et al.,

2015). This holistic approach ensures that young people receive the support they need to thrive in all aspects of their lives, including their financial endeavors.

Systems-based approaches offer numerous advantages over linear approaches in addressing youth well-being in Uganda. By integrating multiple dimensions of well-being, addressing multifaceted challenges, leveraging digital technologies, enhancing stakeholder communication, and adapting to real-world complexities, these approaches provide a more comprehensive and sustainable framework for youth policy and programming. This paradigm shift toward system thinking is essential for harnessing the demographic dividend and contributing to sustainable development.

Youth Well-being Ecosystem in Uganda

3.1 SOCIO-CULTURAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

3.1.1 Role of Family

The role of family in socio-cultural support systems for youth well-being in Uganda is multifaceted and critical. Families are the primary social unit where young individuals first experience socialization, emotional support, and develop values and norms (Asiimwe et al., 2023). This foundation is essential for fostering resilience and positive development. The positive youth development model emphasizes pursuing relevant goals, significantly influenced by family support (Mutambara, 2015b). This model advocates for a holistic approach focusing on strengths and potential rather than deficiencies.

In Uganda, the socio-cultural context highly values extended family structures, including relatives and community members beyond the nuclear family. This system provides a robust support network crucial for youth mental and emotional well-being. Integrating sociocultural considerations into policy advocacy is essential, recognizing the role of traditional family structures in mental health care (Asiimwe et al., 2023). Collaborating with traditional healers and increasing funding support can make policies culturally attuned and effective in addressing youth mental health needs.

However, economic challenges often hinder the effectiveness of family support. Many Ugandan families face financial constraints limiting their ability to provide adequate support for their children. This is particularly evident in youth employment, where many young people are engaged in informal, low-quality jobs. Improving the quality of existing jobs and preparing youth for better opportunities are essential (OECD, 2020). Families play a crucial role by

providing emotional and sometimes financial support to help young individuals transition to higher-quality jobs.

Moreover, the digital revolution has introduced new dynamics into the family structure and its role in youth development. Access to digital technologies can enhance educational opportunities and provide new avenues for employment. However, it also requires families to adapt and support their children in navigating these digital landscapes. Youth skills development programs need to move beyond traditional metrics of employability and earnings to consider broader well-being impacts (DeJaeghere et al., 2020). Families need to be equipped with the knowledge and resources to support their children in leveraging digital tools for their development.

The family is also critical in addressing systemic issues affecting youth well-being. Policy initiatives in Uganda have often been piecemeal, lacking a comprehensive framework addressing the economy's structural transformation (Bbaale et al., 2023). Families, as part of the broader socio-cultural support system, can advocate for more integrated and systemic approaches to youth policy and programming. By participating in community and national dialogues, families can help shape policies that are more inclusive and reflective of the real constraints faced by young people.

The family's role in socio-cultural support systems for youth well-being in Uganda is indispensable. Families provide the initial and ongoing support crucial for positive development. They help navigate economic challenges, adapt to the digital revolution, and advocate for systemic changes in youth policy. Recognizing and strengthening the role of the family allows stakeholders to better harness the demographic dividend and contribute to sustainable development in Uganda (Asiimwe et al., 2023; Bbaale et al., 2023; DeJaeghere et al., 2020; Mutambara, 2015b; OECD, 2020).

3.1.2 Influence of Peers

The influence of peers on youth well-being in Uganda is a multifaceted issue intertwined with various socio-cultural support systems. Peer relationships are critical in shaping mental health,

educational outcomes, and the overall development of young people. Adolescence, a period of significant physical, emotional, and social change, is particularly sensitive to peer influence (Costa, 2024). At this stage, the need for acceptance and belonging can drive youth to adopt prevalent behaviors and attitudes within their peer groups, with both positive and negative implications.

In mental health, peer influence is a double-edged sword. Supportive peer relationships provide emotional support, reduce loneliness, and foster a sense of belonging, crucial for mental well-being. Conversely, negative peer interactions, such as bullying or peer pressure to engage in risky behaviors, can exacerbate mental health issues. Studies show that urban youth living in slums, who often face significant mental health disparities compared to their school-attending counterparts, are particularly vulnerable to the negative aspects of peer influence (Swahn et al., 2020). These disparities highlight the need for targeted interventions addressing the unique challenges faced by these populations.

Educational outcomes are also significantly impacted. Positive peer interactions can enhance academic motivation and performance, while negative influences can lead to disengagement and dropout. The digital revolution further complicates this dynamic, as social media and other digital platforms become integral to peer interactions. These platforms can amplify both positive and negative influences, making it essential to integrate digital literacy and responsible online behavior into educational programs (Kinnula et al., 2024).

Peer influence is also evident in youth employment prospects. In Uganda, the private sector is emphasized as the primary provider of employment, yet the youth employment agenda remains fragmented and poorly coordinated (OECD, 2020). Peer networks can provide valuable information about job opportunities and support during job searching. However, they can also perpetuate cycles of unemployment and underemployment if prevailing attitudes within these networks are pessimistic or lack access to accurate information and resources.

The socio-cultural context in Uganda further complicates peer influence. Cultural norms and historical contexts shape peer

interactions and the types of support systems available to youth. For instance, traditional community structures and extended family networks can mitigate some negative impacts of peer pressure. However, urbanization and modernization increasingly erode these structures, leaving many youth without the necessary support to navigate their challenges (Costa, 2024; Luwangula et al., 2021).

Addressing the influence of peers on youth well-being requires a comprehensive, systems-based approach considering the interplay between various socio-cultural factors. Interventions should strengthen positive peer interactions while mitigating negative ones through programs that promote mental health education, foster supportive peer networks, and integrate digital literacy into the curriculum. Additionally, policies should focus on creating a more coordinated and supportive environment for youth employment, leveraging peer networks to disseminate information and resources effectively (Nambaziira, 2023; OECD, 2020).

Peer influence on youth well-being in Uganda is complex, intersecting with mental health, education, and employment. A systems-based approach, considering the sociocultural context and leveraging positive peer interactions while mitigating negative ones, is essential for promoting youth well-being and sustainable development.

3.1.3 Community Networks

Community networks play a pivotal role in enhancing youth well-being in Uganda by fostering socio-cultural support systems. These networks are essential for creating shared spaces, promoting dialogue, and encouraging cooperation among youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds, particularly where internal migration impacts young people's sense of belonging (International Alert, 2013). By building capacity and facilitating interactions, community networks help bridge gaps and create unity and purpose.

Youth involvement in community networks contributes to innovative solutions and community engagement strategies tailored to address Africa's unique health challenges. This active participation enhances the social impact and relevance of health

research, ultimately improving health outcomes (Adebisi et al., 2024). Furthermore, effective programming within these networks requires selecting youth with a genuine passion for agri-venturing and fostering necessary contextual factors like training and role modeling. This approach ensures exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities along the entire value chain, supported by a robust system at family and sector levels (Tindiwensi et al., 2023).

In addition to health and entrepreneurship, community networks promote digital rights and address digitalization challenges. For instance, promoting children's digital rights in Uganda is crucial, given internet shutdowns, high internet costs, and government censorship (Nambaziira, 2023). By advocating for policies protecting these rights, community networks ensure youth access to digital resources and opportunities, enhancing their educational and employment prospects.

Community networks significantly influence young people's mental health and well-being. Research indicates that youth in Uganda are anxious about their futures, particularly regarding the climate crisis. A substantial proportion express concerns about environmental changes impacting their lives and families (Barford et al., 2021.). Community networks can provide the necessary support and resources to help youth cope with these anxieties and build resilience.

As demonstrated, community networks are integral to the socio-cultural support systems underpinning youth well-being in Uganda. By fostering cooperation, promoting health and entrepreneurship, advocating for digital rights, and addressing mental health concerns, these networks contribute to a holistic and sustainable approach to youth development.

3.2 EDUCATION AND SKILLING

3.2.1 Access to Education

Access to education in Uganda is critical for youth well-being, significantly influencing their future prospects and overall

development. Despite notable progress in expanding educational opportunities, substantial challenges remain, particularly regarding quality and equitable distribution of educational resources. Uganda's large youth population exacerbates these challenges, increasing demand for educational services and straining existing infrastructure.

The Ugandan government recognizes education's importance in its national policies, aligning its goals with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure the young population can accumulate the necessary human capital to reach their full productive potential.

One significant issue is the disparity in educational attainment among different regions and socio-economic groups. Many youths, particularly from deprived neighborhoods, face barriers to accessing quality education, affecting their ability to participate fully in the labor force. Early pregnancy and disability are additional factors hindering educational attainment and requiring targeted interventions (Bbaale et al., 2023).

Moreover, the digital revolution presents both opportunities and challenges. The rapid increase in children's online presence, with a significant proportion of internet users being children by age 12, underscores the need to integrate digital literacy and rights into the educational curriculum (Nambaziira, 2023). This integration is essential for preparing youth to navigate the digital age effectively and safely.

Improving access to education requires a system-based approach, considering socio-cultural support systems and the broader context of youth well-being. This approach should include developing high-quality and usable data to inform policy decisions and ensure educational interventions are evidence-based and equitable (UNAS, 2022). Additionally, multi-disciplinary research training programs and collaborations are needed to enhance understanding of youth health and education, informing more effective policies and programs (Kabiru et al., 2013).

The government has also prioritized youth employment in its national development plans, recognizing the link between education and job prospects. Policies focusing on improving youth productivity

and job prospects, especially for the most vulnerable, are crucial for harnessing the demographic dividend and contributing to sustainable development (Bbaale et al., 2023; OECD, 2020). However, existing youth employment programs have had limited success, often redistributing existing job opportunities rather than creating new ones, highlighting the need for more effective interventions (OECD, 2020).

Addressing the challenges of access to education in Uganda requires a comprehensive, systems-based approach integrating socio-cultural support, digital literacy, and evidence-based policy-making. By focusing on these areas, stakeholders can create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment supporting the well-being and future prospects of Uganda's youth.

3.2.2 Quality of Education

Quality of education is critical for youth well-being in Uganda. Disparities in access to quality education are evident, particularly in the digital divide among schools. For instance, while some schools have computer labs, others lack such facilities, leaving many children without the necessary digital skills (Nambaziira, 2023). This inequality in digital empowerment hampers the promotion of children's digital rights and their ability to participate fully in the digital age. Uganda's demographic transition presents an opportunity to harness the youth dividend, but this potential can only be realized with a robust and inclusive education system.

Moreover, integrating leadership competencies and an understanding of strategic processes into technology and innovation education is essential. This approach can help children and young people develop the skills to navigate and contribute to the rapidly evolving technological landscape (Kinnula et al., 2024). However, limiting the current study to a single country, city, and school suggests broader research is needed to generalize these findings.

The causal link between education and mental health further highlights the importance of educational investments. In contexts with limited health infrastructure, such as Zimbabwe, educational

reforms that remove barriers and improve educational outcomes can significantly reduce the burden of poor mental health in adulthood (Kondirolli & Sunder, 2022). This finding suggests that similar educational investments in Uganda could have far-reaching benefits for youth well-being.

Additionally, emphasizing increased educational attainment and keeping girls in school is paramount. Addressing socio-cultural norms promoting child marriage and early childbearing is critical for the full development and exercise of adolescent girls' capabilities (Bantebya et al., 2014). These policy recommendations align with the need for a comprehensive approach to youth well-being that includes educational reforms.

The need for a coordinated approach to youth employment programs is also evident. Ensuring that funding, services, and outcomes are monitored and adapted in real time can enhance program effectiveness. A proposed framework for integrated youth employment programs suggests piloting and testing such an approach in Uganda (OECD, 2020). This framework could provide valuable insights into what works in youth employment and how it can be scaled up to benefit more young people.

In summary, Uganda's education quality is multifaceted and requires a comprehensive, systems-based approach. Addressing the digital divide, integrating leadership and strategic competencies into education, and making targeted investments in educational attainment are critical steps. By adopting a coordinated and adaptive approach, stakeholders can harness the demographic dividend and contribute to sustainable development.

3.2.3 Vocational Training

Vocational training plays a pivotal role in enhancing the skill sets of young people in Uganda, contributing significantly to their well-being and economic prospects. The AVSI Foundation's Vijana life skills training program exemplifies a structured approach to vocational training (Luwangula et al., 2021). This program imparts practical skills and addresses design, implementation, and

modification processes to adapt to the evolving needs of youth. The outcomes of such training initiatives are evident in the intervention districts, where participants have shown improved competencies and employability.

However, the current landscape of youth employment programs in Uganda is fragmented and lacks a systematic approach. Programs like the Youth Livelihoods Program and the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Program are among the largest initiatives aimed at youth employment, yet their impact remains largely anecdotal and superficial (OECD, 2020). This piecemeal approach fails to integrate vocational training with broader development objectives across various sectors like energy, roads, and industrialization, which could otherwise create more job opportunities for youth.

Adebisi et al., (2024) underscore the necessity for a paradigm shift in youth policy and programming, highlighting the underfunding and under-prioritization of health research in Africa. This situation mirrors the broader neglect of comprehensive vocational training programs that could transform health outcomes, drive economic growth, and foster social development. The potential of African youth to drive this transformation is immense, yet largely untapped due to the lack of a cohesive strategy.

Moreover, integrating socio-cultural factors into vocational training is crucial. Shifting towards cultural contextualization in training programs enables stakeholders to address critical mental health needs while considering the unique sociocultural dynamics of Uganda's diverse tribal groups (Asiimwe et al., 2023). This approach ensures that vocational training is relevant and effective in meeting the specific needs of different communities.

The digital revolution presents both opportunities and challenges for vocational training in Uganda. While digital tools can enhance accessibility and quality, relying solely on digital provision may exclude poorer and rural populations lacking access to such technologies (Barford et al., 2021). Therefore, efforts must be made to maximize accessibility, ensuring training programs reach all segments of the population, including those in the informal sector.

Renzaho et al., (2020a) support the notion that vocational training can significantly boost self-esteem and the economic contributions of young people. Participants completing vocational courses reported a sense of pride and accomplishment in supporting their families, indicating the positive impact of such training on individual and community well-being.

Despite these positive outcomes, structural issues in the labor market hamper the overall effectiveness of vocational training programs in Uganda. Bbale et al., (2023) highlight that youth unemployment is not merely a matter of individual choice but is rooted in a deficiency in labor demand. This structural unemployment is exacerbated by low industrialization and discrimination in the formal sector, leading to underemployment or unemployment among educated youth.

3.3 EMPLOYMENT

3.3.1 Youth Unemployment Rates

Youth unemployment in Uganda is a pressing issue, with nearly half of the youth population not engaged in employment, education, or training (NEET) (Wamajji & Mubangizi, 2022). This high unemployment rate is compounded by limited access to technical training and a societal preference for academic over technical education (Bantebya et al., 2014).

Over two-thirds of Kampala's youth are unemployed or underemployed, leading many to engage in crime, gambling, and drug abuse for survival (Renzaho et al., 2020b). This situation is exacerbated by the concentration of these youths in slum areas with scarce opportunities for gainful employment.

The issue extends beyond urban centers like Kampala. Across Uganda, young people face high joblessness, with 33% actively seeking work compared to 15-23% of older cohorts (Namubiru et al., 2023). This disparity highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions addressing the unique challenges faced by the younger

demographic. The youthful population, still building social and economic capital, is particularly vulnerable to economic disruptions like those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which further exacerbated unemployment rates (World Bank, 2019).

Local interviews reveal youth concerns about unemployment, drug abuse, and exploitation by political elites who make grand promises during elections but fail to deliver. This underscores the need for empowerment programs providing young people with the skills and opportunities to secure stable employment. Such programs could be effectively implemented through district and sub-county councils, tailored to the specific needs of local communities (International Alert, 2013).

Moreover, a systems-based approach to social protection is necessary. A comprehensive strategy integrating various socio-cultural support systems and leveraging the digital revolution could significantly impact education, employment, and mental health outcomes. A systems approach to social protection can provide a more cohesive and effective framework for addressing the multifaceted challenges of youth unemployment (White et al., 2023.).

In 2023, Bbale et al., (2023) reviewed the Government of Uganda's Youth Employment Policies, including The Parish Development Model, The Presidential Initiative on Skilling the Girl Child, The Youth Apprenticeship Program, and The Youth Livelihood Program, and how they had affected the country. The review showed that some problems existed with the current programs, such as a lack of knowledge about what the youth really need, which caused development funds to be diverted to meet basic needs like food and shelter.

Inclusive dialogues at national and international levels are also important. Engaging young people in these discussions and validating their experiences and solutions are crucial for delivering effective change (Barford et al., 2021.). This participatory approach ensures that policies and programs are relevant and have buy-in from the youth they serve.

In summary, addressing youth unemployment in Uganda requires a multifaceted approach, including targeted empowerment programs,

a systems-based strategy for social protection, and inclusive policy dialogues. By adopting these measures, stakeholders can mitigate the adverse effects of unemployment and contribute to the overall well-being and sustainable development of Uganda's youth.

