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Abstract

The youth population bulge in Kenya comes with so many challenges such as poverty, gender inequalities, political inequities, the absence of adequate health and medical resources, low educational attainment, homelessness, increased involvement in violence, drugs, and alcohol, poor physical and mental health, a lack of key life skills, premature sexual involvement. Using inductive or “bottom up” thematic analysis, we explored experiences of the youth aged 18-34 (n=36), youth workers (n=26) and administrators of youth programs (n=22) on existing youth development programs and their alignment to the positive youth development principles. Six key findings from the study sufficed as follows: (1) the mismatch between education and job skills: a degree without skills and talent is meaningless; (2) promoting youth development through creative arts and talent development programs; (3) leveraging on entrepreneurship to curb socio-economic barriers of the youth; (4) empowering youth: navigating reproductive and sexual health; (5) navigating psycho-social challenges and fostering youth empowerment; and (6) overcoming political tribalism and strengthening youth services. We illustrate existing PYD programs, their shortcomings and alignment to PYD. Implications for PYD research, policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords: aspiring youth, positive youth development, strength-based model, thematic analysis

Introduction

Various scholars have indicated that many developing countries, and in particular, the least developed countries are undergoing a youth bulge where more than 20% of a country's population is youth (Kararach et al., 2011; Lauxman et al., 2021; Lin, 2012). It was estimated that in 2019 about 230 million youth (aged 15–24) were living in Africa, which accounts for approximately 19% of the global youth population. Projections show that by 2030 the number of youths living in Africa will have increased by up to 42 percent (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2019).

Article 260 of Kenya's Constitution defines a youth as a person aged between 18 years and 34 years and they constitute 35% of the Kenyan population. The United Nations defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Under the African Youth Charter, a youth is a person between 15 and 35 years (National Gender and Equality Commission, n.d.).

The population in Kenya is projected to be 63.9 million with 22.3 million aged 15–34 years by 2030 (National Council for Population and Development, 2019).

Table 1. Percentage of Population aged 15–34 (Youth) in Kenya: 1969–2030

Year	Total population (million)	Population aged 15–34 (million)	Percentage of the youth aged 15–34 years to total population
1969	10.9	3.8	30.41%
1979	15.3	4.9	32.25%
1989	21.4	7	32.97%
1999	28.7	10.1	35.49%
2010	38.5	13.3	34.55%
2015	44.2	15.8	35.75%
2020	50.3	17.8	35.39%
2025	57	19.8	34.74%
2030	63.9	22.3	34.90%

Source: National Council for Population and Development, 2019

Most of the studies that have been carried out on youth development in the global south are on the deficit model that focuses on the risk and problems the youth face during development (Lerner et al., 2005); views adolescence as a time of storm and stress (G. Stanley Hall Theory) (Lerner, 2004); and emphasizes identifying and reducing problem behaviors like delinquency, racism, poverty, gender inequalities, political inequities, the absence of adequate health and medical resources, low educational attainment, homelessness, increased involvement in violence, drugs, and alcohol, poor physical and mental health, a lack of key life skills, and premature sexual involvement (Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2021; Scales et al., 2005; Tidmarsh et al., 2022). These challenges are not viewed as responses to family stress, emotional disturbance, or maladaptive cognitions, but rather to the absence of engagement in a positive life trajectory (Larson, 2000).

Further, Archibald and colleagues (2021) opine that African youth face great challenges and great opportunities. Some of the daunting challenges faced include poverty; food insecurity; illness; lack of access to quality education; un- and underemployment; civil unrest; and exclusionary local, national, and international policies. In Kenya, the deficit model has been amplified by studies that have highlighted the risks and challenges faced by the youth, including unemployment, marginalization, harassment by the police, impediments in accessing essential facilities and services such as education and health care, urban youth unemployment in the informal settlement, poor housing, prostitution, school dropouts, marginalization, rape, HIV/AIDS infections, and early marriage (Hope, 2012; Muiya, 2014).

The deficit model, while offering some insights into problems faced by the youth, has been widely criticized for its shortcomings. First, the deficit model neglects strengths and potential of the youth. These strengths can include communication skills, creativity, talent, problem-solving abilities, and a positive sense of self. By bypassing these strengths, the model fails to leverage on these strengths in promoting positive youth development (PYD) (Catalano et al., 1999). Second, the model can be labeling and lead to young people being seen as inherently problematic. For example, labeling the youth as at risk, delinquent, alcoholic, and troubled, among others, can have stigmatizing and negative effects on the self-esteem of the youth. This disapproval creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the youth adopt the labels and believe they are incompetent of constructive transformation (Pittman et al., 2001). Third, the model focuses on fixing what is wrong with the youth, implying a deficit in their development. Instead of solely fixing problems, a more effective approach should be the one that promotes health development across different cycles of the life of the youth (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Finally, the model focuses solely on individual factors, neglecting the environmental context in which youth development occurs. Factors such as poverty, lack of access to resources, or dysfunctional family environments can significantly affect PYD (Catalano et al., 1999).

Locating Positive Youth Development

In the 1990s, a shift transpired toward a more positive approach to PYD. This approach focuses on identifying and promoting strengths and competencies. This shift placed greater emphasis on identifying and nurturing the unique strengths and competencies the youth possess, such as leadership abilities, problem-solving skills, and emotional intelligence (Luthar & Lerner, 2000). PYD programs began to prioritize interventions that promoted healthy development across various domains (e.g., social, emotional, cognitive) and equipped young people with coping skills and resources to overcome challenges (Jaffee et al., 2019). Instead of solely focusing on potential problems, the PYD field began to view adolescence as a critical period filled with opportunities for learning, positive development, and exploration of identity (Larson & Richards, 2002).

According to Leman and colleagues (2017), over the past 30 years, positive youth development (PYD) has emerged as an important strand of applied developmental science. PYD supports the positive functioning of all youth, ensuring every young person is prepared and ready to face the challenges that lie ahead. In particular, it focuses on the positive aspects of young people's relationships at the individual, family, community, and societal (civic) levels (Arnold, 2020; Leman et al., 2017; Pittman, 2017). Further, Lerner and colleagues (2021) lay emphasis on PYD as concepts that are predicated on the idea that every young person has the potential for successful, healthy development and that all youth possess the capacity for positive development.

PYD contrasts with models that have focused on problems that some young people encounter while growing up—problems such as learning disabilities; affective disorders; antisocial conduct; low motivation and achievement; drinking, drug use, or smoking; psycho-social crisis triggered by maturational episodes such as puberty; and risks of neglect, abuse, and economic deprivations that plague certain populations. In such models, youth is seen as a period of fraught with hazards and many young people are seen as potential problems that must be straightened out before they can do serious harm to themselves or to

others (Damon, 2004; Leman et al., 2017). Consequently, there are numerous research-based programs for youth aimed at curbing drug use, violence, suicide, teen pregnancy, and other problem behaviors, but lack a rigorous applied psychology of how to promote positive youth development (Larson, 2000).

Various scholarly works have indicated a paradigm shift from the deficit model to the strength-based PYD approach that aims to capitalize on human plasticity and emphasizes that all youth can gain healthy or positive development when the strengths of the youth align with their ecological assets (Chai et al., 2022; Lerner et al., 2005, 2009; Tidmarsh et al., 2022). The PYD approach interlocks the youth alongside their families, communities, and/or governments so that youth are empowered toward proactively building skills, fostering healthy relationships, and supporting youth to be active partners in development efforts. It builds skills, assets, and competencies; foster healthy relationships; strengthen the environment; and transform systems. It suggests that if young people have the knowledge, skills, and support they need, they will thrive as adults, enjoy good health, succeed economically, and make meaningful contributions to their communities (Alvarado et al., 2017).

The adoption of PYD approach that began in research communities and programs in the late 1990s in the global north has stretched across to the global south. “Increasingly, governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, research institutions, foundations, and multilateral organizations are working to leverage and strengthen the capacities and well-being of a growing ‘youth bulge’ by implementing PYD research and practice into their individual and collective development efforts” (Lauxman et al., 2021).

Over the years, different PYD theoretical frameworks and models have been developed to define and measure PYD processes and outcomes. This is a summary of the frameworks that have been developed (Alvarado et al., 2017; Arnold & Silliman, 2017): **Research-driven frameworks:** The Community Action Framework for Youth Development; Developmental Assets Framework; Developmental Systems Theory: The 5 Cs of Positive Youth Development. **Research-referenced frameworks:** Character Counts! The Essential Elements of 4-H Youth Development and Targeting Life Skills. **Research-adapted frameworks:** California 4-H Youth Development Framework and Oregon 4-H Youth Development Framework. This article is guided by the following three models of PYD:

a) **Trabian Shorter’s Asset-Framing**

According to Shorter (2015), this asset-framing approach emphasizes strengths and aspirations over deficits. First, instead of labeling youth by challenges (e.g., “at-risk youth”), it focuses on asset-framing to identify their aspirations (e.g., “I want to go school,” “I want to someday own a home,” “I want to get out of this neighborhood or come back to the neighborhood and build a youth center,” “I want to be a future leader,” “I want to be an athlete,” “I am an aspiring scientist,” “I am an aspiring artist”). This shift in language fosters a more hopeful and empowering environment (California Health Care Foundation, 2021).

Second, the focus is on building on assets, not fixing deficits. PYD programs are designed to build on young people’s existing strengths and interests, rather than solely focusing on fixing weaknesses. This aligns with the core principles of PYD as outlined in the Search Institute’s Developmental Assets Framework (Search Institute., n.d.).

Third, empowerment through choice where young people’s voices are included in shaping their development by offering choices within programs and involving them in decision-making (Tappe, 2022).

Finally, fostering positive relationships through connecting youth with mentors who can provide guidance and support while recognizing their strengths and creating opportunities for young people to build healthy relationships with peers, fostering a sense of belonging and celebrating their diverse strengths (Shorters, n.d.).

b) **The 5 Cs of Positive Youth Development**

The 5 Cs of Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework was developed by developmental psychologist Richard M. Lerner (Lerner et al., 2011). The 5 Cs of Positive Youth Development is a well-regarded framework that outlines key areas that contribute to a young person's positive development.

- 1) Competence: The ability to act effectively in various settings.
- 2) Confidence: A sense of self-worth, mastery, and belief in one's ability to contribute.
- 3) Character: Ethical and moral values that guide behavior.
- 4) Caring: Empathy and compassion for others.
- 5) Connection: Positive relationships with family, friends, and community.
- 6) Contribution: Feeling like one can make a positive impact.

c) Oregon 4-H Youth Development Framework

According to Arnold & Gagnon (2020), the 4-H Thriving Model predicts that participation in high-quality 4-H programs helps youth thrive and that thriving youth achieve key developmental outcomes, thus illuminating the process of positive youth development in 4-H.

The 4-H Thriving Model has three structures that describe and predict the effect of 4-H programs on youth development (Arnold, 2018):

“The first structure is the 4-H developmental context, which is comprised of the setting and experiences provided by 4-H for youth. The developmental context is made up of four elements: (a) facilitating youth sparks, (b) fostering developmental relationships, (c) following principles for high-quality youth development programs, and (d) promoting youth engagement. High-quality developmental contexts lead to youth thriving, which is the second structure of the model. The six indicators of youth thriving proposed by Search Institute (2014) are (a) openness to challenge and discovery; (b) a hopeful purpose; (c) an awareness beyond the self (transcendent awareness); (d) a prosocial orientation; (e) positive emotionality; and (f) intentional self-regulation. This part of the model describes the process of PYD, which happens as youth increase their levels of thriving across the thriving indicators. Thriving youth, in turn, achieve positive youth development outcomes, which constitutes the third structure of the model: (a) academic motivation; (b) academic success; (d) reduction in risk behaviors; (e) healthful choices; (f) Social competence; (g) Personal Standards; (h) Connection to others; and, (i) contribution to others. Social competence, personal standards, connection to others, and contribution to others align with the Five Cs.”

Positive Youth Development Programs in Kenya

According to Hope (2012), youth are, and will remain, a significant share of Kenya's population for the foreseeable future. Therefore, developing and implementing PYD programs that prioritize interventions that promote healthy development across various domains (e.g., social, emotional, cognitive) and equip the youth with coping skills and resources to overcome challenges must be much more of a priority for the government than it currently is. Any failure to provide appropriate opportunities for this large segment of the population could have enormous economic, political, cultural, and social ramifications.

The government commitment to youth empowerment is anchored on Article 27 of the Constitution. This accords every person, including the youth, the right to equality and freedom from discrimination. Similarly, Article 43 grants every person economic and social right while Article 55 compels the government to take measures to promote youth empowerment. In this respect, the government is required to take measures, including affirmative action programs to ensure that the youth access relevant education and training; have opportunities to associate, be represented and participate in political, social, economic, and other spheres of life; access employment; and are protected from harmful cultural practices and exploitation.

The National Gender and Equality Commission (NGEC) works with stakeholders to promote progressive realization of the constitutional rights of youth and children, which include the following: coordinate a working group on issues relevant to the youth; coordinate public education forums at grassroots to create awareness on gender equality and freedom from discrimination in relation to youth; audit affirmative action initiatives to ensure youth are benefiting from such initiatives; analyze performance contracting data submitted quarterly to Commission on youth employment in the National Government and prepare a status report; coordinate development of standards for the implementation of policies for progressive realization of the rights of the youth spelled out in Article 55 of the Constitution; and conduct research on matters relating to gender equality and freedom from discrimination pertaining to the youth.

The National Youth Service (NYS) is a voluntary work and educational program for young Kenyan citizens. It was established in September 1964 by Dr. Geoffrey Griffins (a consummate educationist) and the late General Waruhiu Itote (General China), an utmost disciplinarian who served in the Mau Mau war (a militant Kenyan nationalist movement against British domination). The NYS has been focusing on helping the youth discover and develop their potential since 1964. It was restructured by H.E. former president Uhuru Kenyatta in 2014 into a premier agency through which the government executes an elaborate and comprehensive youth empowerment master plan known as the 5-Point Vision. Through the NYS's program dubbed "Go Better, Do Better," about 30,000 youth are recruited annually and trained in various skills (paramilitary, engineering, fashion and design, business management, catering, agriculture, secretarial, plant operation, construction, driving). Through this program, youth are prepared for other national matters such as service in the armed forces, national reconstruction, and disaster response.

The Ministry of State for Youth Affairs (MOYA) was established on December 7, 2005, to address youth concerns in the country. This was grounded on the realization that the government may not achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals without adequately dealing with the many socioeconomic challenges facing the Kenyan youth. In May 2008 the Department of Sports in the then Ministry of Gender, Sports, Culture and Social Services was transferred to the Ministry of State for Youth Affairs forming the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MOYAS) (Hope, 2012).

In January 2023 through the Executive Order No. 1 of 2023 - Organization of the Government of the Republic of Kenya, President William Ruto reorganized ministries to push the Kenya kwanza (Swahili: "Kenya First"—a political coalition in Kenya, emerged in the run up to 2022 General Elections) development agenda. A restructuring was witnessed in the formerly Public Service, Youth and Gender ministry under former president Uhuru Kenyatta. The Youth docket was moved to the Sports ministry, which is now under the Ministry of Youth Affairs, Sports and the Arts (MOYASA) (Thiong'o, 2022).

The Ministry has two state departments: Youth Affairs and Sports and the Arts. The agencies under the State Department for Youth Affairs include Kenya National Youth Council (National Youth Council Act, No. 10 of 2009); Youth Advisory Board (National Youth Council Act, No. 10 of 2009); Kenya Association of Youth Centers; Kenya National Innovation Agency (Science, Technology and Innovation Act, No. 28 of 2013); and The Regional Youth Forum Secretariat of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). The mandate of the state department of Youth Affairs includes Youth Policy and Empowerment; Mainstreaming Youth in National Development; Business Innovation and Incubation; Managing and Promoting engagement with Youth for National Development; Harnessing and Development of Youth Talent for National Development; Collaborating and Overseeing Stakeholders engaged in Youth Promoting Activities (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2023).

The State Department for Youth Affairs implemented a five-year Kenya Youth Employment & Opportunities Project (KYEOP) funded with USD 150 million (Kshs. 15 billion) credit from the International Development Association/World Bank. The project was focused on increasing employment and earning opportunities among targeted youth in Kenya. KYEOP, which began in 2016 and ran until 2021, targeted youth between 18 and 29 years old with form 4 education level (final year of secondary school education in Kenya, which culminates with a Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education) and below. The project was implemented in 17 of 47 counties (administrative regions): Mombasa, Kilifi, Nairobi, Nakuru, Kiambu,

Nyandarua, Mandera, Turkana, Wajir, Bungoma, Kakamega, Kwale, Kisumu, Kisii, Machakos, Kitui and Migori Counties. The project had four major components: improving youth employability, support for job creation, improving labor market information systems, and strengthening youth policy development. Through this project, 33,167 youth benefited from training and internship whereby 64% of them have been employed. A total of 32,186 youth received business support, with 26,922 receiving a 40,000Ksh grant and 5,264 receiving coaching to manage a business. Eighty-seven percent of youth who received business grants have created employment for themselves and others (KYEOP, n.d.).

The State Department for Youth Affairs is also implementing the Youth Empowerment Centers (YECs) program. This is a Kenya Vision 2030 flagship program under the Gender, Youth and Vulnerable Groups sector of the Social Pillar. The YECs are modeled to be a One-Stop Center to address their diverse and dynamic needs. The establishment of YECs is a unique response to challenges facing the youth such as inadequate capacity and access to Information Communication Technology (ICT) services, guidance and counseling on drugs and substance abuse, and HIV-AIDS prevention, among others. Besides promoting and nurturing youth talent, the YECs serve as a platform for integrating services such as entrepreneurship training, information provision, ICT, counseling, games, community mobilization and networking, making the YECs to be hubs for all government activities involving the youth countrywide.

A fully fledged YEC was to be constructed in three phases all constituting a Y-shape (meaning Youth) of an office complex. **Wing A** consisting of a library, cybercafé, a guidance and counseling room, a room for indoor games, an office, and a store. The National Government through the then Ministry of Devolution and Planning were to fund the establishment of this wing. The second phase (**wing B**) would comprise a large multipurpose hall, a physical fitness gymnasium, a reproductive health facility and changing rooms funded by the local National Government Constituency Development Fund (NG-CDF). The third and final phase (**wing C**), funded by the local county governments, was to comprise a conference room, counseling and testing room, a secretariat office, substance abuse facility, and a nutritionist facility (Youth Empowerment Centers, n.d.).

Key partners have been instrumental in the process of operationalization of the various Youth Empowerment Centers (YECs) countrywide, including Spread Truth; UN-Habitat; I Choose Life; Constituency Development Fund (NG- CDF); Ajira Digital Kenya; General Motors; Isuzu East Africa; PATH; and World Vision. The partners have facilitated the provision of indoor and outdoor games, internet connectivity, computers, and furniture, among other items. On August 9, 2019, the then Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender launched 15 refurbished Youth Empowerment Centers in various counties across the country (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2023).

In 2006, the government launched the National Youth Policy to combat a myriad of challenges facing the youth in Kenya. The National Youth Policy is aimed at ensuring that the youth play their role, alongside adults, in the development of the country. The policy goal of the youth policy is to promote youth participation in community and civic affairs and to ensure that youth programs are youth centered. The policy proposes guidelines and strategies that can be used to facilitate participation of the youth in national development. The policy also spells out the strategic areas that must be addressed in order for Kenya's young people to effectively play their role in nation building. These are employment creation, health, education and training, sports and recreation, the environment, art and culture, the media and participation and empowerment. The youth are classified into priority target groups to make it easier to tackle challenges unique to each group. The priority groups are youth with disability, street youth, youth infected with AIDS, female youth, unemployed youth, and out-of-school youth. The implementation plan is to ensure that the policy becomes a reality. It suggested the formation of a National Youth Council to facilitate, coordinate, monitor, advocate, and promote youth issues and youth-led initiatives, under the ministry in charge (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2006).

According to a policy statement published by NGENC Kenya (n.d.), Kenya embraced the 8-4-4 system of education with the first cohort of students completing secondary school in 1988. It was envisaged that

the education would equip students with skills that were required in the labor market. In 2003, to boost the enrollment rates, the government started the Free Primary Education (FPE) and later subsidized secondary education. The government has undertaken education reforms to address the skills mismatch with the available job's requirement. The education curriculum has undergone reforms to make it competency based. As part of education reforms, the government of Kenya has established the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TVETA), a State Corporation established under the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Act, 2013. The role of TVETA is to register, regulate, assess, and ensure standards and compliance by the technical and vocational institutions. The technical and vocational institutions will address gaps in employability by developing and training skill-based human capital for the purpose of employment. TVETA guides the curriculum of the courses offered in the technical and vocational colleges. Technical and Vocational Colleges are a realistic and attainable educational outlet for many youths, but often fall into the same trap as the formal educational system. For many years technical and vocational training has been perceived as a career path for those with low academic qualifications and limited prospects for further education and professional development in formal education. This has affected the uptake of technical and vocational training. Kenya has established several youth-focused initiatives to reduce youth unemployment. Some of these initiatives are the Uwezo Fund (Swahili: "Ability Fund"—a Kenyan government initiative aimed at empowering youth and women through access to finances for business and entrepreneurial ventures), the Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF) and Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) (NGEC Kenya, n.d.). The YEDF was established through the Public Financial Management Act (The Youth Enterprise Development Fund) Regulations (2006), Legal Notice No. 167/2006, to champion the creation of employment for youth through enterprise development. In 2007, the Fund was transformed into a State Corporation under the then Ministry of State for Youth Affairs, vide Youth Enterprise Development Fund Legal Order No. 63 of 2007. The Fund is currently domiciled at the State Department for Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises Development in the Ministry of Cooperatives, and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development (YEDF, n.d.).

The Fund is one of the measures the government has put in place to promote employment creation for the youth. It is a flagship project of the Kenya Vision 2030 under the Social Pillar. The Youth Fund is tasked with promoting enterprise development as a critical strategy for increasing economic opportunities and youth participation in nation building. The mandate of the YEDF is to provide loans to youth owned enterprises; provide market support to youth enterprises; facilitate youth enterprises to develop linkages with large enterprises; provide trading premises and worksites; provide business development services to youth owned enterprises; and facilitate youth to obtain jobs abroad (YEDF, n.d.).

On the other hand, Uwezo Fund, which is also a flagship program for Vision 2030, aims at enabling women, youth, and persons with disabilities to access finances to promote businesses and enterprises at the constituency level, thereby enhancing economic growth toward the realization of the same and the Sustainable Development Goals No.1 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger) and 3 (promote gender equality and empower women). The Fund is highly devolved and adopted the concept of a bottom-up approach with decision-making done at the grassroots level. The Fund was established vide Legal Notice No. 21 of February 21, 2014 – Public Finance Management (Uwezo Fund) Regulations, 2014 and was launched by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Kenya on September 8, 2013. Since inception, the Fund has disbursed more than Kshs 7.2 billion and directly supported 1,124,221 beneficiaries of which 69% are female and 31% male through provision of affordable and accessible credit, capacity building on entrepreneurship skills, basics on bookkeeping and market linkages and networking. Overall, the absorption rate in the constituencies averages at 107.5%, indicating very impressive uptake of the Fund, with over Kshs 1.5 billion having been revolved. In addition, the fund has recorded a cumulative repayment of Kshs 2.8 billion since its inception, which translates to a 40.6% repayment rate (Republic of Kenya., 2023).

It is a legal requirement for women, youth, and persons with disabilities to access 30% of Government Procurement opportunities. It is being implemented within the context of the AGPO program, which was officially launched by H.E. president Uhuru Kenyatta on October 16, 2013, in Nairobi County. The AGPO program is founded on the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 Article 227 on the fair, equitable, transparent and cost-effective public procurement of goods and services, Article 55 on affirmative action, and the Public Procurement and Asset Disposal Act, 2015. The aim of the AGPO program is to facilitate the enterprises owned by women, youth, and persons with disabilities to be able to participate in government opportunities. This is made possible through the implementation of the legal requirement that 30% of government procurement opportunities be set aside specifically for enterprises owned by these groups. As a result, the program is aimed at empowering them by giving them more opportunities to do business with the government.

To further address unemployment in Kenya, H.E. the former president of the Republic of Kenya, the Late Hon. Mwai Kibaki, and the then prime minister. Rt. Hon. Raila Odinga launched the Kazi Kwa Vijana (KKV) (Swahili: “*Work for the Youth*”) on March 12, 2009. The KKV program is a nationwide initiative which employs 200,000 to 300,000 Kenyans, primarily the youths, who are at risk of hunger and starvation. This was to enable them to earn income, to buy food and other basic items, and to support their families. The KKV was intended to help meet these two critical needs, namely providing relief to the people at risk through gainful employment and contributing to increasing food production, particularly through better utilization of our water resources. Those employed in the KKV were engaged in manual-based small projects in their own communities. In rural areas, they built water dams and irrigation, repaired boreholes and access roads, cleared bushes, and planted trees. In urban areas, the KKV workers built and operated water kiosks, developed and implemented waste management systems, and repaired and maintained access roads, all to improve quality of life particularly in the slum areas (Onyango, 2012).

Despite the fact that the government of Kenya and other partners have implemented the above-mentioned well-meaning youth development projects, they have come under criticism therefore casting aspersions on their effectiveness. For example, Karanja (2014) cited challenges such as insufficient training and capacity building, insufficient funding, poor leadership and internal control, and policy challenges that affect the implementation of youth projects in Nairobi County.

In 2011, the kazi kwa vijana project was reported to be dogged by poor planning and usual politics. Allegations of misuse of kazi kwa vijana funds in the prime minister’s office were brought to the fore. Critical issues around design, implementation, cost-effectiveness, and evaluation of such programs were reported by the Business Daily Newspaper. Eventually, the World Bank canceled the multi-billion-shillings program after an audit revealed officials at the Office of the Prime Minister had misappropriated millions of shillings. The World Bank even went ahead to request a refund (Nation Newspaper, 2011). The KKV program was relaunched in April 2011, as KKV II, with supposedly more stringent measures being put in place to prevent mismanagement, fraud, and corruption and to ensure accountability. It was expected to entail 1,200 projects for empowering youth between 18 and 35 years with lifelong skills, internships, and long-term employment (Hope, 2012).

According to Gachuru & Mwirigi (2014), the youth enterprise development fund was yet to make a significant impact because the attitude of the youth toward loans is poor and their knowledge level on the youth fund is low. Other major challenges identified in their study were delays in loan processing, culture of handouts and lack of initiative on the part of the youth. Also, group loans were also found not to be viable owing to the fact that it is very difficult to raise a group of 12 youth who can work harmoniously in a joint business. Further, Kimando and colleagues (2012) emphasize that skills in entrepreneurship, business planning, and financial management must elaborately be imparted before any YEDF funds are disbursed by the board.

Further, just like the deficit model, the National Youth Policy in a section dubbed special interest groups refers to the youth as: “youth with disability,” “street youth,” “youth infected with AIDS,” “female

youth,” “unemployed youth” and “out-of-school youth.” These labels view the youth through a lens that emphasizes their perceived shortcomings or deficits, rather than focusing on their strengths, potential, or contributions to society. This overlooks the diverse skills, capabilities, and perspectives that the youth possess (Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs, 2019). The present study builds on the already existing youth development programs that are being implemented by the government of Kenya and its partners. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to assess the alignment of youth programs in Kenya with Positive Youth Development (PYD) principles, focusing on promoting youths’ strengths, resilience, and holistic development through structured activities, supportive environments, and community engagement. The study was guided by the 5-Cs of PYD, Trabian Shorter’s Asset-Framing and Oregon 4-H Youth Development Framework (Arnold, 2018; Lerner et al., 2011; Shorter, 2015; Zarrett & Lerner, 2008). We sought to answer the following questions:

- a) What PYD programs are currently being implemented in Kenya to enable the youth to thrive and flourish in various sociocultural contexts?
- b) How do youth programs align with PYD principles?

Materials and Methods

Qualitative approach and research paradigm

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) due to its focus on understanding how individuals view specific experiences around a shared phenomenon (Clanton et al., 2023). IPA is a method designed to understand people’s lived experience and how they make sense of it in the context of their personal and social worlds (Smith et al., 2009). With IPA, the objective is to get as close as possible to the lived experience of participants so that it can be examined in detail. Accordingly, IPA researchers aim for insight into what it is like to have an experience from the point of view of the person who has had it to elicit rich descriptions, trying to capture the emotions surrounding the experience and how people understand it and make sense of it. The personal meanings associated with lived experience are considered particularly important in IPA, as is how the experience relates to people’s views of their world and their relationships. It gives an opportunity to get a close and detailed understanding of what an experience has been like for an individual and how they make sense of it (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In this study, we are using IPA to understand the experiences of the youth and youth workers with regard to youth programs and their alignment to PYD principles in Kenya.

Research team and reflexivity

The multidisciplinary research team who conducted this research encompassed upcoming scholarly researchers from Kenya, five men and one woman, with expertise in social work, positive youth development, child protection, community development, and public policy (Allen et al., 2016; Asige & Omuse, 2021; Onyiko & Pechacova, 2015; Orucho, 2022). The research team participated in design, data collection, coding, and interpretation of the findings. It is likely that the adequate training on building rapport and reflexivity enabled the researchers to establish a trusting relationship between the research team and youth and youth workers and discuss youth development challenges.

Study Setting

The study was carried out in the following counties in Kenya: Narok, Bungoma, Kakamega, Busia, Kisii, and Kisumu. Narok county has an estimated population of 1,157,873 out of which the youth constitute 33% of the population, of whom 51% are female (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), 2019). Forty

percent of girls aged 15–19 years in Narok County have begun childbearing; this is almost two times higher than the national average, which stands at 18%. Specifically, 7.4% are pregnant with their first child and 33% have ever given birth compared to the national levels of 3.4% and 14.7% respectively (CSAKenya, n.d.).

In Bungoma County, the youth population form 26.6% of the total population and accounts for 28.86% of the labor force. They face various challenges ranging from unemployment, lack of access to credit facilities, drug and substance abuse, and teenage pregnancies, among others (County Government of Bungoma, 2020). In addition, the county has high poverty rates and a dependency ratio of 105.8. The main economic activities young people are engaged in are small-scale business such as bodaboda (Swahili: “Motorcycle taxis”), casual jobs, and domestic work (National Council for Population and Development (NCPD), 2017).

According to Kakamega County Integrated Development Plan 2018–2022, the youth population was 440,094, which translates to 27% of the total population in the county. This population was projected to be 551,140 in the year 2018 and further increase to 579,397 and 609,104 by the year 2020 and 2022 respectively. In Kakamega County, there is a large percentage of unemployed young people, leading to migration from rural to urban centers by the youth (Rogito, 2020).

The labor force in Busia County in 2015 was estimated at 400,017 and was projected to increase to 435,667. About 71% of the labor force is engaged on family farms while the remaining 29% work in other economic activities such as fishing, trading and employment in the formal and informal sectors. Given the size of arable land in the county, it implies that the majority of the labor force is not gainfully employed. With an undeveloped industrial and production system, the rate of unemployment is bound to further rise. The county government has put in place specific initiatives to empower the youth including reservation of tenders, construction of youth empowerment centers among others (Busia County Integrated Development Plan 2018–2022).

The youthful population in Kisii County was estimated at 385,143 in 2012, representing 31.4% of the total county population. Sixty-one percent of the unemployed persons in the county are within this age group (Kisii County Government, n.d.).

In Kisumu County, the youth is estimated to account for approximately 40% of the total county’s population, which comprises 1,155,574, with 556,942 males; 594,609 females; and 23 intersex. Worryingly, 61% of them remain unemployed (Kisumu County Intergrated Development Plan (CIDP), 2022–2023; Youth Alive Kenya, n.d.).

Sampling strategy

Each of the three main groups of stakeholders in positive youth development were separately consulted: youth; youth workers and administrators of youth projects—County Government CEC, Youth Affairs, Sports and Communication. From each of the following counties, Narok, Bungoma, Kakamega, Busia, Kisii, and Kisumu, we obtained the list of youth programs and sampled five. In each of the youth projects, we interviewed the beneficiary youths, youth workers and also county officials in charge of Youth Affairs, Sports and Communication. Eligible for enrollment in the original study were (1) youth aged 18 to 35, (2) youth workers who had worked with the youth for at least three years, and (3) administrators of youth programs.

Units of study

We interviewed 36 youth from: Narok, Bungoma, Kakamega, Busia, Kisii, and Kisumu counties. The age of the youth ranged from 18 to 30 years old with a mean age of 24 years old. The entire sample of the youth that was consulted identified as Christians and 53% of them were male. In terms of county of origin, the majority of the youth were from Kakamega county—9, followed by Narok county at 8, Busia County at

7, and 4 each from Kisii, Bungoma, and Kisumu counties. A total of 72% of the youth had post-secondary school education (8 had a diploma, 13 had undergraduate degrees, and 5 had postgraduate degrees).

We also interviewed 26 front-line youth workers from the six contexts/counties. They had an average age of 33. The oldest youth worker was 63 years old while the youngest was 18 years old. A total of 69% of the youth workers were males. Out of the 22 heads of youth programs we interviewed, 77% were male. They had an average age of 39. The oldest was 57 years old, while the youngest was 24 years old.

Ethical issues pertaining to human subjects

This study was approved by the Kenya National Commission for Science and Technology (NACOSTI), which issued us a permit, license No. NACOSTI/P/22/18051. To participate in the study, willing participants aged 18 years and older were required to provide voluntary, informed, and written consent. The participants were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. We also protected the privacy of participants by maintaining confidentiality of their personal information and research data. Data was anonymized to prevent identification.

Data collection methods

We conducted a total of 84 structured interviews: 36 youth aged between 18 and 35 years of age; 26 front-line youth workers and 22 administrators of youth development programs at the county levels. Participants were selected randomly from each of the six counties. Six interviewers collected data face-to-face with participants from each of the six counties: Narok, Bungoma, Kakamega, Busia, Kisii, and Kisumu. All the interviewers had graduate-level training and were supervised by a senior lecturer.

After informed consent was obtained, participants answered socio-demographic questions, followed by a structured interview. The interviews were conducted in the Swahili language and they were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and translated into English. All the interviews were carried out in private rooms. This ensured use of a private, safe, and conducive environment where the youth and workers would freely express their experiences about the youth development programs. It took an average of 40 minutes for each interview. The youth, front-line youth workers and the administrators of youth programs were asked on the following two domains: the PYD programs currently being implemented in Kenya to enable the youth to thrive and flourish in various sociocultural contexts and how the youth programs align with PYD principles. We also collected socio-demographic information on age, gender, county, and level of education from the participants.

Data processing

After collecting data using structured interviews, each interviewer transcribed the audio recordings into a written text. The transcriptions captured the verbatim responses of the participants. The interviews that were conducted in the Swahili language were subsequently transcribed and translated into English. Further, the researchers reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy and completeness, then we deidentified data in the bid to protect individual participants' privacy. Anonymization is the process we used to identify data. We removed personal identifiable information so that data can no longer be linked to specific individuals. We deleted names of the participants, names of the organizations, addresses and phone numbers. Subsequently, we issued participants with pseudonyms, a unique code identifier that cannot be easily linked back to the participant without additional information e.g., Y1_M_23 to mean, Y1 (Youth number 1), M (Male); 23 (Age).

Further, we created a clear and consistent system for naming and organizing data files in readiness for uploading into NVivo 14.23.0 in readiness for coding and generation of themes. The transcripts for the

youth were organized as youth-1 to youth-36, those of youth workers as youth worker-1 to 22 and finally administrator-1 to 22.

Qualitative Data Analysis

We adopted an inductive or “bottom-up” way of conducting thematic analysis where the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves. The themes we developed were not driven by our theoretical interest in the area or topic. In the process of coding the data, we did not fit data into a preexisting coding frame, or preconceptions. Data analysis was data driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In exploring the research questions, we were guided by the six steps laid out by (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2022) for thematic analysis: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generation of initial codes, (c) generation or development of themes, (d) review of potential themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing the report. First, all the six authors/coders individually listened to the entire 84 audio recordings alongside each participant’s transcript. This was done to allow the authors to familiarize and capture meaning across the dataset. This enabled us to derive the first impressions of the data. Second, all transcripts were individually coded by the six authors using NVivo 14.23.0, a qualitative data analysis software that allowed easy tracking of codes. During this phase, we conducted several analytic meetings where coders discussed their interpretations of the data and challenges. Subsequently, the derivative codes from the transcripts were compared for consistency. Coding was data driven. In stages three, four, and five, we created clusters of like-minded codes and grouped them together to form themes. Redundant codes that did not address the research question were discarded. In the final stage, we compiled the findings in the form of a report containing themes that provided an account of PYD challenges and programs in Kenya.

Techniques to enhance trustworthiness

Demonstrating rigor in qualitative studies is essential so that the research findings have the credibility, trustworthiness, integrity, and validity to make an impact on practice, policy, or both. Rigor refers to the quality and reliability of the research process (Hadi & José Closs, 2016). We deployed the following measures to establish and sustain rigor during qualitative data analysis. First, authors engaged in writing reflexive memos, journaling and continuous self-checking to prevent identities and biases from infiltrating interpretation of data and worldview may have shaped how they understood and interpreted the data. Points on the reflexive memos and journals were discussed with other coders in the weekly meetings. Second, we maintained a clear and organized record of all the research activities, including concept, data collection, coding, and analysis. This audit trail will enable other researchers to follow our process and substantiate trustworthiness (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). Third, to ensure consistent coding among team members that enhances the credibility of the analysis, we calculated inter-rater reliability to assess the agreement between coders. Establishing inter-rater reliability (IRR) is a recognized process of determining the trustworthiness of the study (McAlister et al., 2017). Finally, excerpts from the participants were included in the findings section to ensure that data is participant driven. According to Milne & Oberle (2005), the overall credibility of the study depends on the researcher’s ability to capture an insider (emic) perspective and to represent that perspective accurately. Strategies to enhance rigor included flexible yet systematic sampling, ensuring participants had the freedom to speak, providing accurate transcription and data-driven coding, as well as ongoing attention to context.

Results

The Mismatch Between Education and Job Skills: A Degree Without Skills and Talent Is Meaningless

The first theme emanated from the participants who expressed a mismatch between what they learned in college and the required skills in the job market. The youth workers and administrators of the youth programs alluded to the fact that most youth do not have the required level of skills to perform tasks in their chosen career paths. Participant YW1_M_35 ^[1] said that was worrying:

“Most youth who graduate from universities do not have the right skills that are required in the job market today. It looks like the university teaching is more theoretical than practical oriented. We have a mismatch of what is learned in school and the skills that are required in the job place uhm!”

Further, the participants cited deficits in curriculum in schools and colleges. They said that the curricula focused more on mastery of theory without focusing on job related skills. Also, the curriculum does not impart creativity. Youth program administrators stated:

“The way the 8-4-4 curriculum has been structured does not prepare the students adequately. I think it emphasizes mostly the mastery of theory and that is why most graduates do have the right skills for the job market. A good curriculum should be able to trigger the youth to be creative. A person should have a degree with skills. A degree without skills is meaningless” (YA1_M_33).

“Another problem is...I think our education system is not relevant to the job market. Some of the things we go to study are not helpful at all. You will not apply them at any point” (Y34_F_25).

The participants emphasized on the need for more skill-based training opportunities to enable the youth to have hands-on skills that will spur employability. They cited the need to introduce skill-based training courses such as building technology, fashion design and garment making, motor vehicle mechanics, electrical installation and electrical wiring, plumbing, beauty therapy, among others. The mentioned courses leverage on development of talent and skills that translate to employment as stated by one of the youth program administrators who was concerned about the mismatch between education and skills development:

“A good curriculum should be able to trigger the youth to be creative. A person should have a degree with skills. A degree without skills is meaningless” (YA1_M_33).

Lack of life skills was particularly evident as most youth were not able to handle issues and problems encountered in life. A youth administrator reported:

“I am telling you, most of the young people I work with lack essential life skills like communication, time keeping, (laughs). Yes, I am telling you the truth. Most of them arrive very late to work or sometimes they don't just show up without an excuse. Others are very poor in stress management, problem-solving, decision-making and lack creativity. I think universities don't teach life skills” (YA4_M_19).

We also found out youth mentoring is not practiced in the research location. They youth expressed disappointment on not being assigned mentors to contribute to their personal development and education.

Mentors provide guidance, advice, and emotional support to the youth to enable them to navigate the complexities of life. One of the youth program administrators reported:

“I do not have a mentor to guide me on what to do. I lost all my parents and I am all alone. I wish I had someone to look up to for support and advice. A more experienced mentor could be a good guide to help me. The challenge that the youth are facing is lack of mentorship. You see these young people I realized that they have the potential but they lack someone to get hold of their hand and encourage them to realize their potential. The biggest challenge I think is lack of mentorship because we have lost many youths due to peer influence, discouragement among other things. Actually, that is what we call an opportunistic challenge that is brought about by the main challenge of lack of mentorship” (YA4_M_38).

Illiteracy is a problem that most Kenyan youth grapple with in Kenya. Three youths reported dropping out of school in primary. School dropout is directly correlated to lack of skills that young people need to obtain gainful employment. They reported lacking school fees to help stay in school. Most illiterate people are usually underemployed and this exacerbates poverty and poor life outcomes. One youth who dropped from school reported:

“I think one of the challenges is unemployment, followed by illiteracy. I dropped out of school because of school fees. Now I don't have a certificate to secure a good job. I do manual jobs like Mjengo (Construction job) that are very demanding physically. If I don't go to work, my family also suffers” (Y27_F_22).

Poor levels of computer literacy, lack of ICT skills, and poor level of awareness of internet facilities were expressed by the participants. The digital world has significantly impacted the employment landscape. Most jobs are available online. Youth without ICT skills and access to the internet are likely to be left out of the digital economy that is very lucrative. The ICT superhighway should be able to accommodate all the youth, as cited by one of the youth program administrators who stated:

“We also focus on youth who want to develop their talent, so we have youth ICT and training as an area that we focus on, where we mobilize them to take up opportunities, maybe in relevant courses that...will assist them in their lives. We also directly engage them by training them in online entrepreneur skills” (YA17_M_40).

The participants reported a raft of programs in place to curb mismatch between education and job skills. First, programs that make youth acquire digital competencies as summed up by the following sentiments from a youth officer, YA12_M_35: “Our program offers digital literacy education where we equip the youth with digital competencies such programming, mobile app development, digital design and data visualization, social media content creation, and cyber security. These skills are meant to make the youth employable.” Second, most organizations have established youth mentorship programs to link the youth to mentors. This is aimed at connecting the youth with the right models as stated by YA20_M_38: “We have a youth mentorship program where we connect the youth with mentors to guide them in their career paths and act as role models.” Last, some organizations also offer the youth with internship and volunteering opportunities, where they are attached to experienced industry person to enable them to gain the right skills, as stated by a youth program administrator who said, “We admit graduates who are looking

for internships and volunteering opportunities so that they can gain skills. We give them a small stipend to facilitate their travel and accommodation expenses.”

Leveraging on Entrepreneurship to Curb Socioeconomic Barriers of the Youth

The majority of the participants—youth, youth workers, and administrators alike—felt that unemployment is the main challenge that affects positive youth development in Kenya. A program administrator echoed that despite the fact that youth are the majority in this country, they also lead among the unemployed:

“The main challenges relating to our youths is unemployment despite the fact that they represent about 60 percent of our population in Kenya” (YA2_M_35).

Further, most of youth are not considered for employment because they are not experienced enough, as pointed out by one of the youths:

“The main problem is unemployment, as youths are not considered for jobs because they do not have experience which is the main requirement in the job market today” (YA6_F_47).

Unemployment has been exacerbated by business capital constraints. These participants pointed out the inability to access capital to start a business or start-up as most organizations request for proof of employment to give out loans. A youth officer reported:

“Definitely yes, the youth face many challenges. This includes limited job opportunities, lack of capital to start businesses, health care problems especially women, high poverty levels, lack of skills, lack of leadership skills, rampant violence among others” (YA2_M_35).

Corruption also came out strongly. The participants said that for one to get a job, they must bribe the employer. This has led to discrimination of the poor youth who cannot access opportunities that have been monetized. One the youth reported how he was denied the opportunity to join one of the disciplined forces because he was not able to raise KES 350,000:

“I was not recruited because I didn’t have money for a bribe. To get a job in this country, you must be connected, I mean know somebody or part with a bribe” (Y14_F_20).

Further on corruption, some youth reported exploitation from their employers. Exploitation ranged from bribes, lots of work and sexual favors. A youth reported that:

“I was invited to an interview, but the employer demanded that I enter into an affair with him for me to get the job. I decided to abandon the pursuit for the job” (Y14_F_20).

Inaccessibility to government procurement opportunities was also cited as a barrier to the youth being able to do business with the government. The aim of the AGPO Program is to facilitate the youth, women, and persons with disabilities owned enterprises to be able to participate in government procurement (for more details refer here: <https://agpo.go.ke>). One of the youths reported:

“I have been applying for government tenders for three years to no avail. I wonder what

criteria they use to award those tenders” (Y24_F_23).

To curb unemployment, most of the participants expressed the need to leverage on entrepreneurship and youth empowerment programs. For example, here are four (4) excerpts on what organizations are doing to leverage on entrepreneurship as reported by the participants below:

“Gender and youth empowerment with key focus on livestock keeping and crop farming. We also provide loans to both women and youth and train them on entrepreneurship. In agriculture, we deal with the value chains from producers to consumers. This entails cooperative societies, financial institutions, middle men, farmers and consumers” (YA2_M_35).

“The key programs we implement include education of youths and children, life skill training, entrepreneurship and apprenticeship” (YW5_F_63).

“We endeavor to provide youth with the following skills and support to the best of our ability: technical skills, life skills, entrepreneurship skills, basic ICT skills, communication skills, work readiness skills and also support in linking with the industries” (YW6_F_46).

“We are working with youths aged between 18 and 34. Our main objective is to empower those that did not receive formal education by providing them with informal education as well as entrepreneurship skills. We also teaching them of their rights and how they can advocate for them” (YW12_F_27).

Some organizations offer the youth a combination of business capital grants, entrepreneurship education, financial management skills, and follow-up programs as cited by the following youth worker:

“We have youth empowerment programs, like, entrepreneurship, financial management. Then we used to support them with business capital and grants. In addition to that, we also have an approach that we think works for youth, where they see, come back and implement what they have seen, yeah. And, we believe it has worked for us not only for the youth but also for the women and other components we work with like livestock production” (YW13_m_30).

Youth Enterprise Development Fund is a measure the government has put in place to promote employment creation for the youth, as cited by one government officer:

“We also have other programs such as youth employment and participation. Under this, Youth Enterprise Development and Uwezo funds that are mainstreamed under the Department of Gender, where we are also stakeholders” (YW13_M_30)

Promoting Youth Development Through Creative Arts and Talent Development Programs

The participants reported involving the youth in programs that are geared toward advancing creative arts and talent development. The talent development programs are designed to help the youth interested in art to develop their talent. A number of participants reported that youth organizations are striving to harness youth talents for national development, as reported in following two excerpts:

“Our main mandate as a youth organization is to promote youth empowerment, mainstream youth in national development, and harnessing youth talents for national development, managing and promoting engagement with youth for national development, collaborating and overseeing stakeholders engaged in youth promoting activities” (YA4_M_47).

“We have youth who have skills and talent in given areas, so we have a thematic area we call youth and talent development. We also focus on youths who want to develop their talent” (YA17_M_40).

Another participant reported that “our organization is involved in talent search, music extravaganza, sports, athletics, and fine arts” (YW1_M_47). Through such events, the youth are able to showcase their talents and such talents are then harnessed. Kenya is widely known for producing world-class athletes. Such athletes are discovered through such events.

The youth are also involved in recreation and leisure activities. One of the youth workers said that “the youth take part in many activities such as games, sports, watching movies, swimming and indoor games” (YW14_M_32). Such activities play a crucial role in youth development and recognition of talent.

Empowering Youth: Navigating Reproductive and Sexual Health

The fourth theme describes the youth reproductive and sexual health (RSH) challenges and programs in Kenya as cited by the participants. The youth is a population that is at high risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS, while female adolescents face the additional risk of early pregnancy, unsafe abortion and female genital mutilation (Mutea et al., 2020). Further, a youth program administrator reported:

“There are many problems/challenges relating to our youths. Youths are about 60 percent of our population. The main challenge is HIV/AIDS” (YA2_M_35).

The youth have also come under sharp criticism for being sexually immoral. Sexual immorality leads to contraction of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, early marriages, and teenage pregnancies. For example, a youth worker summed up by saying that:

“Youth face a number of challenges in this country. Majorly, they include drug and substance, sexually immorality with leads to sexual abuse, prostitution, theft and HIV/AIDS” (YW4_F_30).

The participants also cited that the majority of the Kenya youth indulge in early marriages at the expense of developing skills. One of the youth workers cited:

“Unemployment, early marriages, drugs, indulging in sexual immorality” (YW1_M_47).

Gender-based violence (GBV) was categorized into the following three areas: female genital mutilation; harmful cultural practices; and teenage pregnancies. FGM was seen by the participants as a harmful cultural practice and precursor for teenage pregnancies and early marriages. This was summed up in the following statements from the youth program administrator:

“The biggest problem of the youth in this county is gender-based violence which manifest in the following ways: female genital mutilation (FGM); harmful cultural practices; and teenage pregnancies. It mostly affects the girls who are adolescents. FGM is used as rite of passage and once the girl undergoes the cut, the community thinks she is now ready for marriage” (YA8_F_21).

However, the participants reported that a number of reproductive and sexual health programs are in place. Example of programs that came up from this study include gender mainstreaming; HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention; anti-FGM campaigns; and GBV asylum. The following excerpt from the participants sheds lights on these programs:

“The main programs are Reproductive and Sexual Health Education for the youth. Our programs cover issues like Gender mainstreaming, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, anti-FGM campaigns and alternative rites of passage and a girls’ rescue center. The girls’ rescue center is an asylum for girls running away from early marriages and FGM practices” (YA5_F_43).

Navigating Psycho-Social Challenges and Fostering Youth Empowerment

The fifth theme illustrates the psycho-social challenges that the youth grapple with in Kenya and the struggle to strike the balance. Further, we also describe programs that organizations have put in place to address such challenges among the youth in Kenya. The majority of the youth are in pursuit for an easier life. Such youth are avoiding hardship and unpleasant experiences today in pursuit of easy money. According to the participants, manifestations of easy life include involvement in crime in pursuit of easily obtained money, and the pursuit for only high-end white collar-jobs and negative attitude toward entrepreneurship. This was summed up by one of the youth administrators who elaborated on how graduates are unemployed because they are not willing to take up informal jobs:

“Many have gone to school and there are no jobs to accommodate them, but they are unwilling to take up informal jobs. Most of them are not ready to come up with things that they can do to earn a living. As in, be their own bosses, that is to employ themselves” (YA2_M_63).

The participants said that the root cause of most of the challenges the youth face, including crime, is unemployment. This was summed up by the following statement from a youth:

“Most of the youth are educated but it is very difficult for them to get employment and this makes life very difficult for them and they have other issues such as: drugs and substance abuse, HIV/AIDS and criminality. According to me, the root cause of all these is just unemployment” (Y34_F_25).

Other participants thought that youth pursue easy life through crime because of the frustrations in life; for example, a youth officer said that “another problem is drug and substance abuse and crime among the youth. This comes as a result of frustrations in life and also peer pressure” (YA_M_40).

The participants also enumerated youth-parent challenges in Kenya. The following challenges emanate because of the generational gap, poor parenting, youth dependency and failure of the youth to know God, peer pressure, and spending too much time on social media. Concerning the generational gap, the bone of contention is that the youth want to make their own decisions and yet the culture demands that they respect their parents. The end result is an altercation between parents and the youth, as summed up by the following youth programs administrator:

“When you talk about the generational gap, it is manifested in the cultural practices or just behavior. Like in western region generally, the elderly still believe that the youth cannot think for themselves and make informed decisions. On the other hand, the youth feel that they can think on their own. This leads to some generational disconnect. This becomes one of the challenges affecting the youth though it depends or varies from one culture to the other” (YA3_M_40).

The participants also cited poor parenting, which has a serious impact on not only the youth but also on society as a whole. Physically, poor parenting manifests through child abuse, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, or emotional neglect, which can harm a child or put them or others in dangerous situations. Psychologically, bad parenting skills lead to children’s development and mental health problems (Li, 2023). One of the youth program administrators said that “most parents do not bring up their children. Some are absentee fathers; others are alcoholics and others don’t impart the right skills to enable them to survive in society. You see, the family is the fundamental unit of the society” (YA_M_33).

Closely tied to poor parenting is youth dependency. The participants reported that most of the youth are unable to detach from their parents even after college. This was exacerbated by unemployment as observed below:

“I am 25 years old and I still depend on my parents because of unemployment. If it were not for my parents, I don’t know how I would survive in this country” (Y36_M_25).

The participants also touched on the subject of youth and spirituality. Spiritual and religious involvement is an important dimension in youth development. The participants pointed out that youth who are grounded in religion are unlikely to engage themselves in delinquent behaviors. This was echoed by a youth worker (YW10_M_40) who said that “most of the youth engage in drug abuse, crime and immorality because they don’t go to church.” Here, religion is seen as a yardstick for measuring prosocial behavior among the youth.

The participants also reported psycho-social challenges like lack of psycho-social support, low self-esteem, inability to deal with emotions, drug and substance abuse. This was cited by a youth program administrator who said that:

“Most youth lack psycho-social support in the community to deal with their problem. Some of them have very low self-esteem and this has prevented them from addressing their issues as they do not believe in themselves” (YA14_M_32).

Most participants also weighed heavily on the subject of drug and substance abuse among the youth. In Kenya, drug and substance use is increasing and especially among the youth. Current statistics indicate that more than half of drug users are aged 10–19 years old and especially include those in universities. Most studies done in the country indicate that the commonly used drugs are nicotine, alcohol, and cannabis

(Oino & Obare, 2022). The participants cited the unemployment, peer pressure, and idle-mindedness as the causes of drug and substance abuse as stated:

“Lack of jobs has rendered many young people useless. All they do now is just to roam around the neighborhood in search of drugs and alcohol” (YA15_M_36).

To navigate psycho-social challenges, youth workers have implanted a number of youth empowerment programs. First, the participants reported the existence of youth mobilization and empowerment programs as cited by the following youth officer:

“We are involved in the following programs: sports activities, counseling sessions, workshops, empowerment projects and volunteering” (YW_M_55).

Second, the participants cited counseling services to facilitate the youth to explore and understand their own problems and needs. Earlier on, most youth expressed challenges with low self-esteem, crime, peer pressure, drug and substance abuse, and parent-youth conflict. For such youth, counseling services will help in behavior change. A youth administrator cited the following programs for youth empowerment and development:

“We offer youth empowerment programs such as counseling services, non-custodial sentences for delinquent youth and youth rehabilitation programs. We also teach them vocational skills and income generating activities” (YA6_F_46).

Last, organizations are also involved in spiritual development of the youth. The participants pointed out that spirituality is a key factor for youth development. The domains of spiritual development have been summed in the following statement by one of the youth program administrators:

“Actually, we do spiritual development of the child. Our operations are centered around four domains: spiritual which entails devotion and learning the word of God; cognitive which deals with mental growth of the child; physical which mainly deals with health issues; and finally; socio-emotional aspect which is mainly pegged on how the child can interact with others and become fruitful in the society” (YA20_M_38).

Overcoming Political Tribalism and Strengthening Youth Services

The participants complained about tribalism and nepotism, which affects access to services. They said that tribalism manifests when loyalty to one’s tribe is more important than loyalty to anything else. A youth workers said that:

“The main cause of unemployment, corruption, and underdevelopment in Kenya is tribalism. For one to get a job in Kenya, you must know the employer or part with money. Top directors in the organizations only employ their kinsmen” (YW12_M_24).

Tribalism in Kenya is indeed a major stumbling block to democracy as well as socioeconomic development. It persists since it provides an avenue through which state goodies and favors trickle down from those in power to their tribesmen. Therefore, loyalty to the tribe is given ever greater relevance than loyalty to the country (Masakhalia, 2011).

Little representation of the youth politically also came up as an issue. The participants maintained that without representation of the youth, their voices and subsequent needs are not taken care of. For example, one of the youths said:

“The youth are often sidelined by the political class and institutions. This has led to their exclusion in the development of policies that touch on them” (Y21_M_24).

The youth have been portrayed by the participants to be used by the politicians political aspirants use the to cause disharmony, to loot, and to cause disturbances especially during the election period. They are paid small money to stage demonstrations. This was echoed by YA19_M_35 who said that:

“I believe unemployment is the biggest of all the challenges. The other one is political instability. This is whereby politicians ‘use’ the youth to achieve their political goals.”

To curb tribalism and nepotism, the participants proposed proper administration and delivery of youth services by government. One of the youths (Y20_M_22) said:

“The government should streamline access of youth to government services and ensure all youth access services irrespective of their status in the society. The government should put up structures in place to curb tribalism, corruption and nepotism.”

Discussion

In this study, we explored the experiences of the youth, youth workers, and administrators on youth development programs in Kenya. Our main aim was to determine whether the current youth programs in Kenya aligned with the PYD model. The findings indicate a mixture of both the deficit-based and the strengths-based models of PYD. The deficit model is exhibited in the findings in the following ways.

First, the following labels have used to refer to the youth in the findings: “youth with disability,” “street youth,” “youth infected with AIDS,” “female youth,” “unemployed youth,” “out-of-school youth,” “youth with inadequate skills,” “youth who are not literate,” “come to work late,” “lacking in stress management skills,” “shortage of creative thinking,” “unemployed,” “youth lacking mentorship,” “less experienced,” “youth engaged in drug and substance abuse,” “involved in theft/criminality,” “youth in pursuit of easily obtained money,” “financially dependent on their parents,” “youth who do not know God,” “youth overindulging in social media,” “youth disregarding parental decisions,” “youth lacking self-esteem,” among others. These labels view the youth through a lens that emphasizes their perceived shortcomings or deficits, rather than focusing on their strengths, potential, or contributions to society. This overlooks the diverse skills, capabilities, and perspectives that the youth possess. However, the deficit model, while offering some insights into problems faced by the youth, has been widely criticized for its shortcomings. It neglects strengths and potential of the youth. These strengths can include communication skills, creativity, talent, problem-solving abilities, and a positive sense of self. Many models of intervention or prevention prior to the early 1990s focused almost exclusively on reducing risk exposure. They conceptualized youth as broken, dangerous, and “problems to be managed,” and involved or risk behaviors such as drug use, truancy, delinquency (Lerner, 2005; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), n.d.).

Second, the youth development programs have been developed to fix what is apparently wrong with the youth. For example, the establishment of YECs was in response to challenges facing the youth such as inadequate capacity and access to ICT services, guidance and counseling on drugs and substance abuse, and HIV/AIDS prevention, among others (Youth Empowerment Centers., n.d.). The priority groups in the

draft National Youth Policy are youth with disability, street youth, youth infected with AIDS, female youth, unemployed youth, and out-of-school youth (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2006); to address unemployment, *kazi kwa vijana* (KKV) (Swahili: “*Work for the Youth*”) was launched (Onyango, 2012); to address the mismatch between education and job skills, the education curriculum has undergone reforms to make it competency based; digital literacy education programs have been developed by the youth workers to equip the youth with digital competencies such programming, mobile app development, digital design and data visualization, social media content creation, and cyber security; mentorship programs have been created to link the youth to mentors; youth development programs offer the youth with a combination of business capital grants, entrepreneurship education, financial management skills, and follow-up programs to address unemployment; reproductive and sexual health programs such as gender mainstreaming, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention; anti-FGM campaigns; and gender-based violence asylum, among others.

This finding resonates with Roth & Brooks-Gunn (2000) who maintain that instead of solely fixing problems, a more effective approach should be the one that promotes health development across different cycles of the life of the youth. This is akin to the deficit model, which focuses solely on individual factors, neglecting the environmental context in which youth development occurs. