Mainstreaming youth policy in Zimbabwe – what role for rural youth?

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Abstract: Youth exclusion in policy formulation and implementation, especially in rural areas, is worsening their socio-economic wellbeing. This article evaluates current youth empowerment policies and the institutions mandated to foster youth emancipation in Zimbabwe. In exploring the compatibility of these policies in a rural context, the researchers purposively selected and interviewed the youths involved in policy implementation and self-help projects (respectively). The in-depth and key informant interviews were transcribed and analysed in line with the thematic concerns of the article. Secondary data on youth empowerment policies in Zimbabwe were used to corroborate the findings. Amongst a host of shortcomings noted within the policy framework, was the issue of how there is little to no consultation in formulating, designing and implementing policies. Secondly, while poor coordination between actor organizations has debilitated delivery, corruption and a shortage of funds also hamper implementation. Panaceas to realizing the youth empowerment policy are explored.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Youth policies are used to implement decisions that aim to transform the livelihoods of young people in various communities. This study looks at the operationalization of the youth empowerment policy in Zimbabwe, specifically targeting groups that are in remote and marginalised areas. It evaluates the efficacy of involving various stakeholders, namely district officers in ministries and officers in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to implement the youth empowerment policy. This paper examines the successes achieved and challenges faced by youth in self-help projects that are funded by local NGOs and those that are funded by government partners. It is noted that local NGOs complement the initiatives made by the government to promote socio-economic empowerment of the rural youth. Involving youth in formulating and implementing policies that affect them is found to be an appropriate response to the challenges of the poverty trap and youth exclusion in development.
Empowerment agenda are proposed, including context-specific policies that meet the real rural challenges as experienced by the youth and not as imagined by policymakers and enactors. This article advocates for youth participation at every stage of developing such programmes while also empowering relevant institutions to enhance the emancipation of youth. In contributing to the broader discussion on rural African youth empowerment, this article advocates for the mainstreaming of youth policies as a conduit to enhancing their socio-economic emancipation. In addressing knowledge gaps, the article illuminates the plight of rural youths, their exclusion from development initiatives (implemented by street-level bureaucrats) and their response to such exclusion.

**Subjects:** Politics & International Relations; Social Sciences; Urban Studies; Development Studies

**Keywords:** Youth empowerment; policy implementation; mainstreaming of policy; rural areas; Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

It is evident that youths have been side-lined for too long, not only in their personal development but also in the development of their communities. Researchers, policy implementers, socio-economists and youth advocacy groups concur that there is a need for a comprehensive approach, involving all stakeholders, to ensure that youth policies and relevant institutions are effective. The youth empowerment drive has been quite topical across the African continent (Ile & Boadu, 2018). The main reason for the increased interest is that Africa is a young continent, with 60% of the population below the age of 25 years (Mariam, 2015; Yahya, 2017). Investing in the youth is therefore seen as an important initiative towards engendering a competent human capital.

The purpose of this study is therefore to explore the operationalization of the youth empowerment drive in Zimbabwe. This is done by probing into the functioning of street-level bureaucrats in youth empowerment policy implementation. The article contributes to knowledge on how rural youths perceive the policy environment regarding youth empowerment, as well as how neglecting their views affects the overall outcome and effectiveness of policy implementation. This article demystifies how involving youth in their programmes is slightly different from mainstreaming their concerns in terms of empowerment outcomes. The Commonwealth Youth Guide emphasizes the need to mainstream policies to do with youth in order to embed young people’s aspirations. According to Seneviratne (2017) youth mainstreaming is a critical part of pursuing a vision for an egalitarian world. This is because it incorporates young people’s aspirations into development planning and ensures equality between youth and adults. Therefore, it can be concluded that mainstreaming youth policies results in more equitable development outcomes for the youth than mere involvement does.

The demographic dividend argument, applied to African youth, demonstrates an impetus towards youth-driven socio-economic emancipation (Gay et al., 2017: 2). Apart from examining how the Zimbabwe National Youth Policy has been enacted and mainstreamed, this article also evaluates its effectiveness. This is done using the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), which assesses the effectiveness of youth empowerment policy in the rural context. The findings from this approach are significant in that they inform policymakers and implementers on the improvements that are needed to enhance the effectiveness of youth empowerment projects.

In order to understand the operationalization of the youth empowerment drive in rural Zimbabwe, and Mwenezi District in particular, the authors contacted and interviewed policy implementers both from government and the private sector. The qualitative empirical investigation revealed that the prevailing challenges, within Mwenezi District, debilitate the realization of socia-
economic emancipation amongst the youth. As found by other scholars, the establishment of multi-sectoral or stakeholder alliances, in the discourse of equitable rights and participation, is of paramount importance (Berten & Leisering, 2017; Chambers & Kopstein, 2009). Similarly, this article explores a multi-stakeholder approach towards engendering pro-youth, consensual and progressive policies. This approach considers the mainstreaming of institutions and policies. Through establishing the status of policy frameworks that promote empowerment amongst youth in Zimbabwe, this article contributes towards the understanding of the existential link between policy and development, within the context of youth socio-economic empowerment.

Studies in Ghana and Kenya have noted, with concern, the conspicuous absence of youth empowerment, even in policies that are meant to advance youth interests. It is noted that such a weakness will prevent proper accountability and commitment on the part of policymakers, at both national and local levels (Ile & Boadu, 2018). Youths have been mere spectators and not active partners. This translates to a policy package devoid of youths’ real interests as their voices are often excluded. This article builds on such evidence and uses the sustainable livelihood lens to reflect on how policies and institutions can best be used to engender a consensual and pro-youth empowerment policy. Therefore, this study is critical in that it unpacks and foregrounds issues that are in line with promoting equality and ending poverty in the world.

2. Literature review
The experiences of youths in various socioeconomic and political conditions, and the outcomes of these experiences, largely define youths. This study focuses on the out-of-school category, i.e. 18 to 35, which, according to the Zimbabwean Constitution of 2013, is also classified as adult (Bhebhe et al., 2015, p. 52). This category of the population is arguably underrepresented in policy formulation as well as policy implementation. Even such initiatives as Indigenization and Economic Empowerment have not significantly transformed rural youths’ access to strategic economic resources, such as land. This is despite the fact that they represent the most productive and reproductive age category in the entire population.

