
Empowering Youth in Agriculture in Northern Uganda through Mentorship: Implications for Enhancing Inclusivity by SSE Organizations

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Abstract

After two decades of civil conflict in Northern Uganda, Ugandans are now returning to their communities to reestablish their livelihoods. Most youth don't have skills to venture into Agriculture. MasterCard Foundation was interested in finding replicable approaches to getting youth involved in Agriculture. Qualitative methods were used in this study. 415 youth from the project were sampled out through simple random sampling and purposive sampling. Cleaned data was coded and analyzed with the help of a computer package ATLAS. In each district, two Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were held with sampled youth from project beneficiaries each Focused group discussion was comprised of five female and five male youth. Four Key Informant Interviews were also held, one per district. Findings from these interviews were triangulated with program reports, as well as staff reflections and experiences. This study adopted experiential learning theory which presents a cyclical learning model, consisting of four learning stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation leading to active experimentation and choice of new experience. The study sought to find out the role played by mentors in the success of the project. The research identified the following benefits of mentors: Mentors supported in Mobilizing and registration of Youth Associations with government, provided technical advice, resolved youth conflicts, supported youth access agricultural land and training to youth, linked youth to markets etc. This study is important to policy makers as youth unemployment is a concern in developing Nations.

Keywords: Youth, Inclusivity, SSE Organizations, Mentorship, Farming

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INTRODUCTION

After two decades of civil conflict in Northern Uganda, Ugandans are now returning to their communities to reestablish their livelihoods. Uganda has the youngest population in the world and the highest youth unemployment rate in sub-Saharan Africa, with youth making up 80% of the unemployed (GOU, 2014). According to (World Bank, 2020) the latest official estimates, between 2012 and 2016 poverty increased moderately from 19.7 percent to 21.4 percent, and inequality rose as the Gini index went from 41 to 42.8. Girls fare worse

than boys accessing education, with many dropping out of school. (GOU, 2014). According to World Bank (2020), while Uganda's youth are renowned for being highly enterprising, fewer than 4% of Ugandans are employers.

In partnership with The Mastercard Foundation, NCBA CLUSA implemented the five-year Youth Empowerment Through Agriculture (YETA) program in Northern and Midwestern Uganda in the districts of Dokolo, Kole, Masindi, and Kiryandongo. Along with its partners Youth Alive Uganda (YAU) and Reproductive Health Uganda

(RHU) and program learning partner the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

The project had the following four objectives: 1) In order to increase inclusivity, both male and female youth were recruited in to youth Associations and strengthened through training and mentorship, 2) In order to increase the well-being and confidence of youth association members youth were trained on foundational skills, 3) The project also sought to increase access to financial services for youth association members, and 4) The project also sought to improve the technical and entrepreneurial skills of youth association members so they can launch their businesses and grow them.

Coaching and mentoring practices have been influenced by a number of learning theories (Griffiths, 2005). Kolb's experiential learning theory has been particularly influential in the training and development sector (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning is the process whereby knowledge and skills are created through the transformation of experiences (Moore, Boyd and Dooley, 2010). The experiential learning theory presents a cyclical learning model, consisting of four learning stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). The learning cycle shows how experience is translated through reflection into concepts, which, in turn, are used as a guide for active experimentation and the choice of new experiences.

The Youth Empowerment through Agriculture consortium addressed challenges faced by youth in agriculture – such as low levels of productivity, access to resources, and low skill levels – by facilitating the creation of a network of youth associations and cooperatives. Before participating in the Youth Empowerment through Agriculture program, the majority of rural youth in the project intervention areas worked on small pieces of land provided by their parents or communities, without the necessary skills or finance to farm productively. Many youth did not effectively manage the little income they

generated and often did not know how to best invest their surpluses.

Youth Empowerment through agriculture's youth associations acted as a vehicle to address these obstacles by providing access to formal training and mentorship so that young people had the skills to produce more and invest better. Once formed, groups were encouraged to choose a mentor to support their group endeavors and form a village savings and loans association so they could save for their individual goals and group projects. Groups functioned as a means for empowering youth who have low levels of self-esteem and for demonstrating that change and better livelihoods are possible. Finally, it was easier for groups to access resources – including land, information, and concessionary loans – provided by government or other NGOs than it is for individuals.

What is mentorship?

Within the context of the project, mentorship is defined as a relationship between youth and caring, responsible adults and is a partnership cultivated through mutual learning and development. Mentoring and coaching are sometimes used interchangeably but in YETA, there is a distinction and the project did both. Mentorship is less prescriptive. Mentors do not give youth the answers; they help them come up with their own solutions. They encourage free thinking, without fear of making mistakes. Coaching remedies a specific problem and tends to be more technical in nature. The two can overlap and mentoring tactics can be employed while coaching, but it is important to note the difference. There is also a distinction between a naturally occurring adult-youth relationship and a structured one where the mentor is assigned or matched. There is less research available for informal mentor relationships (i.e. with family members, relatives, religious leaders) than there is for formal ones, but the research indicates that benefits exist for both the mentor and mentee, particularly in formal settings.¹ Research also shows that mentorship benefits mentees,

mentors, and communities alike.² For mentees, the relationship helps them realize their career and livelihood ambitions, discover their passion, and have a positive role model to look up to. For mentors, the relationship can produce collegiality and collaboration, improved interpersonal skills, and present opportunities for self-reflection. And for communities, more empowered youth create productive, informed citizens that can make positive contributions to society at large.