3.3.2 Job Creation Initiatives

Job creation initiatives are pivotal in addressing the multifaceted challenges of youth unemployment and underemployment in Uganda. The government recognizes the necessity of targeted interventions to enhance young people's employability, crucial for harnessing the demographic dividend and fostering sustainable development. One primary factor contributing to youth unemployment is the lack of employable skills, exacerbated by limited access to financial and technical resources, insufficient vocational training, and a mismatch between youth skills and job market requirements.

To mitigate these issues, establishing Youth-Led Health Research Innovation Hubs has been proposed (Adebisi et al., 2024). These hubs aim to engage young individuals in research activities, policy advocacy, and community outreach, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship. Such initiatives provide young people with the necessary skills and knowledge and empower them to become active contributors to the economy.

The Uganda Health Sector Development Plan 2015/16 – 2019/20 also prioritizes producing healthy human capital for wealth creation. This plan emphasizes reducing child mortality, facilitating a decline in fertility, and ensuring Uganda's future labor force is healthy, well-educated, and productive (EPRI et al., 2018). By improving the overall well-being of youth, these initiatives contribute to a more sustainable and prosperous future.

Furthermore, integrating digital technologies plays a crucial role in modern job creation strategies. The Government of Uganda's commitment to developing a digital vision aims to build a digitally enabled society that is secure, sustainable, innovative, and transformative. This vision seeks to create a positive social and economic impact through technology-based empowerment (Gillwald

et al., n.d.). By leveraging digital tools and platforms, young people can access new opportunities for education, employment, and entrepreneurship, enhancing their economic prospects and overall well-being.

Youth are also encouraged to use their innovative advantages to leverage the transition to green economies in response to climate change. The government has developed the Uganda Green Growth Development Strategy to guide efforts around green growth, focusing largely on green skills and business development in green sectors (mostly recycling and pollution control) through work-based placement programmes and business accelerators, such as the Uganda Green Incubation Programme (UGIP). Progress is however hindered due to heavy donor dependency, scattered implementation of siloed programs with little coherence, low levels of public awareness, weak political support (Lijfering & Lacey, 2022), inadequate skills (particularly in renewable energies), and poor access to financing (UNREEA, 2022). The transformative power of digital technologies for fast-tracking progress in green jobs is underscored, through bridging data gaps for diagnosis, monitoring and evaluation, creating online platforms for marketing and live-time transacting (APRI, 2023)

In summary, job creation initiatives in Uganda are multifaceted and require a comprehensive, systems-based approach. By addressing the challenges of youth unemployment through targeted investments in skills development, health, and education and by leveraging digital technologies, Uganda can harness the potential of its young population to drive sustainable development and economic growth.

3.3.3 Informal Sector Employment

The high rate of youth unemployment in Uganda is a pressing issue, with many young people turning to the informal sector for survival. Informal sector employment plays a crucial role in Uganda's economic landscape, particularly for youth. This sector, characterized by small-scale, unregistered, and often unregulated

economic activities, provides a significant source of livelihood for many young people facing barriers to entering the formal job market. The informal sector's flexibility and low entry requirements make it an accessible option for youth, especially given high unemployment rates and limited formal employment opportunities. The informal sector, while providing immediate employment opportunities, often lacks the stability and benefits associated with formal employment, such as job security, social protection, and career progression.

Urbanization and migration trends further complicate the employment landscape. As young people migrate to cities seeking better opportunities, they often find themselves in congested urban areas with strained resources and limited access to public services, housing, and education (UNAS, 2022). This urban influx exacerbates the challenges faced by the informal sector, as increased competition for limited opportunities can lead to exploitation and poor working conditions.

The digital revolution presents both challenges and opportunities for youth employment in the informal sector. Increased penetration of mobile devices and digital technologies can enhance access to information, markets, and financial services, potentially improving productivity and earnings for informal sector workers (Med & Lukyamuzi, 2019). However, the benefits of digitalization are not evenly distributed, and there is a risk of widening the gap between those who can leverage digital tools and those who cannot.

Efforts to support youth in the informal sector must consider the broader socio-cultural and economic context. Programs combining technical and vocational training with financial support have shown positive results in post-conflict areas of Uganda, indicating that integrated approaches can enhance employment outcomes (OECD, 2020). Additionally, initiatives providing business skills, life skills, and mentorship can empower young people to navigate the challenges of the informal sector and build sustainable livelihoods.

3.3.4 Externalization of Labor

The Government of Uganda considers labor migration (‘externalization of labor’) as a short-term avenue to easing domestic unemployment. Between 2016 and Oct 2023, nearly 270,000 Ugandan migrant workers were officially placed for work abroad, mainly in the Arab states (ILO, 2024), with the majority being female youths aged between 26 and 31 years, many of whom found employment in the care sector. Other deployments include war jobs in countries with insecurities as security guards, chefs, and drivers. Skilled migrants are also registered to a lesser extent because these often move individually using private arrangements (Guloba et al., 2022).

The labor migration strategy has received both applause and criticism. Applause for the contribution of remittances to provide for families’ basic needs, such as food, housing, and education, as well as capital injection in small-scale enterprises. Critics point to the exploitation of some youth by unscrupulous recruitment agencies, the lack of consular support for migrant workers in distress, and the lack of systematic return and socio-economic reintegration support for migrant workers (ILO, 2024).

Schools of thought posit that the government can better strategize and align labor externalization with harvesting its demographic dividend strategy. The government could invest in bilateral partnerships for agricultural-based labor externalization, adopting a brain-gain perspective, where return migrants with accumulated savings, and newly acquired knowledge and skills, invest in agribusiness. The productive investment of remittances can help households move from labor-intensive to capital-intensive activities (Guloba et al., 2022). The use of digital tools in the recruitment of migrant workers, which has been initiated by the Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development to curb human trafficking, could further aid in tracking and re-integration of migrant workers.

The importance of a systems-based approach to youth well-being is evident in the need to address the interconnected factors influencing informal sector employment. This includes improving access to

education and training, enhancing social protection mechanisms, and fostering an enabling environment for entrepreneurship and innovation. By adopting a holistic perspective, stakeholders can better support youth in harnessing the potential of the informal sector while mitigating its inherent risks.

3.4 MENTAL HEALTH

3.4.1 Prevalence of Mental Health Issues

The prevalence of mental health issues among Ugandan youth is alarmingly high, with loneliness, worrying, and sadness being the most frequently reported indicators (Swahn et al., 2020). These mental health challenges are exacerbated by socio-economic factors like livelihood insecurity, affecting economic stability and impacting mental and physical health (Barford et al., 2021). The negative consequences of these insecurities will likely intensify with ongoing climate disruptions, further stressing the mental health of young people.

The socio-economic context plays a pivotal role in the prevalence of mental health issues. Economic stress, poverty, and unemployment are frequently cited as both causes and consequences of mental health problems. The economic instability exacerbated by the collapse of urban job opportunities due to COVID-19 and the unreliable nature of agricultural production due to climate change further compound these issues (Barford et al., 2021). This economic distress is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where the lack of financial stability leads to increased stress, disappointment, and boredom, which are primary contributors to mental illness (Hawkins et al., 2020).

The intersection of mental health with other systems, such as education and justice, highlights the fragmented nature of current interventions. Only a small fraction of studies address well-being from a behavioral or physical health perspective, and even fewer explore the consequences of well-being across multiple systems (Campie et al., 2015).

Additionally, the cultural and linguistic adaptation of mental health measures remains underdeveloped in Uganda, hindering the sociocultural alignment of interventions. This gap in culturally relevant mental health practices further exacerbates the prevalence of mental health issues, as interventions may not resonate with or be effective for the local population.

Moreover, the mental health status of youth, particularly those living in disadvantaged urban areas, is a pressing concern. High levels of sadness, loneliness, and suicidal ideation among these youths indicate an urgent need for mental health services and support systems. Addressing mental health disparities through targeted interventions could significantly improve the lives and health outcomes of vulnerable youth (Swahn et al., 2020).

Enhancing mental health literacy through education and awareness campaigns is essential to empower young people to seek appropriate care and support (Amone-P'Olak et al., 2023). Additionally, integrating mental health education into secondary school curricula can help address the significant barriers faced by schools in implementing effective mental health strategies (Costa, 2024).

However, integrating digital technologies in education and mental health services presents both opportunities and challenges. While digital transformation can enhance access to mental health resources, it also requires careful consideration of the socio-cultural context to ensure interventions are culturally relevant and accepted (Kagoya & Mkwizu, 2022).