Youth empowerment means youths gain not only greater extrinsic control but also a greater intrinsic capability—greater self-confidence—and an inner transformation of their consciousness, enabling them to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology (Sen & Mukherjee, 2013, p. 7). Youth empowerment is critical because the youth stage marks a transition from being economically dependent to being productive and economically self-reliant, and taking on dependents in adulthood (Chalasani, 2013). According to the Africa Commission (2009), in Africa, young people are the majority as they constitute up to 70% of the continent’s population. Youths, who constitute the bulk of the economically active demography, are correspondingly the engine of growth and development in any society (Idike & Eme, 2015). Youths play a critical role in the transition of society from one generation to the next and, for this reason, societies must be conscious of the imperatives of youth empowerment, not only to meet youths’ developmental needs but also as a way of preparing them to be the next generation of leaders—a move that conforms to the popular sentiment that today’s young people are the leaders of tomorrow.

Further to the above, peace—or the absence of it—is in part dependent on the socio-economic status of the youth. Disgruntled youths are likely to cause social instability as they fight to claim a share of economic resources or opportunities. The xenophobic violence that regularly engulfs South Africa, for example, is a result of youths feeling disgruntled and excluded, with the ensuing violence being a means of venting their existential anger (Mamabolo, 2015). For these reasons, youth economic empowerment is a critical area that every nation should invest in. This suggests that policies and institutions need to ensure that they advance the interests of the youth as a disadvantaged group. In other words, there is need to enact deliberate policies that spearhead creation of sustainable livelihoods for disempowered youths, who are rural youth in the context of this study. Given a conducive policy environment with the requisite implementation of youth
projects, youths’ livelihoods can be enhanced and supported to allow their emancipation. There are a number of ways through which youth empowerment can be realized. These, according to Chalasani (2013), include high school education, vocational education or training, building awareness, information sharing, employment creation, and fostering self-employment.

Previous related studies have noted the strong relationship that exists between empowerment and sustainable livelihoods, as emphasized by the SLA’s asset pentagon (Dutta & Guchhait-Barddhaman, 2018; Udoh et al., 2017). However, the emphasis on the livelihood asset pentagon overlooks not only the role of policies, institutions and processes in determining access, control and use of assets, but also the role of choice and interaction of different livelihood strategies (Scoones & Wolmer, 2003, p. 4). Bureaucrats, who work for the government and for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), often influence the empowerment outcomes among those youths who are actively involved in self-help projects. This reflects the idea that individuals, through their institutions as well as through legislation, are critical in the emancipation of ordinary rural youth. Therefore, it is important to understand the issues of rights, power and institutions, as they influence policy which has long-term implications for sustainable livelihoods (Carney, 2002, p. 28). This study, through its focus on mainstreaming pro-youth policies, also seeks to determine the implications of adopting a multi-stakeholder approach in the implementation of youth empowerment policies.

Youths experience various controls in their attempt to realize socio-economic emancipation. These controls not only emanate from limitations in the operational environment but are also imposed by policy implementers. Scoones and Wolmer (2003, p. 5) argue that poor people in Africa face a “complex and messy institutional context” in establishing livelihoods, and that “lines of authority and control are constructed in overlapping and often contested institutional settings”. Significant positive change or impacts cannot occur unless interventions are directly integrated within the local institutions and structures of governance (Toner & Franks, 2006, p. 91). This revelation clearly demonstrates the need for mainstreaming pro-youth policies so that rural youths are “liberated” from the shackles of poverty and exploitation. The integration of efforts therefore calls for organisations to work in harmony towards this drive.

The policy framework that does not deliberately seek to promote the welfare of rural youths as a distinct group is inimical to the realization of their emancipation. The rural context imposes challenges such as limited markets, fewer employment opportunities and prospects, higher prices of inputs, and neglect by policy implementers. Within this policy environment, youths in the urban areas of Zimbabwe are likely to have a competitive edge over their rural counterparts.

Understanding policies, institutions and processes, and their relationship with governance, rights and power, helps to explain why people choose certain livelihood strategies, and helps to identify where strengths lie and where restrictions, barriers and constraints occur (Scoones, 1998, p. 12). An analysis of policies, institutions and processes also helps to explain social processes that could influence livelihood sustainability among the rural youth in Zimbabwe. It also explains the environment within which the youth livelihood discourse is located, while also helping to establish how a more enabling environment for sustainable livelihoods could be achieved, i.e. how policy implementers could affect interventions.

Previous studies done in Zimbabwe have principally focused on youth employment creation through the provisioning of start-up kits (Bomani et al., 2015; Zindiye et al., 2012). Most of them foreground the need for business incubation as a means to support entrepreneurship. Integrated Skills Outreach Programmes (ISOPs) are outreach skills-training initiatives normally implemented in rural areas to equip rural youths with skills such as crafting of coffee tables, bee keeping, soldering leaking pots, brick moulding, market gardening and so forth (Murinda, 2014, p. 23). Scholars such as Nyika (2016) have looked at the ISOPs and their capacity to transform livelihoods. In addressing literature gaps, and by contributing to the discourse on the socio-economic
empowerment of rural youth in Zimbabwe, this study calls particular attention to the need to mainstream pro-youth policies and institutions.

Zimbabwe’s youth empowerment programmes are embedded in its National Youth Policy (NYP). The policy was first introduced in 2000 and later revised and republished in 2013. It outlines strategies designed by the Zimbabwean government in its quest to empower the local youths. This policy covers the development strategies that the government and other private organisations seek to implement to ensure that the youth in Zimbabwe are emancipated. One of the emphases is on training the youths so that they develop some vocational skills. Training is widely recognized for playing a role in equipping the beneficiaries with skills and in capacity development, which in turn not only enhance employability but also prepare beneficiaries for self-employment. Training initiatives also promote the well-being of society’s vulnerable groups (UNDP, 1998), reduce household vulnerability, and enhance earning capacity, self-sufficiency and livelihood diversification (De La Rocha & Grinspun, 2001). International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2008) is of the view that training initiatives promote the decent work agenda and improve the quality of jobs, which in turn improve the welfare and livelihoods of people. As a result, the government considers training to be one of the key areas that its empowerment policy should address.