Youth Empowerment through agriculture mentorship model

Youth Empowerment through Agriculture (YETA) employed several mentorship models to help youth vision and achieve their goals, improve decision-making, challenge their assumptions, and build their self-confidence. These models included reflection circles (small groups of 5 -7 youth) as well as peer to peer and traditional adult-youth mentorship. Youth Associations were a formal platform for youth to explore business opportunities and pilot new ideas and from that emanated informal, organic peer to peer exchanges and mentoring. Reflection circles were also a form of peer to peer mentoring but were more formally organized. Adult mentors did not participate in the circles; these small groups were youth-led, self-selected subsets of Youth Associations that addressed personal challenges and concerns youth otherwise would not feel comfortable sharing at the larger group level. Youth typically organized themselves based on their interests, geographic location, gender, age group, and enterprise type. The circles were safe spaces for youth to come together and find solutions to each other's problems; they discussed challenges around their businesses as well as relational issues they may have with their spouses, friends, or parents. Challenges that could not be resolved at the circle level were elevated to the larger group, an adult mentor, or YETA staff for additional support.

Reflection circles met once a month and were led by a chairperson. In every session, a new chairperson was nominated to lead the

next circle to give every youth an opportunity to lead. YETA's adult-youth mentorship model was a formal 6-month relationship between a mentor and youth association that began after youth completed their technical and foundational skills trainings. Although some mentors and mentees kept in touch after the 6-month period, it is important to note that the relationship had a beginning and an end.

Together with prospective mentors (i.e. community elders and opinion leaders, parents, retired civil servants, private sector, local government) and youth, YETA developed criteria on how to select a good mentor. YETA then sensitized both youth and adults on that criteria and trained them on how to be productive mentors and mentees. Each of the 813 Youth Associations selected a mentor by voting. In their signed MOUs with mentees, mentors committed to doing the following:

1. Support mobilization of youth and establishment of Youth Associations
2. Meet with Youth Associations at least three times a month to: (a). Help youth access land, (b). Help youth register their groups as a community-based organization or cooperative with the government, (c). Mentor youth on the start-up and management of their businesses and monitor business performance, (d). Encourage youth to self-reflect g. Facilitate linkages between youth and markets for inputs and buyers, (e). Facilitate linkages between youth and financial institutions, (f). Help youth groups start and manage successful VSLAs, and (g). Link youth to other parents, experienced farmers, associations or cooperatives, and other community development resources for additional support, as needed

The project organized a one-day sensitization meeting for mentors so they were aware of their aforementioned roles and responsibilities. Although mentoring was mandated to occur at least three times a month, the exercise was also needs based so meeting times, dates, and venues varied

across Youth Associations. Mentors for example typically supported youth VSLAs once a week for an hour and the visits could occur on saving days in a member's home. Technical mentoring and coaching around YETA-distributed demonstration kits, occurred twice a week for three hours and mentors would visit the piece of land where the kit was distributed. Mentors and mentees established goals for both the mentorship relationship and the Youth Association itself. Throughout the 6-month period, mentors and mentees assessed the health of the relationship and adapted their interventions accordingly. YETA staff also conducted monthly follow up meetings with mentors to ensure quality assurance and that mentors were helping young people achieve their goals. And when the relationship concluded, mentees gave mentors formal feedback. Qualitative data showed that the relationship was mutually beneficial and improved intergenerational dialogue between youth and adults in the community

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were largely used for this study such as focused group discussions, Key informant interviews, interview questionnaires and observation method. 415 youth were sampled out through simple random sampling and purposive sampling from project beneficiaries to participate in the study. Data collection took a period of three weeks across the four districts. In each district, two Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were held with sampled youth from the program. Each Focused group discussion was comprised of five female and five male youth. In addition to Focused group discussions, the project also conducted four Key Informant Interviews (KII), one per district. Depending on the district and learning question topic, Key informant interviews were conducted with Community Development Officers, Agricultural Officers, Sub County Chiefs, Parish Chiefs, Local Council 1 Chairpersons, mentors, and private sector actors. Once data was collected and cleaned, it was coded and analyzed using a computer package ATLAS. Findings from

the study were triangulated with program reports, Volunteer and partner reports and staff reflections and experiences. It should be noted that some of the outcomes reported in this study were unintended and as a result, baseline information was not originally collected. Though the study documents these outcomes, it was difficult to quantify some changes without baseline data.

FINDINGS

In its Results Framework, the Uganda National Strategy for Youth Employment in Agriculture emphasizes mentorship as an important ingredient to achieving its objective of '...promoting an enabling environment for youth employment in agriculture.' The project also observed the transformative nature mentorship played in young people's lives in Northern Uganda.

The role played by mentors: **Mobilization, sensitization and group formation.** In the case of Youth Empowerment through Agriculture project the mentors supported in the process of mobilizing and organizing youth. They helped youth link with the ministry of social services, local governments and municipal councils for registration. Most of the mentors also helped youth in the process of developing constitutions and other registration materials that were required by the registration authorities. The mentors appealed to other parents to allow the youth to come together for a worthy purpose in groups. Mentors helped youth register associations with the Local District Government and their cooperatives and SACCOs with the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives and then connected them to private sector actors like banks and input dealers. In Kole District, Rwot Amio Youth Association's Mentor Mrs. Anna Agom lent the group UGX 35,000 with no interest so that they could register their YA with Ayer Town Council; they were able to reimburse their mentor afterwards.

Access to land and other productive resources. Most youth needed land as their businesses were largely production-based. Mentors negotiated fair prices on youth's

behalf so they could rent and even buy land to start their agricultural enterprises. Mentors convinced parents to give youth access to family land. Some directly rented land to youth under very flexible conditions and only expected payment after harvest or sale of crops. Others were generous enough to give youth land for free. Mentors strongly advocated for their mentees. As a result, all 813 YETA Youth Associations accessed land either through their parents or renting at reasonable rates and 3,248 (552 females and 2,696 males) youth actually purchased land. Mentors encouraged young people to save diligently and helped 802 Youth Associations start and manage Village savings and loan Associations (VSLAs). Of the total 27,130 YETA youth, 19,692 (10,678 males and 9,014 females) belong to these VSLAs and cumulatively saved USD \$615,713. Mentors were very active and shared VSLA best management practices with youth. Mentors helped VSLAs set realistic saving goals and many even joined weekly VSLA savings meetings as observers. Mentors were particularly supportive during the critical stages of the VSLA lifecycle - managing share-out and setting investment and saving goals. At the end of a cycle, VSLAs conduct an audit to assess how much members saved, and the interest earned; mentors guided groups on how to determine share out amounts for their members after this process. They also discouraged VSLAs from timing their share-outs around holidays like Christmas and Easter; initially, many did this and spent most of their money on frivolous, holiday-related purchases. Mentors encouraged members to repay loans timely so others can benefit from the same funds and they helped VSLAs recover debts from those that borrowed and failed to pay. In Masindi district for example, Isagara Young Stars Youth Group reported that their mentor was instrumental in helping their VSLA recover money when they discovered that their Treasurer mismanaged fund.

Technology and knowledge transfer. Most project mentors were experienced farmers. Many established demonstration

gardens on their own farms to teach youth best agronomic and animal management practices such as conservation farming and regular vaccinations. For example a prominent farmer and Kisonga Youth Group's mentor Mr. Alex Asiimwe in Masindi District, invited YETA youth to his farm to help strengthen their piggery, passion fruits, and horticulture businesses. Through coaching and mentorship the mentors transferred knowledge to the youth which helped the youth become better farmers.

Supported youth to access markets. Mentors helped young farmers increase and bulk their production to access better markets. Some mentors were members of Area Cooperative Enterprises (ACE) and linked youth directly to these enterprises as direct buyers and sellers; Nyamahasa ACE in Kiryandongo, Dokolo ACE, and Masindi District Farmers Association bought youth produce at better-than-market prices because youth sold in groups. In Kiryandongo, Blessed Youth and Youth Ascending youth groups reported that their mentors looked for markets while maize was still in their gardens; Nyamahasa ACE bought youth maize at UGX 1,100 per kilogram, compared to a market price of UGX 900. Similarly, in Masindi district, Victory Youth Group reported that their mentor brought a maize buyer right to their farm to avoid transportation costs.

Mentors supported youth adopt positive behavior. Mentors inspired once idle youth to adopt positive behaviors and become productive members of their communities. YETA's 2019 Annual Survey indicated that 90.6% of youth were able to identify and understand the risky effects of negative behaviors after YETA interventions, and mentors played a large role in this. Youth were compelled by their mentors to begin volunteering their time and resources to respond to community needs; they cleaned water and health centers, helped the elderly in their gardens, and excavated pit latrines. Youth also confided in their mentors about private matters. Mentors mediated family disputes on their behalf and addressed

sensitive issues like domestic violence and family planning/sexual reproductive health within youth couples.

Mentors helped resolve group conflicts. When groups went through their storming stage, mentors helped association members clarify their roles and responsibilities within their group businesses; they were key in maintaining group cohesion, managing group conflicts, and minimizing attrition.

CONCLUSION

Mentorship plays a very transformative role in young people's lives not only in the agricultural sector but other spheres of life if well designed. Mentors helped youth to - Access to land and other productive resources, Mobilization, sensitization and group formation, technology and knowledge transfer, supported youth access markets, Mentors supported youth adopt positive behavior, and Mentors helped resolve group conflicts. Through mentorship youth improved their life skills and entrepreneurial pursuits and helped change their perception around work in agriculture, a main livelihood source in Uganda thus enhancing inclusivity and sustainability of SSE groups.

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