Youth in Uganda also face challenges related to inadequate life skills, crucial for their mental health and overall well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of life skills beyond conventional definitions, considering Uganda's unique socio-cultural context (Luwangula et al., 2021.). This approach can help develop more effective interventions tailored to the specific needs of Ugandan youth. In addition, the role of life skills training in promoting positive health-seeking behaviors cannot be overlooked. Programs equipping youth with essential life skills, including emotional regulation and stress management, can

empower them to seek help when needed and reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues (Luwangula et al., 2021). These programs, supported by both state and non-state actors, are crucial for fostering a supportive environment and encouraging health-seeking behaviors among youth.

In summary, addressing stigma and promoting health-seeking behaviors among youth in Uganda requires a multifaceted approach considering cultural, socio-economic, and technological factors. Integrating culturally meaningful concepts into mental health interventions, enhancing digital literacy, and involving youth in health research and policy-making can create a more supportive environment for mental health care. This comprehensive approach is essential for improving mental health outcomes and overall well-being among youth in Uganda (Asiimwe et al., 2023; Costa, 2024; Hawkins et al., 2020; Kagoya & Mkwizu, 2022).

3.5 SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND HIGH-RISK BEHAVIORS

Musoke et al. (2017) identified alcohol abuse, risky sexual behaviors such as transactional sex and unprotected sex with multiple partners, physical and emotional abuse, and empowerment leading to acts such as bullying, sedentary lifestyles, and poor nutrition as the most prevalent health-risk behaviors among Uganda's adolescent population. Violence among youth in slums is also an area of concern.

Substance abuse among youth in Uganda represents a significant challenge within the broader context of high-risk behaviors impacting their well-being. Various socio-economic and cultural factors, including limited access to education, unemployment, and inadequate mental health support systems, exacerbate the prevalence of substance abuse. These factors collectively contribute to a cycle of vulnerability and risk among young people.

Mental health issues are closely intertwined with substance abuse. The mental health system in Uganda faces significant challenges, including limited resources, inadequate policy implementation, and a lack of culturally appropriate mental health services. Integrating

community and cultural strengths into mental health practices is crucial for addressing these challenges and promoting resilience among youth (Asiimwe et al., 2023). However, the current mental health infrastructure cannot meet the needs of young people, many of whom turn to substance abuse to cope with their mental health struggles.

The digital revolution has also played a dual role in the context of substance abuse. On the one hand, it offers opportunities for education and employment, which can mitigate some socio-economic factors driving substance abuse. On the other hand, increased access to digital platforms can expose youth to online environments that may promote or facilitate substance abuse behaviors (Nambaziira, 2023). Therefore, harnessing the positive aspects of digital technology while mitigating its potential risks is essential.

Addressing substance abuse requires multi-faceted strategies encompassing prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. By adopting systems thinking and leveraging the strengths of socio-cultural support systems, stakeholders can create a more supportive environment for youth, ultimately contributing to sustainable development. In addition, engaging young people in designing and implementing programs ensures these interventions are relevant and effective. This approach empowers youth and leverages their insights to create more sustainable and impactful solutions (UNAS, 2022). In summary, a comprehensive, systems-based approach moving away from fragmented interventions is needed. Such an approach would integrate various sectors, including education, health, and social services, to address the root causes of substance abuse and support the overall well-being of the youth (Adebisi et al., 2024; Barford et al., 2021.; Luwangula et al., 2021).

3.6 VIOLENCE AND CRIME

Violence and crime among youth in Uganda present significant challenges to their overall well-being. High unemployment rates and inadequate educational systems are the primary contributors. Theoretical education systems failing to equip students with

practical skills have been identified as a major factor leading to youth unemployment and subsequent involvement in criminal activities. This lack of practical education leaves many young people without the necessary tools to secure employment, pushing them toward high-risk behaviors for survival.

The socio-economic environment in Uganda further exacerbates the situation. The high population growth rate, coupled with limited job opportunities, creates fertile ground for crime and violence. Youth, often seen as the driving force behind social and political upheavals, are particularly vulnerable to being drawn into criminal activities to express their frustrations and address their economic needs (Ssenyimba et al., 2023).

The increasing use of drugs and substance abuse among youth is another critical factor contributing to rising crime rates. Substance use disorders are on the rise, further complicating the already challenging landscape of youth well-being in Uganda (Asiimwe et al., 2023). Hunger, drunkenness, lack of parental supervision, and drug use were specifically associated with victimization and perpetration of violence involving weapons among these vulnerable youth in urban slums (Swahn et al., 2020).

Mental health is also a driver for criminal behavior. An association was made between the category of crime, recidivism, and type of mental disorder among prisoners in Mbarara municipality (Forry et al., 2019). Uganda's Prison Reform Program provides functional adult literacy for those without prior academic education and formal education at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. They also include vocational and skills training and limited psychosocial interventions (Sanyu, 2014).

Additionally, the political landscape in Uganda plays a role in perpetuating youth involvement in crime. Dominant elites often manipulate the youth demographic to serve their interests, with little regard for addressing the actual issues faced by young people (UNFPA, 2020). This exploitation disenfranchises youth and fosters an environment where crime and violence become viable options for those seeking to assert their agency and voice their grievances.

3.7 SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Data from various demographic and health surveys, including those conducted in 2000-2001, 2006, and 2011, highlight the factors contributing to teenage pregnancy in Uganda. These surveys, along with data from the District Health Information System (DHIS), underscore the associated risks and the need for targeted interventions (National Population Council, 2022). Analyses reveal that early school dropout significantly predicts early marriage and high fertility rates, perpetuating poor health outcomes and poverty (NPA, 2020). Risky sexual behavior was associated with the age and gender of the student as well as alcohol consumption, smoking, and substance use (Anyanwu et al., 2023), exposure to pornography, and a lack of health promotion, education, and counseling (Ngabirano et al., 2020).

A multi-sectoral approach is necessary to address the complex determinants of youth vulnerabilities and successful transitions. This approach should encompass education, skills and employment, health, civic participation, and empowerment, as well as aspects of subjective well-being (OECD, 2017b).

3.8 DIGITAL REVOLUTION AND YOUTH

In recent years, Uganda has made significant digital literacy initiatives. Programs such as the Digital Uganda Vision and the National Information Communication and Technology Policy have laid a strong foundation for enhancing digital skills among the youth. These initiatives aim to integrate ICT into education systems, promote e-learning, and support tech entrepreneurship.

3.8.1 Impact on Education

E-Learning Platforms

E-learning platforms can play a critical role in addressing educational disparities in Uganda. Investments in effective learning

for children and youth can have long-term positive effects (Hynes, 2017). By leveraging e-learning platforms, educational institutions can provide quality education to a larger number of students, contributing to the overall well-being of the youth population.

Socio-cultural support systems also play a significant role in successfully implementing e-learning platforms. Engaging young people as equal stakeholders in policy and programming development is crucial (Dlamini et al., 2019). This approach ensures that educational content and delivery methods are tailored to the needs and preferences of youth, enhancing their learning experience and outcomes.

Furthermore, integrating e-learning platforms can help address youth unemployment by providing vocational and technical training. Initiatives such as the Business, Technical, and Vocational Education and Training (BTVET) program aim to support entrepreneurial ideas and initiatives (Okware & Ngaka, 2017). E-learning platforms can complement these efforts by offering online courses and training programs that equip young people with the skills needed to start businesses or secure employment in various sectors.

The impact of e-learning platforms on mental health is another critical aspect to consider. Parental support and monitoring of children's online activities can protect them from mental health problems associated with cyberbullying (Nambaziira, 2023). This highlights the need for a balanced approach to e-learning, prioritizing digital literacy and online safety alongside educational content.

Integrating digital tools in education requires a comprehensive understanding of technology, sustainable solutions, and business idea development processes. This complexity necessitates that students acquire substantial subject knowledge, which can be time-consuming (Kinnula et al., 2024). The ability to digest and internalize new information is crucial for students to manage their tasks effectively, highlighting the importance of digital literacy in the educational process.

Moreover, promoting children's digital rights, including protective and participatory rights, is essential in creating a safe and inclusive digital environment. Challenges to digital rights promotion,

such as bureaucratic strategies and the risks present in the digital environment, need addressing to ensure effective implementation (Nambaziira, 2023). Voluntary participation in digital literacy programs can empower children and young people, enabling them to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly.

Socio-cultural barriers encountered by youth organizations, particularly in rural areas, also play a significant role in the digital literacy landscape. Traditional authoritative, patriarchal, and hierarchical values often hinder youth from having a voice in decision-making processes. This lack of involvement can limit their access to digital literacy programs and resources, further widening the digital divide.

The sustainability of interventions aimed at improving digital literacy is another critical aspect. Life skills training programs balancing hard skills with soft skills are essential for young people to achieve their full potential (Luwangula et al., 2021). These programs should be inclusive and accessible, ensuring that all youth, regardless of their socio-economic background, have the opportunity to develop digital literacy skills.

3.8.2 Impact on Employment

Remote Work Opportunities

Remote work opportunities have emerged as a significant aspect of employment for youth in Uganda, particularly in the context of the digital revolution. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote work, highlighting its potential and challenges. The reduction in economic opportunities during the lockdown period exacerbated vulnerabilities among youth, reducing their resilience and increasing their economic susceptibility to violence (UNFPA, 2020).

However, disparities in access to digital devices and internet connectivity must be addressed to ensure equitable participation in the digital economy. Bridging this divide requires governmental and institutional interventions to provide necessary digital infrastructure

and subsidize internet costs for low-income households (Nambaziira, 2023). Such measures are essential to enable youth in all spheres to engage in remote work and other digital employment opportunities.

The potential of remote work to contribute to youth employment is further supported by the success of various interventions aimed at increasing self-employment and household enterprises. Programs combining skills training with financial or mentorship support have shown positive results, particularly in rural areas where the majority of youth reside (OECD, 2020). These initiatives highlight the importance of integrating remote work opportunities into broader employment strategies to enhance youth's participation in the labor market.

Despite the promise of remote work, recognizing the socio-cultural factors influencing youth employment is crucial. Attitudes towards work, dependence on family support, and the lack of critical skills needed in a competitive labour market are significant challenges that must be addressed (Luwangula et al., 2021). A comprehensive approach including socio-cultural support systems and targeted skill development is necessary to maximize the benefits of remote work for youth.

The digital revolution has also impacted the gender dynamics of youth employment. Female youth face higher unemployment rates than their male counterparts, and a significant proportion of employed youth are self-employed (Bbaale et al., 2023). Remote work can offer flexible employment opportunities accommodating the unique challenges faced by female youth, thereby promoting gender equity in the labor market.

3.8.3 Digital Entrepreneurship and Financial Inclusion

Digital entrepreneurship in Uganda has emerged as a pivotal factor in transforming the employment landscape, particularly for youth. Integrating digital technologies into business models has created new opportunities for young entrepreneurs, enabling

them to innovate and compete in local and global markets. Digital financial services provide secure, low-cost, and contactless financial tools to underserved communities (mostly rural youth and women) to improve their saving efforts and access to capital (Okot and Kasekende, 2024). This shift is crucial for addressing the high unemployment rates among graduates, who often find themselves underemployed or forced to seek supplementary income outside the public system (NPA, 2020).

The Digital Uganda Vision provides a strategic framework aligning with the national Vision 2040, emphasizing the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in fostering economic progress and poverty eradication through digital innovation (Gillwald et al., n.d.).

3.8.4 Impact on Mental Health

Social Media Influence

The role of social media in shaping mental health outcomes is complex. On the one hand, social media platforms can provide a sense of community and support, especially for marginalized youth. However, the lack of regulation and potential exposure to harmful content can exacerbate mental health issues. For instance, the absence of cultural advisors in mental health programs has been noted as a significant gap, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive approaches to mental health care in Ugandan communities (Asiimwe et al., 2023).

Social media's impact on mental health is not uniform and can vary based on individual experiences and socio-economic conditions. Youth living in informal economies face unique challenges affecting their confidence, work trajectories, and overall well-being. These challenges are often compounded by the unrealistic expectations and comparisons fostered by social media, leading to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety (DeJaeghere et al., 2020).

The digital revolution has also impacted the socio-cultural support systems crucial for mental health. The involvement of parents and guardians in mental health education is essential, as it helps create a supportive environment for adolescents during their vulnerable developmental stages (Costa, 2024). The provision for anonymous interaction via online support platforms such as “Totya” provides access to psycho-social support for victims of sexual abuse, without fear of retribution from society. The platform also stands on a pillar of prevention, healing, and justice by engaging the families or the ecosystem of survivors and those at risk of abuse (Nayiga, 2024).

In summary, online mental health resources offer a promising avenue for addressing the mental health challenges faced by youth in the digital age. By leveraging digital tools and platforms, providing accessible, scalable, and effective mental health support is possible, contributing to the overall well-being of young people.

3.9 THE CREATIVE ARTS AND SPORTS

Arts and sports programming have proven effective for youth in various contexts. Art programs have been shown to help young people find alternative sources of recognition, achievement, and self-expression beyond gang membership. At-risk youth who participated in arts programs have improved social outcomes: they were more likely to vote, participate in government and social activities, and volunteer (Catterall et al., 2012). While these programs are effective both as part of a school curriculum and after-school programs, non-school community programs show the most effective outcomes. Similarly, studies have found that regular physical activity, and organized sports in particular, can positively affect youth self-esteem, goal setting, and leadership. A correlation has been found between regular exercise and mental health among students as they enter their teenage years. Youth arts and sports programs improve social skills and social responsibility, as well as increase feelings of empowerment, personal responsibility, self-control, and conflict

resolution in vulnerable communities such as refugees (Bintliff et al., 2024; Luwangula et al., 2024).

3.10 INCLUSION AND SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

Inclusion and spiritual well-being are critical components of a comprehensive approach to youth well-being in Uganda. Integrating socio-cultural support systems, including spiritual guidance, significantly fosters resilience and emotional stability among young people. The presence of positive role models, such as religious leaders, can influence youth behavior and promote spiritual development essential for their overall well-being (Somefun, 2019).

Religious and cultural leaders are often seen as custodians of values and ethics within communities (Bantebya et al., 2014). Their influence can be harnessed to support youth in navigating challenges, including those related to mental health and social integration. Involving these leaders in youth programs can provide a sense of belonging and purpose, crucial for emotional and psychological health.

Moreover, inclusive practices emphasizing spiritual and emotional support can mitigate the stigma and marginalization experienced by orphans and other vulnerable youth (Caserta et al., 2016). Reducing stigma and enhancing social support networks are vital for improving these groups' mental health and emotional well-being. This approach aligns with the need for positive parenting and establishing trusting relationships, which are fundamental for orphans' emotional adjustment (Mutambara, 2015a, 2015b).

The cyclical relationship between mental illness, poverty, and stigma further underscores the importance of a holistic approach, including spiritual well-being (Hawkins et al., 2020). Addressing these systemic issues requires a multi-faceted strategy incorporating spiritual support as a means of providing comfort and hope to those in distress. This is particularly relevant in contexts where traditional and religious beliefs play a significant role in community life.

In addition, the digital revolution can enhance delivering spiritual and emotional support. Digital platforms can facilitate access to spiritual guidance and counseling, extending the reach of these services to a broader audience. This can be particularly beneficial in rural or underserved areas where access to traditional support systems may be limited.

Integrating spiritual well-being into youth policy and programming addresses immediate needs and contributes to sustainable development. By fostering a sense of community and belonging, spiritual support can help harness the demographic dividend and promote long-term socio-economic stability (Hynes, 2017). It makes sense that including spiritual well-being within a systems-based model for youth support in Uganda is essential. It provides a holistic framework addressing young people's emotional, psychological, and social needs, promoting their overall well-being and contributing to sustainable development.

3.11 GOVERNANCE OF YOUTH AFFAIRS

3.11.1 Local Policy Frameworks- National Youth Policies

National youth policies in Uganda have historically been fragmented and lacked coherence, hindering their effectiveness in addressing youth well-being. Since gaining independence in 1962, Uganda, like many other African nations, has not had a comprehensive youth-centered policy. The organization of youth activities was largely influenced and funded by the government, meaning youth development was not self-sustaining or reflective of their long-term interests. This situation worsened during the Idi Amin era (1971-1979) when state funding for youth activities dried up due to political instability.

Uganda has enacted good laws and policies, such as the National Youth Policy (2016). The National Youth Action Plan (NYAP), 2016, operationalizes the policy and recognizes the importance of an effective coordination mechanism among various stakeholders in achieving NYP goals. Even with this framework in place, duplication

persists. For instance, both the Uganda Skills Development Program and the Presidential Skilling Initiative have overlapping mandates, resulting in wasted resources and limited impact (Mbabazi, 2021). A review of the implementation of the NYP found limitations in several aspects, such as funding, central coordination, awareness of youth opportunities, enhancing vocational and entrepreneurial skills, and increasing youth participation (Mbabazi, 2021).