The NYP document recommends youth involvement in all stages of empowerment programmes, from planning and decision-making to implementation and evaluation (National Youth Policy, 2013). It also synthesizes the idea of mainstreaming youth concerns in national programmes. Accordingly, it seeks to “systematically integrate youth issues into all policies, plans, programmes and strategies at all levels and within all sectors and institutions of government, NGOs and the private sector” (National Youth Policy, 2013, p. 10). This emphasizes the need to institute a consensual, collaborative and progressive pro-youth development agenda for Zimbabwe. However, the reality on the ground is that centrally planned policies have no input from the youths themselves. Charumbira and Chituri (2013) support this assertion and argue that policy formulation and implementation devoid of grassroots consultations often result in policies that fail to cascade down to the intended beneficiaries.

Paying lip-service to the pro-youth development agenda creates implementation gaps, as well as disillusionment amongst the youth (Gaventa & Runciman, 2016). In Zimbabwe, the National Youth Policy (2013, p. 27) suggests that the government, as the duty bearer, has set up some mechanisms to facilitate youth policy mainstreaming, with specific mention of strategies, such as making “provision for the appointment of youth representatives or focal persons in all government departments to ensure that youth issues are mainstreamed in all facets of development”. However, the implementation of this strategy has had little effect. This is evidenced by the majority of Zimbabwean youth who are still excluded from the mainstream economy.

Other than the NYP, the government and the donor community have also initiated various programmes which aim to engage youths in a variety of projects (Ncube, 2015; Nkonya et al., 2017). These include the Graduate Entrepreneurship Employment Programme, Kurera/Ukondla Youth Fund (administered through Central African Building Society), Training for Rural Economic Empowerment, Youth Empowerment Fund, Wealth Creation Fund (administered by the Stanbic, Commercial Bank of Zimbabwe and Industrial Development Bank of Zimbabwe banks) and the Skills for Youth Employment and Rural Development Programme (Bhebhe et al., 2015). These programmes are seen as critical for the promotion of self-reliance, critical thinking and wellbeing amongst the youth. Institutions designed to enhance the welfare of youths in rural areas, such as the Zimbabwe Youth Council, are also critical for how livelihood outcomes can be shaped in rural Zimbabwe. This reveals that there is need for a nexus between and among policies, institutions and processes that can facilitate the socio-economic empowerment of rural youths.
3. Theoretical framework
The study was grounded in the SLA, which enables an assessment of the degree to which institutions and policies can enhance socio-economic empowerment. Youth socio-economic empowerment is understood as enhancing the status of young people so that they build on their competencies and capabilities for life. This means ensuring their full participation as active citizens in social and economic spheres (Seneviratne, 2017). This study theoretically conceptualizes youth socio-economic empowerment as a process or a means to an end (Tandon, 2016). By presenting empowerment as a process, the study focuses on the decisions and actions made and how they influence or enhance the ability and capacity to transform their socio-economic and livelihood situations (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). The study follows the thinking that youth empowerment should increase young people’s ability to act autonomously, and increase self-reliance (Anderson & Funnell, 2010). The anticipated outcomes of the empowerment process are to eliminate exclusion of young people, to enhance their access to and control of productive resources, and to enhance their participation in activities that affect their lives socially and economically (Tandon, 2016). To better understand factors, institutions and processes, and their relationship with governance, rights and power (Scoones, 1998), that affect or shape youth empowerment, the study used the SLA as an analytical tool. The SLA was chosen because, as a minimum measure of success, empowerment must achieve sustainable or secure livelihoods for the vulnerable group, which is the youth in this case.

The SLA is an enhanced way of thinking about the objectives, scope and priorities of development that aims to meet the needs of the poor by looking at their vulnerability context and exploring their access to critical livelihood assets (Ashley & Carney, 1999). The SLA is a holistic approach that tries to capture, and provide a means to understanding, the fundamental causes and dimensions of poverty (Krantz, 2001). In this study, we used the SLA to assess the link between poverty among the youth and how deliberate policy interventions can enable youth socio-economic empowerment. The SLA tries to sketch out the relationships between different aspects (e.g., causes, manifestations) of poverty, allowing for more effective prioritisation of action at an operational level and resulting in improved livelihoods (Krantz, 2001). This analytical approach is therefore critical for a study that looks at policies and institutions that are working towards poverty eradication among the youth.

Adato and Meinzen-Dick (2002) used the SLA to assess the impact of agricultural research on poverty. They argued that structures and processes influence how people utilize their asset portfolio to achieve different livelihood strategies by influencing their vulnerabilities. Structures generally include public, private and/or non-governmental organisations that deliver goods and services, administer policies and perform different functions. Processes can be political, economic, social and/or cultural mechanisms that govern structures and their interaction with individuals. Another study by Bosch (2019) looked at institutional processes and organizational structures in Madagascar. He concluded that research and extension are critical in promoting positive livelihood outcomes.

The SLA emphasizes the role of policies and institutions in constructing livelihood assets, and our need to understand how these factors shape, affect or influence livelihoods made this framework relevant to this study. According to Davies (1997, p. 24) “institutions are the social cement which links stakeholders to access capital of different kinds as well as being a means of exercising power”. By that logic, institutions are responsible for defining the gateways through which positive or negative livelihood adaptation is passed on. In this study, institutions are conceptualised as organisations or departments, in both the public and private sectors, that formulate and implement policies, legislation and regulations affecting youths’ livelihoods. The hierarchy of functions implies that the administrative system is heavily structured in subordinate services and management positions, with the possibility of appealing from the lower instance to the higher instance; in general, this structure is monocratic and not collegial. The widening of the chasm between social policy and its effective implementation (via institutional deliverables), can thus be understood as a
function of the existential threats to bureaucratic efficacy (Weber, 1978). Several scholars are also emphatic about the importance of institutions, arguing that they are the social cement that provides a means of exercising power while also linking stakeholders to various forms of capital (Davies, 1997; Saha, 2019).

While this study is not an institutional inquiry, the literature on bureaucracy informs us how institutional deliverables, i.e. the extent to which institutions and policies enhance socio-economic empowerment, can be at threat from the abovementioned internal factors (Masuku & Rama, 2020). Lipsky (1980, p. 3) also commented on bureaucrats, saying “although they are normally regarded as low-level employees, the actions of most public service employees constitute the services delivered by government.” It is these public service officials who interact with the youths in the district and therefore affect the outcomes of the youth projects. Their individual decisions constitute agency policy and therefore impact, either positively or negatively, on the livelihood outcomes of the youths. Weber (1978) concurs and, through his theory on bureaucracy, he argues that the rationality and efficacy of such institutions (a measure of institutional deliverables) are often contingent upon the competency of street level bureaucrats, whom are at the frontline of policy and program implementation (Brauns, 2016). The power of bureaucrats therefore lies in their right by definition to determine which clients are entitled to which benefits—and when. This reinforces the idea of power relations that the institutional analysis in the SLA brings out. In this study, young people’s access to livelihood capital is conceptualized as the means to exercising power, or a form of empowerment.

According to Scoones (1998), understanding institutional processes facilitates the identification of restrictions (or barriers) and opportunities (or “gateways”) to sustainable livelihoods. In Mwenezi, the study identified how the ministerial district officials and NGOs are mostly responsible for implementing youth socio-economic (empowerment) policies, while the youths are actively engaged in sustainable livelihood strategy negotiations with local stakeholders. An institutional analysis, defined as the process of analysing the strengths and weaknesses of various power holders interacting with youths doing self-help projects, helped shed light on the social processes, which underlie livelihood sustainability in rural areas. For that reason, the SLA was ideal for the study on Mwenezi as it helped the researchers gain an insight into the existential social relations and institutional power dynamics, synonymous with youths’ self-help initiatives. It is also noted that the youth projects suffer from the shocks and trends that affect government programmes, such as droughts, economic challenges and floods in the district. Therefore, the SLA is critical because it enables an analyses of how such shocks impact youth empowerment.

4. Methodology
This qualitative study used secondary data from documents such as the National Youth Policy of 2013, the Indigenization and Economic Empowerment Act of 2008 and documented research. The study also integrated primary data from semi-structured key informant interviews held between September 2017 and March 2018 in Mwenezi District. This district was chosen because it is one of the poorest in the country and it is very remote. Therefore, it enabled the researchers to assess the impact of information gaps on youth empowerment. A total of thirty participants were interviewed, comprising twenty-five individual youths and five key informants. The interviewees completed informed consent forms before participating in the interviews. The key informants included three key officials in the Ministry of Youth, the Ministry of Women Affairs and the Ministry of Small Enterprises and Development, and workers in non-governmental organisations involved in youth empowerment in the district, namely, Mwenezi Development and Training Centre (MDTC) and Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED). Twenty-five individual youths were purposefully selected according to the type of projects they engaged in. This was done to ensure that various projects were represented. Of these individuals, fifteen were female and ten were male. The reason for purposeful selection was to ensure that youths were selected from those involved in projects. The selection was found to be rich in information about youth empowerment policy implementation. After interviewing twenty-five youths, the researchers felt that no more new data were being
generated so a level of saturation had been reached. Interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from interviews. The main themes were the need for a multi-sectoral approach in implementing youth empowerment policy, the gap between policy formulation and implementation, the need for transparency and accountability amongst policy stakeholders, and the challenges involved in policy implementation.

5. Findings and discussion
This study aimed to probe the experiences of street-level bureaucrats responsible for the implementation of youth empowerment policies in rural Zimbabwe. This section therefore presents and discusses the results of data obtained from the semi-structured key informant interviews that were undertaken between September 2017 and March 2018 in Mwenezi District.

5.1. Youth empowerment programmes in rural Zimbabwe

5.1.1. Implementing national youth policy: multi-sectoral partnerships
Government, church organisations and NGOs have collaborated in various programmes within Mwenezi District, in line with the idea of mainstreaming youth policies and ensuring that they engender socio-economic empowerment for the unemployed rural youth. The programmes were implemented from July 2016 and were continuing at the time of the interviews. Training started in January 2017, especially at Mushagashe because they follow the school calendar of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The study found that the three key ministries were coordinating with Plan International, Care International, CAMFED and MDTC in the implementation of government programmes targeting youth in Mwenezi District. However, because the respective ministries had different result focus areas, the emphasis and target or scope was varied. The major empowerment programmes offered to rural youths in Mwenezi involved:

- Training in various vocational skills (building, motor mechanic, welding, hotel and catering, tailoring, cosmetology, driving and agriculture).
- Entrepreneurship training with courses like bookkeeping (record keeping), stocktaking, marketing and finance sourcing.
- Funding of youth income generating projects.
- Implementing youth advocacy and leadership development, by the Zimbabwe Youth Council.
- Coordinating awareness campaigns on health and well-being, by National Aids Council and Ministry of Health.
- Implementing Indigenization and Economic Empowerment, under the community share ownership trusts.
- Registering youth clubs and associations, under the Zimbabwe Youth Council.

Whilst the acquisition of skills was in keeping with the promotion of sustainable livelihoods, youth were not adequately supported to implement their projects. This resulted in idle skills amongst the youth who, although equipped with cosmetology, motor mechanic and dressmaking skills, still had no start-up capital to put their skills to practice. The literacy levels also militated against the implementation of entrepreneurial skills, such as bookkeeping, because of youths’ limited comprehension of financial matters. The main gap was clearly the funding of these programmes, hence the projects’ sustainability after the NGOs pulled out was questioned. Mukuhlani (2014) raised similar sentiments in reporting a study on youth empowerment through small business development in the peri-urban areas in Gweru. As such, skills alone (human capital), in the absence of funding (financial capital), did not translate to complete empowerment and hence the need to ensure that youths have access to other important livelihood assets to realize total emancipation.

