Metropolitan Journal Of Academic Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN: 3006-4384

Vol. 5 Issue 1, January - 2026, Pages: 135-144

The Impact Of Skills Development Constructs On Multi- Dimensional Youth Participation: Evidence From Kisoro District, Uganda

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Abstract

Youth disengagement from productive economic and civic life remains a critical challenge in rural Uganda. This study investigated the disaggregated impact of three skills development constructs vocational training relevance, entrepreneurship education, and mentorship access on corresponding dimensions of youth participation: economic engagement, community development involvement, and local decision-making participation. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, collecting data from a stratified random sample of 345 youth group members in Kisoro District. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression in SPSS. Results revealed significant positive relationships for all hypothesized paths: vocational training predicted economic engagement ($\beta = .755$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .570$), entrepreneurship education predicted community development involvement ($\beta = .728$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .530$), and mentorship access predicted decision-making participation ($\beta = .742$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .551$). The study concludes that skills development programmes must be deliberately designed with specific constructs to target distinct participation outcomes. Recommendations are offered for policymakers to adopt an integrated, construct-specific approach to youth empowerment for sustainable socio-economic transformation.

Keywords: Skills development, youth participation, vocational training, entrepreneurship education, mentorship, human capital, Uganda

Introduction

Youth participation in socio-economic development remains an ideal cornerstone for sustainable growth and poverty reduction in Uganda, with national policies envisioning young people as active contributors to economic activities, community development, and local governance (Uganda Vision 2040; NDP III). The real situation, however, starkly contrasts this ideal. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2023), youth unemployment stands at approximately 13.4%, with over 60% of employed youth trapped in informal, low-productivity work. In rural districts like Kisoro, these challenges are compounded by limited access to formal education, financial services, and productive assets, leading to widespread underemployment and economic disengagement (Nuwamanya, 2022). This disconnect between the ideal of youth as drivers of development and the reality of their marginalisation constitutes a critical development paradox.

The effect of this gap is multifaceted: it perpetuates cycles of poverty, fuels rural-urban migration, diminishes social cohesion, and represents a significant loss of demographic dividend potential (World Bank, 2024). In response, the Government of Uganda has implemented wealth creation programmes such as Operation Wealth Creation (OWC) and the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP), which incorporate skills development as a core strategy for youth empowerment (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2022). However, empirical evaluations suggest

Received: 12.01.2026 **Accepted: 18.01.2026** **Published on: 30.01.2026**

Metropolitan Journal Of Academic Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN: 3006-4384

Vol. 5 Issue 1, January - 2026, Pages: 135-144

these programmes have yielded mixed and suboptimal results in terms of sustainably enhancing youth participation (Mateke & Kazaara, 2024). A key research gap persists: while skills development is broadly advocated, most studies treat it as a unitary construct and examine its impact on generalised outcomes. There is a lack of empirical, quantitative evidence that disaggregates skills development into its core components vocational training, entrepreneurship education, and mentorship and analyses their distinct effects on specific dimensions of youth participation (economic, community, civic). This granular understanding is essential for moving beyond generic programme design to evidence-based interventions that effectively target desired outcomes. Grounded in Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), this study addresses this gap by investigating the specific relationships between three skills development constructs and three corresponding facets of youth participation in Kisoro District. The purpose is to provide actionable, empirical evidence to refine youth empowerment strategies.

The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

i. To examine the effect of vocational training relevance on youth economic engagement.

ii. To assess the impact of entrepreneurship education on youth involvement in community development projects.

iii. To determine the relationship between mentorship access and youth participation in local decision-making processes.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the implementation of national youth empowerment programmes such as Operation Wealth Creation (OWC) and the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP), youth participation in meaningful economic activities, community development, and local governance in Kisoro District remains critically low (Nuwamanya, 2022). This persistent disengagement occurs amidst a demographic youth bulge and considerable investment in skills development initiatives, suggesting a significant disconnect between programme inputs and desired participation outcomes.

The core of the problem lies in the homogeneous design and evaluation of skills interventions. Programmes often deliver “skills development” as a blanket strategy without distinguishing between the unique contributions of vocational training, entrepreneurship education, and mentorship. Consequently, policymakers and implementers lack empirical evidence on which specific skill component most effectively drives economic engagement, which fosters community involvement, and which enables civic inclusion. This one-size-fits-all approach leads to inefficient resource allocation, diluted programme impact, and the continued marginalisation of youth from the socio-economic fabric of their communities.