The current policy framework also advocates for increased youth representation and participation in decision-making processes at all levels of government and civil society. However, the low participation of youth in decision-making is attributed to several factors, including a lack of leadership and management skills, organizational regulatory barriers, and low resource allocation to youth programs. This lack of effective participation is further compounded by the fact that youth are often given nominal roles in political parties through youth wings and leagues, but their actual impact remains minimal (Wamajji & Mubangizi, 2022).

The political landscape in Uganda presents systemic barriers to effective youth participation. Young people are often marginalized within the political arena despite being the majority of the population in many districts (UNFPA, 2020). Youth participation in governance and decision-making is affected by limited access to relevant and timely information, limited accountability of leaders to the young people, inadequate capacity and leadership skills for youth leaders, and highly commercialized politics (Youth Coalition on Education Democracy in Uganda (YCEDU), 2020)

Youth Councils play a pivotal role in governing youth affairs in Uganda, serving as a crucial platform for youth participation in policy-making. However, these lack financial support, leading to frustration among local leaders and youth representatives. Furthermore, many youths

suffer a victim mentality, which limits their interest in public and political engagements (YCEDU,2020).

To address these challenges, targeted policies focusing on the most disadvantaged youth are needed. Such policies should

aim to support those already suffering from various deprivations and those at risk of falling into deprivation (OECD, 2017b). By identifying and addressing the specific needs of these vulnerable groups, policymakers can create more inclusive and effective youth programs.

Additionally, promoting inclusiveness and ownership of youth programs is essential for developing young people's leadership capacity and increasing their participation in governance. Encouraging youth to support their peers, especially those in special interest groups, can help create equal opportunities for all, including both abled and disabled youth (International Alert, 2013).

3.11.2 International Commitments

International commitments play a pivotal role in shaping the policy frameworks governing youth affairs in Uganda. These commitments align national policies with global standards and ensure that youth benefit from international best practices and resources. Uganda has ratified several international legal instruments promoting and protecting adolescents' human rights, reflecting a supportive policy environment for the protection and well-being of young people.

The Addis Ababa Declaration of 2013 is particularly relevant, emphasizing the demographic dividend, eradicating child marriage, and adopting inclusive development policies and strategies (Dlamini et al., 2019). Uganda's commitment to the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development further highlights the country's dedication to inclusion and equity. These agendas prioritize young people's well-being and aim to create a conducive environment for their development. The focus on inclusion and equity is central to Uganda's National Development Plan III (NDP III), which integrates these international commitments into national policies (UNAS, 2022).

Moreover, emphasizing youth empowerment and health research in Africa, as outlined by Adebisi et al. (2024), is crucial for improving health outcomes and fostering a healthier future for the continent. This perspective echoes the call for Africa to lead global health research, driven by the innovation and resilience of its youth. By investing in health research and youth empowerment, Uganda can contribute to global health advancements and ensure its young population is well-equipped to address future challenges.

In summary, Uganda's adherence to international commitments and frameworks is crucial for shaping effective youth policies and programs. By integrating these commitments into national policies, Uganda can harness the potential of its youthful population, address socio-economic disparities, and contribute to global health and development goals.

Implementation Gaps

Implementation gaps in youth well-being initiatives in Uganda present significant challenges to program effectiveness. One primary issue is the lack of coordination among various stakeholders involved in youth programs. This fragmentation leads to duplicated efforts and inefficient use of resources, diminishing the impact of interventions aimed at improving youth well-being (OECD, 2020; Bbaale et al., 2023).

Moreover, a notable deficiency exists in integrating socio-cultural support systems within these programs. While the entrepreneurial spirit among Ugandan youth is evident, they often lack the necessary skills and capabilities to succeed in business. Insufficiently incorporating cultural and social contexts into program designs, crucial for fostering sustainable entrepreneurial activities, exacerbates this gap (Med & Lukyamuzi, 2019).

The digital revolution can transform education, employment, and mental health services for youth. However, inadequate infrastructure and limited access to technology, particularly in rural areas, often hamper the implementation of digital solutions. This digital divide prevents many young people (especially rural women) from benefiting from advancements that could significantly enhance their educational and employment opportunities (OECD, 2020; White et al., 2023). This requires public policy to provide infrastructure where the private sector has no incentives, review distortionary taxes, enhance financial literacy, and mitigate cybercrime (Okot & Kasekende, 2024).

Furthermore, current youth policies and programs often fail to adopt a systems-based approach essential for addressing the complex and interconnected challenges faced by youth. Instead, many interventions remain fragmented and short-term, lacking the comprehensive strategy needed to achieve long-term sustainable

development (OECD, 2017b). This piecemeal approach limits the effectiveness of individual programs and undermines the potential for a coordinated effort to harness the demographic dividend.

Another critical gap is the insufficient emphasis on evidence-based policy-making. While there is growing recognition of the importance of research and data in informing youth policies, the translation of research findings into actionable policies remains limited (Kabiru et al., 2013). This disconnect between research and policy implementation results in programs not fully aligned with the actual needs and circumstances of youth.

Additionally, the lack of continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms further exacerbates the implementation gaps. Without regular assessments, measuring program effectiveness and making necessary adjustments to improve outcomes is challenging (MOGLSD, 2016; Tindiwensi et al., 2023). This oversight leads to persistent inefficiencies and missed opportunities for enhancing youth well-being.

Addressing these implementation gaps requires a paradigm shift in youth policy and programming. Stakeholders must adopt systems thinking to create integrated and holistic approaches that consider the diverse needs and contexts of youth. By fostering collaboration among various sectors and leveraging the potential of digital technologies, developing more effective and sustainable solutions for youth well-being in Uganda is possible (OECD, 2020; Vindevogel & Kimera, 2023).

Conditions for Adopting a Systems-Based Model for Youth Wellbeing and Development in Uganda

The **digital revolution** plays a pivotal role in transforming education and employment opportunities for youth. Integrating digital technologies into educational curricula can enhance learning experiences and provide youth with the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly changing job market. Systems thinking offers a framework for assessing the interactions between multiple objectives, including incorporating digital tools to achieve sustainable development goals (Hynes, 2017). This approach can help identify and leverage synergies between education, employment, and mental health initiatives.

At the policy level, system-strengthening efforts focus on ensuring **policy coherence, development, and sensitization** to the unique needs of youth. This involves creating policies that are comprehensive and adaptable to the changing socio-economic landscape. Integrated and harmonized social protection programs addressing risk and vulnerability across the life cycle are important (White et al., 2023). Such programs provide a safety net for youth, enabling them to navigate challenges and seize opportunities.

Integrating **program management and coordination structures** into existing government frameworks is critical for strengthening these systems (EPRI, 2021). This integration enhances accountability and ownership, reinforcing the functionality of existing systems. By embedding interventions within established government structures, social protection practitioners can foster greater leadership and sustainability in youth programs (White et al., 2023). This systemic strengthening is essential for addressing the multifaceted vulnerabilities faced by youth, particularly in education, employment, and mental health.

One primary component is establishing **robust socio-cultural support systems**. These systems are essential for fostering a

sense of community and belonging among youth, significantly impacting their mental health and overall well-being. Building basic subsystems to support security, equity, and opportunity is crucial at the administration level (EPRI, 2021). This involves creating programs that are well-designed and harmonized across various portfolios to ensure coherence and effectiveness.

Governance and belonging are critical components in developing and implementing socio-cultural support systems for youth well-being in Uganda. Effective governance structures are essential for creating environments where young people feel a sense of belonging and are supported in their educational, employment, and mental health endeavors. Governance in this context refers to the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which stakeholders, including government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and community groups, coordinate their efforts to support youth.

Governance's role in fostering belonging is multifaceted. It involves creating inclusive policies recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of youth. Successful policy processes require collaboration among different types of actors, ensuring that each group's knowledge and aspirations are considered (Hynes, 2017). This inclusive approach helps develop policies more likely to be accepted and effective, as they reflect the collective input of all stakeholders involved. Furthermore, the quality of institutions plays a significant role in making youth more productive and engaged (Woldegiorgis, 2023). Inclusive institutions that provide open access to resources and opportunities are crucial for youth development. These institutions help create a sense of belonging by ensuring that young people have access to the support and resources they need to thrive.

Social support systems are also important. Social support is key to youth well-being, particularly in prolonged collective violence or adversity (De Nutte et al., 2017). Understanding the role of social support and the relationships within which it is provided can help identify potential resources for young people facing challenges. This understanding is essential for developing effective support systems to help youth navigate their social and emotional landscapes.

Peer support groups are also significant. Young people participating in peer support groups often have access to more resources and develop a more positive view of social-ecological support (Vindevogel & Kimera, 2023). These groups can provide a sense of community and belonging, essential for youth mental and emotional well-being.

Effective governance structures promoting inclusivity, quality institutions, and integrating digital tools are essential for fostering a sense of belonging among youth. Social support systems, including peer support groups and community-based interventions, play a crucial role in supporting young people's well-being. By adopting a systems-based approach considering the interconnectedness of various factors, stakeholders can develop more effective policies and programs contributing to the sustainable development of youth in Uganda (De Nutte et al., 2017; Hynes, 2017; Rosas & Knight, 2019; Woldegiorgis, 2023).

The interconnectedness of individual and collective meaning-making processes is another important aspect of governance and belonging. Placing notions of healing and suffering within the social context emphasizes the need for research and interventions that consider both individual and communal levels (De Nutte et al., 2017). This approach can help develop more holistic support systems addressing the complex needs of youth in Uganda.

Justice and equity are fundamental components in developing socio-cultural support systems, particularly for youth well-being in Uganda. Uganda's diverse cultural landscape, characterized by various ethnicities, tribes, languages, and religions, necessitates a nuanced approach to justice and equity to ensure that all youth have equal opportunities and support (UNAS, 2022). This diversity underscores the importance of inclusive policies recognizing and addressing different communities' unique needs.

A systems-based approach to youth well-being must integrate principles of justice and equity to dismantle social barriers and promote egalitarianism. This involves fostering environments where all individuals, regardless of gender, socio-economic status, or cultural background, can thrive. The British educational system's

historical non-interference by the central government highlights the potential benefits of decentralized, community-driven approaches to education and social support (Abenawe, 2022). Such models can be adapted to the Ugandan context to empower local communities and ensure that interventions are culturally relevant and equitable.

Moreover, integrating digital technologies in education and employment can play a crucial role in promoting justice and equity. Digital platforms can provide access to educational resources and job opportunities, particularly for marginalized youth who may otherwise be excluded from traditional systems (Med & Lukyamuzi, 2019). The development and implementation of these technologies must be guided by a commitment to equity, ensuring that all youth have the necessary digital literacy and access to benefit from these innovations.

The impact of collective violence on social relationships and networks further complicates the pursuit of justice and equity in post-war settings. Social support systems must be designed to rebuild trust and cohesion within communities, promoting positive emotions and traits while mitigating the effects of past traumas (Beinomugisha et al., 2024). This approach aligns with the broader goals of positive psychology, emphasizing enhancing positive factors and reducing negative impacts on individuals' lives.

Additionally, addressing the linkage between economic development and intra- and intergenerational inequality within a systems-based framework is crucial. Economic policies should be designed to reduce disparities and promote inclusive growth, ensuring that the benefits of development are equitably distributed across different segments of the population. This requires a comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of economic, social, political, and environmental systems and adopting strategies considering these complex dynamics.

The need for collaboration to address global sustainability challenges is also pertinent to pursuing justice and equity. Solutions focusing solely on individual countries' needs may overlook their actions' broader implications and long-term consequences. A systems-based approach encourages international cooperation and

sharing of best practices to create more equitable and sustainable outcomes for all (Hynes, 2017).

In conclusion, justice and equity are integral to developing effective socio-cultural support systems for youth in Uganda. By adopting a systems-based approach that considers the diverse needs and contexts of different communities, stakeholders can create more inclusive and equitable policies and programs. This will enhance youth well-being and contribute to the nation's sustainable development.

Adopting Systems Thinking: Precursors for a Successful Transition

6.1 ALIGNMENT WITH GLOBAL AND NATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

6.1.1 Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are integral to harnessing the demographic dividend in Uganda. The SDGs provide a comprehensive framework addressing various dimensions of sustainable development, including social, economic, and environmental aspects. These goals are essential for visualizing desirable futures and ensuring that development efforts are inclusive and equitable.

A systems-based approach is crucial for achieving the SDGs, particularly regarding youth well-being. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of different sectors and the need for integrated solutions. For instance, the TWI2050 framework incorporates qualitative and quantitative elements to create robust sustainable development pathways (SDPs) addressing non-linearity and spanning multiple disciplines and methodologies. By adopting such a comprehensive approach, policymakers can better navigate the complexities and uncertainties inherent in sustainable development.

Uganda's commitment to socio-economic transformation is evident in its National Development Plans (NDPs). The third National Development Plan (NDPIII) aims to increase household incomes and improve the quality of life through sustainable industrialization, inclusive growth, and wealth creation (NPA, 2020). This plan aligns with the SDGs by focusing on economic development while ensuring social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

Building strong ecologies of resilience is also essential for achieving the SDGs, particularly in health and well-being

(Vindevogel & Kimera, 2023). A holistic approach going beyond the biomedical model is necessary to address the complex dynamics between health and society. This includes considering psychological, social, and societal challenges critical for promoting well-being for all ages.

Investing in Uganda's youth is critical for sustainable development (EPRI et al., 2018). This includes prioritizing human capital development and transitioning from a predominantly peasant economy to a competitive, science- and technology-driven economy. Such investments are necessary for realizing the country's long-term aspirations and achieving upper middle-income status by 2040.

6.2 TRAINING AND CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Training and capacity building are critical for adopting systems thinking to address youth well-being in Uganda. The current landscape reveals significant gaps in mental health professionals' training, particularly regarding family systems and community-based interventions. Most graduate-level training programs focus on individual-based approaches, such as clinical and counselling psychology, with minimal emphasis on systemic or familial conceptualizations and interventions (Asiimwe et al., 2023). This lack of comprehensive training limits the effectiveness of mental health services and underscores the need for a more integrated approach.

Moreover, youth in Uganda possess unique intellectual capabilities and the potential to mobilize support for societal development (MOGLSD, 2016). Harnessing these competencies requires strategic actions to enhance youth participation in decision-making processes. Proper preparation and sensitization for youth are essential to ensuring their effective involvement in various programs. This preparation includes providing adequate information and training on managing and sustaining these programs, crucial for their success (Bbaale et al., 2023).

The digital revolution also plays a significant role in training and capacity building. Integrating digital tools and platforms can enhance educational and employment opportunities for youth, contributing to their overall well-being. However, the current education system in Uganda needs a substantial overhaul to align with practical vocational training rather than theoretical knowledge (Wamajji & Mubangizi, 2022). Emphasizing vocational training will equip young people with the skills necessary for job creation and self-employment.

Furthermore, the systemic approach to policy-making highlights the importance of long-term commitment and synchronized actions from the government and development partners (White et al., 2023). The current focus on short- and medium-term achievements often undermines the potential for sustainable development. Institutions need to be incentivized to pursue long-term goals aligning with the principles of systems thinking. This approach addresses immediate needs and builds a resilient framework for future challenges.

The interconnected nature of systems means that both good practices and mistakes can be easily replicated (EPRI, 2021). Therefore, recognizing the risks associated with a systems approach, such as the potential propagation of errors across the system, is crucial. Despite these challenges, the benefits of a systems-based approach far outweigh the risks, as it promotes flexibility and adaptability in addressing complex issues.

In conclusion, training and capacity building are indispensable for adopting systems thinking in youth policy and programming in Uganda. By addressing the gaps in mental health training, enhancing youth participation, leveraging the digital revolution, and committing to long-term goals, stakeholders can harness the demographic dividend and contribute to sustainable development.

6.3 INTEGRATING SYSTEMS THINKING INTO POLICY DESIGN

Integrating systems thinking into policy design is crucial for addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by youth in

Uganda. Systems thinking allows for a holistic examination of the interconnected elements within social, economic, and environmental dimensions, facilitating more effective and sustainable policy interventions. This approach is particularly relevant in youth well-being, where fragmented interventions have often failed to produce significant, long-term improvements (Campie et al., 2015).

Applying systems thinking in policy design involves recognizing and addressing the complex interdependencies between various factors affecting youth. For instance, the digital revolution has significantly impacted education, employment, and mental health among young people. By understanding these interconnections, policymakers can develop more comprehensive strategies leveraging digital tools to enhance educational outcomes, create employment opportunities, and support mental health initiatives.

Systems thinking emphasizes the importance of socio-cultural support systems in promoting youth well-being. In Uganda, traditional support structures play a vital role in young people's lives. Integrating these socio-cultural elements into policy design can enhance interventions' effectiveness by ensuring they are culturally relevant and widely accepted (Luwangula et al., 2021; Swahn et al., 2020). This approach also helps identify potential synergies and trade-offs between different policy objectives, enabling more balanced and equitable outcomes.

A systems-based approach also facilitates identifying feedback loops and potential tipping points within the system. This is essential for anticipating and mitigating risks and capitalizing on opportunities for positive change. For example, policies aimed at improving youth employment should consider the broader economic and social systems, including education, healthcare, and family support, to ensure that interventions are sustainable and have a lasting impact.

Furthermore, integrating systems thinking into policy design requires a shift in how stakeholders collaborate and make decisions. It necessitates developing instruments and frameworks bridging different sectors and scales, from local to global levels (Hynes, 2017). This collaborative approach can help align stakeholders'

efforts, enhancing the overall coherence and effectiveness of youth policies.

Incorporating systems thinking into policy design also involves continuous learning and adaptation. Policymakers must be willing to iterate and refine their strategies based on new insights and changing circumstances (Kinnula et al., 2024). This adaptive approach is particularly important in rapid technological advancements and evolving socio-economic conditions, which can significantly impact youth well-being.

Integrating systems thinking into policy design offers a comprehensive framework for addressing the complex and interrelated challenges faced by youth in Uganda. By considering the broader system and its interdependencies, policymakers can develop more effective, sustainable, and culturally relevant interventions that contribute to young people's overall well-being and support sustainable development (Campie et al., 2015; Hynes et al., 2017; Kinnula et al., 2024; Luwangula et al., 2021).

6.4 EXPANDING FOCUS BEYOND INDIVIDUAL PROGRAMS

6.4.1 Holistic Program Design

Holistic program design is essential for addressing youth well-being in Uganda, moving beyond fragmented interventions to create a more integrated and effective approach. This design emphasizes the importance of socio-cultural support systems and the impact of the digital revolution on education, employment, and mental health. By adopting a systems-based approach, stakeholders can better harness the demographic dividend and contribute to sustainable development.

A comprehensive, systems-based approach encourages continuous feedback and adaptation in policy-making and programming (White et al., 2023). This method allows recognizing the value of experimentation and incorporating feedback from

various stakeholders, including local communities and organizations. Such an approach promotes collaboration across different sectors, ensuring that interventions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing rather than isolated.

Integrating socio-cultural support systems is crucial in holistic program design. These systems provide a foundation for addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by youth in Uganda. For instance, family-strengthening interventions focusing on building family support, improving communication, and mobilizing resources can significantly enhance young people's overall well-being (Ssentumbwe et al., 2024). Additionally, economic empowerment initiatives, such as matched youth development accounts and financial literacy training, can help stabilize families financially and further support youth development.

The digital revolution profoundly impacts various aspects of youth well-being, including education, employment, and mental health. Digital tools and platforms can facilitate access to educational resources, create new employment opportunities, and provide support for mental health issues (EPRI et al., 2018). By leveraging these digital advancements, programs can be more effective and far-reaching. For example, using digital platforms for health promotion can ensure that interventions are accessible to a broader audience, thereby improving health outcomes for mothers and newborns.

Moreover, the guideline approach to identifying what works in practice-based evidence is another critical component of holistic program design (Hill, 2020). This approach involves gathering best practices from local justice workers and other stakeholders with firsthand experience in resolving pressing issues. By incorporating these insights, programs can be more responsive to the community's actual needs, leading to more effective and sustainable interventions.

The shift to systems thinking involves moving away from isolated interventions and toward a more integrated approach that considers the broader socio-economic and cultural context. For instance, developing high-quality research capacity on young people's health and well-being is essential for creating evidence-based policies and programs addressing their needs. Such research

can provide valuable insights into the determinants of change and guide future projections involving human behavior (Hynes, 2017).

Such holistic program design is critical for a comprehensive, systems-based approach to addressing youth well-being in Uganda. By integrating socio-cultural support systems, leveraging the digital revolution, and adopting a guideline approach to practice-based evidence, stakeholders can create more effective and sustainable interventions.

6.4.2 Cross-Sector Collaboration

Cross-sector collaboration is essential for addressing the multifaceted challenges associated with youth well-being in Uganda. This approach necessitates integrating various stakeholders, including government entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and the private sector, to create a cohesive and comprehensive strategy. Constant reflection and collaboration are important, helping innovators consider linkages beyond company borders and value co-creation with various stakeholders. This collaborative effort is crucial for positioning ideas within larger contexts, networks, and systems.

Working in transdisciplinary teams, as outlined in Kinnula et al. (2024), can be embedded in research projects to bring together experts from different fields. This integration is particularly beneficial in providing realistic viewpoints and addressing complex issues. However, organizing such collaboration in formal education contexts can be challenging due to the natural absence of diverse experts. Despite these challenges, the benefits of cross-sector collaboration in creating innovative solutions and improving thinking and creativity are well documented.

The systems evaluation approach described in Rosas and Knight (2019) highlights the importance of combining different disciplinary perspectives to design effective strategies. This approach is particularly relevant in youth well-being, where a coordinated set of activities and structures is necessary to address the diverse needs of the youth population. The study by Bantebya

et al. (2014) further supports this by combining literature reviews with key informant interviews and qualitative fieldwork, involving community members and various stakeholders. This comprehensive methodology ensures that the perspectives of all relevant parties are considered in developing youth policies and programs.

Integrating socio-cultural support systems is another critical aspect of cross-sector collaboration. Enhancing and sustaining advocacy for appropriate youth laws, policies, and access to resources requires broad partner participation and wide information sharing. This collaborative effort ensures that youth interventions are integrated and comprehensive, addressing the various dimensions of youth well-being.

Partnerships with health and construction agencies, as well as research institutes, are important to build on existing knowledge and address issues affecting air quality (Kinnula et al., 2024).

The transition to a non-smoking public sphere and the transformation needed to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, as discussed in Hynes (2017), demonstrate the influence of civil society and the private sector throughout the policy cycle. Forming strategic alliances across governments, academics, businesses, and civil society organizations is becoming a new operating norm, highlighting the importance of cross-sector collaboration in achieving sustainable development goals.

Combining services-oriented programming with cash transfers has shown promising results in various areas, including education, health, gender, protection, and livelihoods (White et al., 2023). This approach underscores the importance of integrating different types of interventions to achieve comprehensive outcomes. The impact evaluation of the Early Childhood Stimulation Programme in Jamaica, mentioned in Gertler et al., (2021), further illustrates the long-term benefits of such integrated approaches, including increased income and reduced inequality.

In summary, cross-sector collaboration is critical for expanding the focus beyond individual programs to address youth well-being in Uganda. By integrating various stakeholders and leveraging their expertise, creating comprehensive and effective strategies addressing

the diverse needs of the youth population and contributing to sustainable development is possible.

Conclusion

Addressing youth well-being in Uganda necessitates a multifaceted, systems-based strategy incorporating socio-cultural, economic, and technological dimensions. By integrating socio-cultural support systems, capitalizing on the digital revolution's influence on education and employment, and tackling mental health issues, stakeholders can establish a sustainable framework for youth development.

Current approaches to youth programming in Uganda are often characterized by fragmented interventions lacking a cohesive strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic, along with other crises such as the Ebola outbreak and climate change, has exacerbated existing biases and inequalities, underscoring the inadequacies of current methods. A shift towards a comprehensive, systems-based approach is essential to harness the potential of the youthful demographic and contribute to sustainable development.

A paradigm shift in addressing youth well-being is evident. This shift involves moving beyond isolated efforts and embracing a holistic perspective integrating various socio-cultural, economic, and technological dimensions. Systems thinking, emphasizing the interconnections and interdependencies within complex systems, provides a robust framework for creating sustainable solutions. By focusing on feedback loops, leverage points, and boundaries and integrating digital and sociocultural factors, stakeholders can develop effective interventions addressing the root causes of problems rather than just their symptoms.

Socio-cultural dynamics in Uganda significantly shape the experiences and opportunities available to youth. Understanding cultural nuances, such as traditional practices and community values, is crucial for designing effective policies and programs.

Education, a cornerstone for advancement, has been profoundly affected by the digital revolution, presenting both opportunities and challenges. Ensuring equitable access to digital resources is vital for maximizing the benefits of this transformation.

Mental health is another critical aspect of youth's well-being that demands attention. The pressures associated with socio-economic inequalities and rapid technological advancements can contribute to mental health issues among youth. A comprehensive approach including mental health support as a fundamental component of youth programs is necessary to address these challenges effectively.

Adopting a comprehensive, systems-based approach to youth well-being in Uganda is essential for creating sustainable and inclusive pathways for youth. By involving communities in the development process and recognizing the interconnectedness of various factors affecting youth well-being, stakeholders can harness the demographic dividend and contribute to the broader goals of national and global development.

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