Ministry officials indicated that, in implementing National Youth Policy, they often mobilize youth, train the youth, source funding for their programs, while also doing follow-ups to ensure
Table 1. Training provided for youth in three wards in 2017

| Type of project training | Ward     | Number of beneficiaries |
|--------------------------|----------|-------------------------|
| Building                 | 1, 2 and 5 | 62                     |
| Motor mechanics          | 5        | 21                      |
| Cosmetology              | 1, 2 and 5 | 73                     |
| Hotel and Catering       | 5        | 25                      |
| Tailoring                | 1, 2 and 5 | 69                     |
| Agriculture              | 2        | 20                      |
| Driving                  | 1, 2 and 5 | 30                     |
| **Total**                |          | **300**                 |

Source: Interview with the Ministry of Youth Training Officer at Neshuro Offices (October 2017).

the effective implementation of projects. In supporting income-generating projects for the unemployed youth, the government participants also mentioned how their ministries are responsible for coordinating responses through collaborations with NGOs. The research findings also confirmed that the three ministries teamed up with Plan International in the training of three hundred youth in 2017, as illustrated in Table 1.

Whilst this looks impressive, numbers alone do not always translate to total socio-economic transformation. The information given by the officer pertaining to the number of participants in the given wards was not disaggregated according to gender, but the majority were females because most of the male youths in the district preferred to cross the border into South Africa rather than engage in entrepreneurship projects. The study noted that some of the graduates or beneficiaries had not positively benefited from taking part in some of these empowerment activities, and their livelihood situations remained unchanged. For example, beneficiaries of cosmetology, hotel and catering, and motor mechanic training, amongst other training, noted that what they were trained in was not relevant since these services are not available in their rural context. To utilize these skills, one must move to an urban centre, which is against one of the core objectives of rural empowerment, i.e. to empower rural people and their communities so as to curb rural to urban migration. However, the reality on the ground is that centrally planned policies that have no input from the youth themselves bear little results. One respondent noted, “I am now a qualified cosmetologist but there are no opportunities in this township where I stay.” Other issues raised by the youths who benefitted from the more relevant skills or trades, such as horticulture, were that the market was not readily available and thus they were forced to either ferry their produce to town (which attracted additional costs), or sacrifice their profits by selling them at giveaway prices. This inadvertently weakened the livelihood outcomes, despite the youths having acquired the requisite skills.

In order to ensure transparency and accountability, the officers at the district documented evidence of projects that were funded, as well as the beneficiaries of such projects. They also recorded the sources of funds given to trained youths in the district. One participant mentioned that cumulative statistics were recorded in reports to capture the evidence of supported projects. The Ministry of Youth representative had this to say:

“Alongside vocational skills training, once the youth is trained, we can issue loans if the funds are available. We have loans as the government from the Ministry of finance. We also have loans and start up kits from other stakeholders like non-governmental organisations who also help us a lot in the training exercise so that these youth can start their own business.”

The other two interview participants indicated that they did not work with the youth per se and therefore could not be expected to have finer details. However, they indicated that amongst their
clients, there were people who fall into the category of youth. The Women Affairs representative said:

“In 2017, we have managed to do eight training programmes. Each training programme had forty participants training at a time. The ministry has also trained the beneficiaries in Income and Savings Lending Schemes (ISALS).”

Such training was understood to be supported in the policy documents of the concerned ministries. This reinforced the argument that mainstreaming of youth policies is a critical step towards engendering socio-economic empowerment among the youth. Acquisition of skills is something the youth esteem highly and it gives them the means with which to sustain their livelihoods. This view is also shared by Moore (2015) who argues that youth need such skills in order to make informed choices and have the assets (knowledge, confidence, networks, and physical and financial resources) to transition successfully into sustainable work for themselves or others. These are also elements that are articulated in the SLA (Ashley & Carney, 1999).

5.1.2. Training and skills development

The sustainable livelihoods framework is built on the premise that individual youths need assets to achieve a positive livelihood outcome that is also sustainable. Training, knowledge and skills, which, together with good health and the ability to labour, are conceptualized as human capital by the livelihoods approach, are examples of assets important to achieve desired livelihood outcomes (Petersen & Pedersen, 2010). The interviewed participants from the ministries applauded the role of NGOs in ensuring that youth vocational skills training became a reality. It is also prudent to note that such interventions from civil society were only possible thanks to the conducive environment created by the central government, i.e., allowing the operation of non-state actors in districts such as Mwenezi.

The arrangement is compatible with the SLA, which gives pre-eminence to policies and the institutional environment, for positive livelihood outcomes. Street-level bureaucrats from both the government and the corporate world therefore constitute the principal partners whose involvement is key in implementing youth livelihood programs. It is prudent to understand that youth in rural areas may have limited power to influence their external environment and must depend on the government to support them. This is where the SLA becomes useful, because it provides a way to incorporate a systemic and holistic way of describing the factors that affect the livelihoods of the poor (Petersen & Pedersen, 2010, p. 6).

Through Plan International (as the lead funding organisation), youths from various wards were mobilized to Mushagashe Training Centre where the actual training was undertaken. As illustrated in this scenario, the challenges to youths’ socio-economic aspirations can be successfully overcome through what Verma and Petersen (2018, p. 467) term “multi-stakeholder partnerships”. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are collaborations that take on board youth interest groups, the private sector and the government in enhancing youth emancipation. Government ministries are part of the structures and institutions that shape the livelihood outcomes among the youth. Indeed, they determine ownership rights and laws to secure the rights of the individuals in a sustainable livelihood framework (Petersen & Pedersen, 2010). Contrary to the NYP talks about marshalling the requisite resources necessary for undertaking youth programmes, evidence in Mwenezi showed that the youth were mainly relying on donor sponsorship to undergo vocational training.

The government key informants reiterated that the training of youth in different life skills in the district was part of the drive to unlock opportunities for the rural youth in Zimbabwe. However, they had divergent views on how to go about the process as they represented different ministries with different visions. For example, the Women Affairs (Gender) representative emphasized the aspect of women emancipation with little regard to age, thereby excluding the male section of
society (as well as not focusing on the 18–35 age category, i.e. the main delineation of the study). Further to this, the participant from the Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) argued that their prerogative had nothing to do with youth but rather, the capacity building of Small and Medium Enterprises. The SMEs Ministry participant, however, acknowledged that the bulk of their clientele comprised people classifiable as youth (18–35 years) (African Union, 2006; National Youth Policy, 2013, p. 5).

5.2. Youth socio-economic empowerment: implementation

Findings indicated that the failure to involve rural youth in the policy formulation process, as well as in the policy implementation stage, has adversely affected the effective implementation of such policies. Of the twenty-five youth respondents, fifteen said that they did not know the contents of the National Youth Policy document. This evidence reinforces the argument that top-down externally driven interventions are unable to meet the demand for socio-economic empowerment. Thus, youth as beneficiaries need to participate in the policy formulation and implementation so that their interests are considered. This line of argument is also shared by the critical social empowerment theorists who jettison the idea of programming for the youth without their involvement (Jennings et al., 2006). Recommendations were that, to make the policy relevant and appealing to the intended beneficiaries, there was a need to make the policy-making consensual.

5.2.1. Civil society or Local NGO interventions

It was generally agreed among the respondents that implementing youth projects in Mwenezi District is a feasible solution to the challenge of youth unemployment. Civil society (i.e. local NGO) respondents echoed the same sentiments as government ministry informants, in that they emphasized the need to mainstream youth empowerment policy. They also agreed that pro-youth development initiatives could improve livelihoods of the whole family. One respondent from Plan International said:

“These are the people who are still energetic and they are at their most productive stage. Supporting youth will create opportunities for them as well as those of their families. Our organization therefore takes pride in supporting youth entrepreneurship through vocational skills training.”

Similar sentiments were echoed by the respondent from CAMFED who said female youth need to be given start-up capital to initiate income-generating projects. In concurrence with work on rural Zimbabwe by Chiweshe et al. (2015), the CAMFED respondent said that traditionally females were oppressed and denied socio-economic opportunities, hence the need to mainstream youth empowerment policies. She added,

“Whilst policies address youth as one common group, female youth have been subjected to exclusive exploitation that demands affirmative action to advance their interests.”

From a comparison of the two excerpts from the interview, it is discernible that the organisations conceptualize institutional or policy mainstreaming differently from government. This is because most of the government programmes follow a gender-blind approach without discriminating whether a beneficiary is male or female. Yet an organisation like CAMFED was specifically formed to address the concerns of girls and female youth. What is common, though, is that the NGO sector also campaigns for the reinforcement of structures to ensure that the welfare of the youth is guaranteed.

Findings on how the concerns of the rural youth are being addressed by NGOs’ projects indicate some marked variances. The CAMFED respondent revealed that the concerns of the rural female youth were largely being addressed. The organization helped the beneficiaries with capital, which has positively influenced the female youth who typically encounter financial constraints in implementing self-help projects. One female participant said,
“I am really thankful to CAMFED for they gave me the start-up capital to buy a sewing machine as well as garments to start my sewing project.”

Youth concerns were highlighted as having been addressed through:

- Accessing start-up capital through loans which are not charged any interest.
- Gaining financial independence and emancipation.
- Experiencing freedom from masculine oppression and dominance.
- Increasing self-esteem among female youth beneficiaries.
- Finding a voice to speak their minds within their villages.
- Experiencing business expansion and employment creation.
- Gaining critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

On the other hand, the key informant from MDTC indicated some limitations in meeting the concerns of the youth, including that most of the projects, such as tailoring, require markets. He also highlighted the challenge of finding funding, especially start-up capital, saying that funding needed for the procurement of materials has been a challenge. As mentioned above, these challenges render many skills obsolete amongst the youth, as without requisite funding, the skilled youth remain idle.

With regard to changing the policy framework, the civil society participants’ responses indicated a lot of scepticism. They said that their “hands are tied” as their mandate is to complement the government rather than compete with the government. However, they expressed the need to embrace the rural youth as an independent population with its own special interests, different from those in urban areas. They also suggested that training be extended to the unemployed youth in the rural communities, to put them on a par with their counterparts in the contemporary world. Furthermore, they highlighted the need to integrate critical thinking or problem-solving into the youth training curriculum. In a similar vein, the study identified a need to prioritize practical subjects at school so that, when leaving formal school, the youth will be in a position to implement the self-help projects (even without any funding or further training).

The respondents, however, expressed ignorance of government legislations that promote youth empowerment. They could not give examples of provisions that need to be emphasized or removed. One respondent said,

“Unfortunately on that aspect ... umm I would rather refer you to the relevant ministry. I am not sure of the correct provisions.”

Whilst the NGO respondents shared the idea of mainstreaming policies, their emphasis differed, as has already been highlighted. This is because the CAMFED respondent indicated that their organization targets female youth, yet the MDTC respondent said that their focus is on youth with the drive to be trained in entrepreneurship and later on to initiate the relevant projects. Accordingly, the MDTC do not emphasize gender as important among their beneficiaries. This signifies the differences in organisations and how they seek to capture the interests of the youths and meet the policy objectives of youth empowerment.

5.2.2. Government interventions
It was shared by the interviewees that many youths appear to be reluctant and defiant instead of being forthcoming, mostly because the projects are driven from outside their communities. Active participation by the rural youth is necessary for critical social empowerment among the youth. This is defined as processes and contexts through which youth engage in actions that create change in organizational, institutional, and societal policies, structures, values, norms, and images (Jennings
et al., 2006). The importance of participation is supported by Trivelli, C & Morel, J. 2019. Rural Youth Inclusion, Participation and Empowerment. Papers of the (2019), who argued that it has been at the core of pro-youth strategies because it improves the delivery of results of interventions and policies targeting youth. Government ministry officials said that the policies need to be accompanied by resources to make them more effective. The resources singled out include material, financial and human resources. The researchers noted that the government personnel might be qualified for their work but did not have the resources to implement the policy provisions concerning the rural youth. In order to improve the effectiveness of policy and enhance awareness among the beneficiaries, the importance of adequate resource provisioning was emphasised.

In the light of the above, the interviewees (key policy implementers) suggested the adoption of measures to ensure that the self-help projects being implemented by government become workable and promote sustainable livelihood for the youth. This was done within the confines of a policy framework created by the government in a bid to cushion youth against the vagaries of unemployment and poverty. In the wake of an existential lack of requisite skills amongst the youth to sustain viable projects, with the end result being the abandonment of previously initiated projects, interventions to mitigate against this included:

- Selecting people or mobilising people to engage in projects that they have skills in and can implement.
- Running training workshops on entrepreneurship and business management.
- Encouraging youth to do projects that they have interest in.
- Doing away with the idea of giving cash for the self-help projects (giving cash might tempt the beneficiaries to use the cash for other unrelated purposes; hence giving equipment was seen as an alternative).
- Supporting beneficiaries who have running projects rather than those in need of start-up capital.
- Doing feasibility studies before the projects are given some funds.

These measures are understood to be progressive in the sense that they promote the efficiency of the youth projects. According to the respondents, ever since this paradigm shift the number of projects being abandoned has significantly reduced. In a sense, they said promoting the marketing and diversification of activities helped the youth to sustain their lives and helped in the acquisition of livestock, immovable property and cash. Training also equipped the youth with critical skills, increased their self-esteem, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. These findings are in keeping with the conclusions made by Charumbira and Chituri (2013) about the efficacy of trained youths. Whilst key attributes, such as critical thinking and improved self-esteem, could be difficult to authenticate, the key informants were in agreement that policy driven youth entrepreneurship leads to the acquisition of such skills.

5.3. Challenges in implementing youth empowerment policy

Youth socio-economic empowerment is premised on the available policies and how these policies are implemented. Although the key informants acknowledged that available policies and policy documents were sound and attractively worded, mention was also made of how it was unfortunate that the potential to fully empower youth was limited by a myriad of challenges. These challenges included limited financial resources, political interference from the ZANU PF officials, defaults in paying back the loans, and looting by public officers. There is a feeling that youth beneficiaries have rarely been from the poverty stricken, remote and rural areas. Rather, it is claimed that patronage and nepotism have affected access to the youth empowerment fund (Warikandwa & Osode, 2017, p. 23). Thus, the policy initiative to give financial support to the youths has been riddled with some controversies from the onset. Despite these misgivings, the
participants said the policies are nevertheless enhancing youth socio-economic empowerment mainly through:

- Providing the opportunity for training in vocational skills.
- Supporting youth projects with funding modalities.
- Guaranteeing a conducive operational environment for project implementation.
- Running awareness campaigns and information dissemination.
- Providing a sound institutional framework and active political administrative and technical support.
- Running a number of programmes out of these policies, e.g. youth advocacy and leadership development.

Whilst there was an argument in support of the youth policy’s contribution to youth socio-economic empowerment by researchers (Mambo, 2010; Murinda, 2014, p. 25) who suggested that these programmes targeting the youth have nurtured some successful youth projects, especially the Zimbabwe Youth Employment Network, some reservations were also expressed by the key informants. Although some of the programmes were not aiming to implement the national youth policy, it was expected that youths in the country would benefit from such initiatives. Respondents indicated that the Indigenization and Economic Empowerment Act (IEEA) was not yielding much result for the youth in Mwenezi. Although Section 3(1) (a) of the IEEA (Chapter 14:33) of 2007 stipulates that “at least fifty-one percent of the shares of every public company and any other business shall be owned by indigenous Zimbabweans” (Warikandwa & Osode, 2017, p. 2), the viability of the IEEA is almost non-existent. Participants complained that most of the youth in the district did not even know about the existence of the IEEA, and the Ministry of Youth respondent lamented how the revenue realized from Community Share Ownership Schemes, such as the Mwenezana Estate (a sugar cane plantation in the district), were too little to bring any significant change.

Three key informants from different ministries reported similar challenges inhibiting the smooth implementation of the youth empowerment policy. It was revealed that implementing policies was not easy, given how there were contestations that arose from the divergence in focus areas or scopes amongst stakeholders. The respondent from the Ministry of SMEs said,

“We struggle to find the youth when we want to train them. Conflicting programmes sometimes fall on exactly the same day. This happens on most Wednesdays when people will not be attending their fields or other chores ...”

Another challenge inhibiting the smooth implementation of youth policy is the disbursement of youth loans through banks, yet most of the youth do not have bank accounts. The distance travelled to get to the nearest bank is also discouraging, given the cost of transport from remote rural areas. Mwenezi district consists of former commercial farms, which have poorly serviced transport and telephone networks.

5.3.1. Political interference

The interviewee from the Ministry of SMEs argued that the implementation of the youth empowerment programme is politicized, because youths received financial support on the basis of political affiliation. It was argued that members of the ruling ZANU PF determine who gets what, when and how. Such power dynamics are clear evidence that structural limitations determined the youth livelihood outcomes. Thus, policies and institutions, as emphasized in the SLA, determined the ability of youth to access livelihood opportunities in Mwenezi District. The three respondents were sceptical of how the policies can suit local communal environments, all with uniquely divergent attributes of their own. Whilst the officers acknowledged that the policy is clearly worded, they said the government should be more serious, especially about the allocation of
funds for the execution of self-help projects in the district. Political interference and a lack of resources were mentioned as some of the impediments to the effective implementation of programmes.

It was also claimed that officials from the governing ZANU PF party usually interfered in projects implemented by Ministry officials, as well as in programmes funded by NGOs. This constituted a threat to institutional or bureaucratic efficacy, particularly the aspects Weber (1978) termed “impersonality” and “rules and regulations”. Other scholars such as Alexander and McGregor (2013) also identified such interference as common amongst African political parties, with resources and opportunities often being exploited for political mileage. Evidence of this interference was most notable when it came to shortlisting or selecting beneficiaries for funding or training programs. In Lesotho, interference from political leadership was also found to be a problem incapacitating poverty reduction programmes (Hapazari & Hapazari, 2019). In the case of Zimbabwe, the ZANU PF party was equally blamed during the interviews for demanding that its loyal followers be given all the opportunities.

5.3.2. Limited resources: challenges in securing funding for youth projects

Regarding the issues of how youth policy can be mainstreamed to ensure that projects are successfully implemented, the three key informants expressed different views. Responses were that their ministries have different sources of finance (Youth Fund, Women Development Fund and SMEs fund). There was potential for an individual youth to get financial support from the three different ministries. However, the Ministry of Women Affairs and Ministry of SMEs were not mandated to implement the National Youth Policy. Therefore, female youths who benefit in the two ministries will do so not on the basis of being youth. The Ministry of Youth is the one mandated to implement the National Youth Policy and the respondent from this ministry indicated that they get financial support from the treasury (money is allocated to them by the Ministry of Finance). They also have funding partners, like Old Mutual life assurance company, which usually disburse money to the youth in the form of loans. As indicated above, female youth can also get financial assistance from the Ministry of Women Affairs. The respondent in that ministry highlighted that up until November 2017, around 41 female groups had benefited from the Women Development Fund. For example, the Rutenga Quarry Group got equipment worth US$10,000. The Ministry of SMEs highlighted that the Oil Producing and Exporting Countries Fund for International Development gave them US$7.8 million for three poverty-stricken provinces, namely Masvingo, Manicaland and Matabeleland North. The proceeds were thereafter disbursed to both cooperatives and individuals undertaking community development projects, such as livestock production, horticultural projects, metal fabrication, wood carving and tailoring projects, among others. All three key informants shared the view that the introduction of self-help projects, funded by NGOs and the government, was indeed part of the youth empowerment policy.

Although the key informants in this study largely concurred that the national policy provides for the training of youth in various vocational skills such as carpentry, metal fabrication and garment construction (National Youth Policy, 2013, p. 15), the government lacks the requisite capacity to fund such training. In Mwenezi District, policy implementers helped fund critical youth programs that included, but were not confined to, vocational skills training. Thus, as stated above, the Ministry of Youth and the Ministry of SMEs have had to heavily rely on financial assistance from the NGO community (Bornstein, 2004). Findings in this study also indicate that, although quite willing, youths were unable to pay for the available entrepreneurial skills training. In response to this, the Ministry of Youth and the Ministry of SMEs explored strategic partnerships with willing partners from the NGO community, and committed to ensuring that such training was successful. Also, youths have had to rely on family, friends, government loans, grants and NGOs to finance their self-help projects, such as dressmaking, poultry production, carpentry and horticultural production. The assistance of family and friends, in the context of the livelihoods approach, constituted part of social capital, while loans from government and other funders made up
financial capital, both of which were regarded as important resources, critical in the creation of sustainable livelihoods.

Although the respondents acknowledged the critical role played by the corporate world, they were quick to note that such support was limited to specific wards or genders, which adversely affected the progress of policy implementation in rural Zimbabwe. Also mentioned were challenges related to communication, transport, resources and understaffing. It was reported that all the district offices had mobility challenges since they did not have cars, and, coupled with the other existential challenges, policy implementation initiatives were rendered impractical. The quest to understand the effectiveness of a multi-stakeholder approach (to address some of the said shortcomings), led the researchers to seek the perspectives of representatives from the non-governmental organisations.

6. Conclusion
Evidence from this qualitative research supports the argument that successful policy implementation comes through a multi-stakeholder approach. Government on its own has no capacity to steer pro-youth development projects. This is because it lacks the necessary human resources, finance and technical expertise. The involvement of NGOs and other partners is critical, as demonstrated by the interventions made by Plan International, CAMFED, MDTC and Care International to train and fund the youth in Mwenezi District. However, it should be noted that many of the training programme beneficiaries are yet to execute some entrepreneurial projects as they lack start-up capital. The absence of start-up capital means that the skilled youth may remain idle, even after having acquired training. In the face of such challenges, the capacity for training to transform youth livelihoods has been largely compromised.

The selective approach of the donors in identifying beneficiaries has also extended and intensified clusters of inequality. Location according to wards is evidently critical for one to benefit from the Plan International sponsored projects. One’s sex also determines one’s eligibility for CAMFED grants. This gender differentiation is needed, but it should not be used arbitrarily to maintain gender discrimination, such as CAMFED grants that apparently target female youth. However, some positive discrimination is needed to close the gender gap. Whilst the logic behind such programming rests with the relevant organisations, youth trapped in poverty barely understand such segregation. Besides, some female beneficiaries of the grants have also developed signs of dependency, which is a significant barrier to independent development.

Although mainstreaming and involvement of youth is clearly spelt out in the National Youth Policy, the study noted that the youth in rural areas have been side-lined in the formulation and implementation of these policies. The key informants agreed that circulars from the Directorate in their ministries determined the day-to-day operations of their respective ministries. The study established that top-down policy formulation hardly reaches the youth who are at the bottom of the societal hierarchies of power. This is because the policy formulators comprise the political elite, whose contact with the rural experiences of youths is minimal. Against such a background, youths in these areas were deprived of the necessary information from youth programmes and government policies.

In essence, the vertical top-down approaches to policy formulation and execution were problematic as they muffled the needs and interests of the rural youths. This study concluded that there is lack of synergy between youth expectations and what the policy implementers are providing. Where the youth expected start-up capital, they received training programmes that were not accompanied by the necessary start-up kits. Thus, it is important that both Government and NGOs improve their development approach and use needs assessments to address the implementation gaps that arise from centrally planned policies.
The study concludes that pro-youth policies have the capacity to transform the lives of the youth who are leading hopeless lives due to unemployment and poverty in the rural areas. Facing artificial barriers and enormous compliance costs, the rural youth can be rescued through deliberate policies that remove burdensome regulations, which inhibit the implementation of successful entrepreneurial projects. Both officials working in government and those from NGOs concur that there is a need to mainstream pro-youth policies and institutions in rural Zimbabwe in general, and Mwenezi District in particular.

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