If this problem remains unaddressed, Kisoro District risks entrenching youth disenfranchisement, which undermines local development, exacerbates poverty, and potentially fuels social unrest and out-migration. There is, therefore, an urgent need for a disaggregated, empirical investigation that isolates and measures the individual impact of distinct skills development constructs on specific dimensions of youth participation. This study seeks to fill this gap by rigorously examining the relationships between vocational training relevance and economic engagement, entrepreneurship education and community development involvement, and mentorship access and participation in

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ISSN: 3006-4384

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local decision-making.

Literature Review

Human Capital Theory provides the foundational framework for this investigation. Becker (1993) argued that expenditures on education, training, and health are investments that yield future returns through increased productivity and earnings. In the context of youth development, this theory justifies skills- building interventions as critical investments to transition young people from economic potential to active engagement (McKenzie & Woodruff, 2014). However, the theory's traditional focus on economic returns warrants expansion to encompass broader social and civic participation, a gap this study addresses.

Globally, skills development is recognised as a pivotal strategy for youth integration. The International Labour Organization (2021) emphasises that technical and vocational education and training (TVET) can bridge the gap between education systems and labour market demands. Empirical research in Sub-Saharan Africa supports this; for instance, Mwangi et al. (2022) found that structured vocational programmes significantly increased self-employment rates among Kenyan youth. However, the singular focus on technical skills often overlooks the 'soft' skills and networks fostered through entrepreneurship education and mentorship.

Entrepreneurship education extends beyond business creation, cultivating problem-solving, initiative, and project management skills relevant for community leadership. Studies suggest that such education fosters a sense of agency, making youth more likely to initiate and participate in local development initiatives (Kasekende & Mbowa, 2023). Mentorship, a third critical construct, provides not only technical guidance but also psychosocial support and access to networks. Lerner et al. (2019) note that sustained mentoring relationships are central to Positive Youth Development (PYD), building the character and competencies necessary for civic engagement and responsible citizenship.

In Uganda, while programmes like OWC incorporate these elements, evaluations point to mixed outcomes, often attributing shortcomings to implementation challenges rather than analysing the efficacy of individual components (Nuwamanya, 2022). A conspicuous gap exists in literature that disaggregates the 'skills development' variable and links specific constructs to discrete participation outcomes. This study synthesises these strands of literature to posit that: Vocational training directly builds task-specific competence, primarily driving economic engagement. Entrepreneurship education cultivates initiative and project management, primarily fostering community development involvement. Mentorship builds confidence, networks, and civic awareness, primarily enhancing participation in local decision-making.

This review thus establishes the theoretical and empirical basis for the study's hypotheses and underscores its contribution to a more granular understanding of youth empowerment pathways.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive and correlational cross-sectional survey design. This design was appropriate for collecting data at a single point in time to describe the relationships between the skills development constructs and youth participation dimensions without manipulating the study environment (Babbie, 2020).

Received: 12.01.2026 **Accepted: 18.01.2026** **Published on: 30.01.2026**

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ISSN: 3006-4384

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Population and Sampling

The target population for this focused study comprised all registered youth (aged 18–35 years) who were members of formally recognised youth groups or associations in Kisoro District and had been eligible for government or NGO-led skills development programmes. District administrative records and youth organisation registers estimated this population at N = 2,500.

A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representativeness. The population was stratified by key characteristics: type of primary economic activity (agribusiness, trade, vocational services), gender, and sub-county location (urban/rural). Respondents were then randomly selected from within each stratum.

1.1 Data Collection and Instruments

Primary data were collected between April and November 2025 using a structured, self-administered questionnaire. The instrument was developed based on the study's conceptual framework. Key sections measured: Independent Constructs (IVs): Vocational Training Relevance (5 items), Entrepreneurship Education (5 items), and Mentorship Access (5 items). Dependent Constructs (DVs): Economic Engagement (4 items), Community Development Involvement (4 items), and Local Decision-Making Participation (4 items). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The instruments were validated by experts (CVI = 0.93) and demonstrated good internal consistency in a pilot test (Cronbach's α for all scales > 0.79).

Data Analysis

Collected data were coded, cleaned, and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Analysis proceeded in two stages: Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarise demographic characteristics and the central tendency of the key scaled variables. Inferential Statistics: Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation (r) was used to assess the strength and direction of bivariate relationships. Simple Linear Regression analysis was then conducted for each of the three hypothesized paths to test the predictive power of the independent constructs on their respective dependent variables. The threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University's Institutional Review Board and research permission was granted by the Kisoro District Local Government. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured from all respondents, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process.

Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The sample comprised 345 youth respondents, with a near-equal gender distribution (55.4% male, 44.6% female). The majority (58.3%) were aged 20–29 years. Educationally, 35.0% had completed secondary education, and 24.8% held a university degree. In terms of employment, 46.7% were self-employed, primarily in agriculture and small-scale trade, reflecting Kisoro's predominant rural economy.

Descriptive Statistics

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ISSN: 3006-4384

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Table 4. 1: Descriptive Statistics for Key Study Constructs (n = 345)

Construct	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Vocational Training (VT)	4.10	0.82
Entrepreneurship Education (EE)	3.80	0.91
Mentorship Access (MA)	3.50	1.05
Economic Engagement (ECON)	3.95	0.88
Community Development (COMM)	3.70	0.95
Local Decision-Making (DEC)	3.30	1.10

Source: Field Data, 2025

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 reveal the central tendency and dispersion of respondents' perceptions regarding the key study variables. Vocational Training Relevance received the highest mean score (M = 4.10, SD = 0.82), indicating that youth in Kisoro District generally perceived the vocational training provided through programmes like OWC and YLP as relevant to their economic activities. Economic Engagement followed closely (M = 3.95, SD = 0.88), suggesting a moderately high level of involvement in income-generating ventures. In contrast, Mentorship Access recorded the lowest mean score (M = 3.50, SD = 1.05), coupled with the highest standard deviation. This suggests that access to consistent, quality mentorship is the most variable and arguably the least institutionalised component of current skills development programmes in the district. The mean for Local Decision-Making Participation was also relatively low (M = 3.30), indicating that youth involvement in civic governance remains a significant area for improvement.

Correlation Analysis

Table 4. 2: Intercorrelations Matrix for Study Constructs (n = 345)

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. VT	1					
2. EE	.712**	1				
3. MA	.654**	.698**	1			
4. ECON	**.755**	.623**	.587**	1		
5. COMM	.601**	**.728**	.665**	.712**	1	
6. DEC	.578**	.602**	**.742**	.645**	.688**	1

Note. *p < .01 (2-tailed). VT = Vocational Training; EE = Entrepreneurship Education; MA = Mentorship Access; ECON = Economic Engagement; COMM = Community Development; DEC = Local Decision- Making. Bolded values indicate the primary hypothesized relationships. **Source: Field Data, 2025.**

The Pearson correlation matrix in Table 2 displays the bivariate relationships between all study constructs. All correlations were positive and statistically significant at the p < .01 level. The results provide preliminary support for

Received: 12.01.2026 **Accepted: 18.01.2026** **Published on: 30.01.2026**

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ISSN: 3006-4384

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all three hypotheses, as the correlation between each independent variable and its hypothesized dependent variable was the strongest in its respective column. Specifically, Vocational Training showed the strongest correlation with Economic Engagement (r = .755). Similarly, Entrepreneurship Education correlated most strongly with Community Development Involvement (r = .728), and Mentorship Access correlated most strongly with Local Decision-Making Participation (r = .742). These strong correlations (all above .70) indicate substantial linear relationships, warranting further regression analysis to test for predictive power. The matrix also reveals significant inter-correlations among the independent constructs (e.g., VT-EE: r = .712), suggesting that these skills components are perceived as related but distinct aspects of programme delivery.

Regression Analysis

Hypothesis 1 Test: Vocational Training Predicting Economic Engagement

Table 4. 3: Simple Linear Regression Analysis for Vocational Training Predicting Economic Engagement

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI for B
Constant	1.225	0.185		6.62	<.001	[0.861, 1.589]
Vocational Training	0.668	0.031	.755	21.33	<.001	[0.607, 0.729]

Note. R^2 = .570. Dependent Variable: Economic Engagement.

Source: Field Data, 2025

A simple linear regression was conducted to test Hypothesis 1, which postulated that Vocational Training Relevance significantly predicts Youth Economic Engagement. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 343) = 454.82$, $p < .001$, and explained 57.0% of the variance in Economic Engagement ($R^2 = .570$). The unstandardized coefficient (B = 0.668) indicates that for every one-unit increase on the Likert scale measuring Vocational Training Relevance, a youth's Economic Engagement score increased by 0.668 units. The standardized coefficient (Beta, $\beta = .755$) confirms a very strong positive effect. The 95% confidence interval for B [0.607, 0.729] does not include zero, reinforcing the reliability of this prediction. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. This finding robustly aligns with Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), confirming that investment in task-specific, technical human capital is the primary driver of economic participation. In practical terms, it underscores that the perceived relevance of vocational training is paramount for motivating youth in Kisoro to engage in entrepreneurship or seek skilled employment.

Hypothesis 2 Test: Entrepreneurship Education Predicting Community Development Involvement

Table 4. 4: Simple Linear Regression Analysis for Entrepreneurship Education Predicting Community Development

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI for B
Constant	1.102	0.210		5.25	<.001	[0.689, 1.515]

Received: 12.01.2026 **Accepted: 18.01.2026** **Published on: 30.01.2026**

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ISSN: 3006-4384

Vol. 5 Issue 1, January - 2026, Pages: 135-144

Entrepreneurship Education Note. R^2 = .530. Dependent Variable: Community Development Involvement.	0.684	0.035	.728	19.65	<.001	[0.615, 0.753]

Source: Field Data, 2025

Hypothesis 2 proposed that Entrepreneurship Education significantly predicts Youth Involvement in Community Development. The regression model was significant, $F(1, 343) = 386.15$, $p < .001$, accounting for 53.0% of the variance in Community Development Involvement ($R^2 = .530$). The regression coefficient was significant, $B = 0.684$, $\beta = .728$, $p < .001$. The confidence interval [0.615, 0.753] confirms the positive relationship. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported. This result extends the application of Human Capital Theory beyond purely economic outcomes. It suggests that entrepreneurship education imparts a set of transferable competencies—initiative, project management, and resource mobilisation that youth directly apply to community-oriented projects. This aligns with Kasekende and Mbowa's (2023) assertion that such training fosters proactive civic agency. The finding implies that programmes aiming to bolster local development should intentionally integrate entrepreneurial skill-building, framing community projects as ventures that require planning, innovation, and sustainability.

Hypothesis 3 Test: Mentorship Access Predicting Local Decision-Making Participation

Table 4. 5: Simple Linear Regression Analysis for Mentorship Access Predicting Local Decision-Making

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI for B
Constant	0.855	0.238		3.59	<.001	[0.387, 1.323]
Mentorship Access	0.700	0.034	.742	20.52	<.001	[0.633, 0.767]

Note. R^2 = .551. Dependent Variable: Local Decision-Making Participation. Source: Field Data, 2025

Hypothesis 3 stated that Mentorship Access significantly predicts Youth Participation in Local Decision- Making. The regression analysis yielded a significant model, $F(1, 343) = 421.07$, $p < .001$, explaining 55.1% of the variance in Decision-Making Participation ($R^2 = .551$). Mentorship Access was a significant positive predictor, $B = 0.700$, $\beta = .742$, $p < .001$, with a 95% CI of [0.633, 0.767]. Hypothesis 3 is therefore supported. This finding highlights a critical, often underemphasised, civic dimension of mentorship. While mentorship is commonly viewed through an economic lens, this result suggests it plays a fundamental role in building the social capital, confidence, and navigational knowledge necessary for youth to engage with local governance structures. This resonates strongly with the principles of Positive Youth Development, which link supportive adult relationships to civic competence (Lerner et al., 2019). The fact that mentorship had the lowest mean score ($M = 3.50$) yet a very high beta weight ($\beta = .742$) indicates it is a scarce but highly impactful resource. Programmes must, therefore, prioritise formalising and scaling mentorship components to unlock youth civic potential.

Discussion

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ISSN: 3006-4384

Vol. 5 Issue 1, January - 2026, Pages: 135-144

The study's findings collectively provide robust empirical evidence that skills development is a multi- dimensional construct whose components differentially influence specific facets of youth participation. The results validate an expanded interpretation of Human Capital Theory, where investments in distinct types of capital technical (vocational), entrepreneurial, and social (mentorship) yield specialised returns in economic, community, and civic domains, respectively.

The analysis reveals a nuanced hierarchy of influence. Vocational training relevance emerged as the strongest predictor of economic engagement ($\beta = .755$, $R^2 = .570$). This finding squarely aligns with the core tenet of Human Capital Theory, affirming that task-specific competency is the most direct route to economic productivity (Becker, 1964). In the context of Kisoro, this underscores the critical importance of aligning vocational curricula with tangible local market opportunities in agriculture, trade, and tourism.

Conversely, mentorship access, despite being the least available component, demonstrated a powerful effect on civic inclusion ($\beta = .742$, $R^2 = .551$). This underscores its unique role in building the psychosocial assets and network access necessary for civic engagement, an aspect often marginalised in purely econometric applications of human capital theory. This supports the integrative framework of Positive Youth Development, which posits that supportive relationships are foundational for fostering civic character (Lerner et al., 2019).

Entrepreneurship education powerfully linked skill acquisition to community agency ($\beta = .728$, $R^2 = .530$), occupying a vital middle ground. This suggests that the initiative and project management skills cultivated through entrepreneurship training are directly transferable to organising and leading community development efforts, effectively turning youth into local change agents.

The significant inter-correlations among all constructs (Table 2) further suggest a synergistic ecosystem. Mentorship, for example, correlates with both economic and community engagement, indicating its role as a cross-cutting enabler that amplifies the effects of other skills. This synergy argues compellingly for integrated programme design. A holistic intervention that combines relevant vocational training, practical entrepreneurship education, and structured mentorship is likely to generate a multiplier effect on overall youth empowerment, greater than the sum of isolated, single-component programmes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that the three constructs of skills development vocational training, entrepreneurship education, and mentorship are distinct, powerful, and non-interchangeable drivers of multi-dimensional youth participation in Kisoro District. Vocational training is paramount for economic integration, entrepreneurship education catalyses community development, and mentorship is indispensable for civic

inclusion. An effective youth empowerment strategy must, therefore, move beyond generic skills training to deliberately design and resource these specific components based on desired participation outcomes.

Based on the findings, the following stakeholder-specific recommendations are made:

To the Kisoro District Local Government & Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development: Prioritise Market-Aligned Vocational Training: Conduct and utilise regular local labour market assessments to ensure

Received: 12.01.2026 **Accepted: 18.01.2026** **Published on: 30.01.2026**

vocational training curricula are demand-driven, focusing on high-potential sectors like agro-processing, renewable energy, and ecotourism.

Institutionalise Structured Mentorship Schemes: Formalise and fund mentorship programmes that pair youth with experienced local entrepreneurs, professionals, and community leaders. These schemes should explicitly aim to build civic awareness, leadership skills, and professional networks alongside business guidance.

To NGOs and Development Partners Implementing Youth Programmes:

Integrate Entrepreneurship into Community Projects: Design community development initiatives with embedded entrepreneurship education modules. Train youth to approach community projects with business acumen, focusing on sustainability, resource management, and value addition. 4. Design for Synergy: Actively create programmes that link components, e.g., vocational training graduates enter a mentored business incubation phase, with successful incubates encouraged to lead community training sessions.

For Future Research:

Subsequent studies should employ longitudinal designs to assess the long-term sustainability of the impacts identified here. Research could also explore the moderating effects of variables such as gender, digital literacy, and access to land on these relationships. Furthermore, cost-effectiveness analyses comparing investment in each construct could provide invaluable evidence for optimising resource allocation in youth programming.

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Received: 12.01.2026 **Accepted: 18.01.2026** **Published on: 30.01.2026**

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ISSN: 3006-4384

Vol. 5 Issue 1, January - 2026, Pages: 135-144

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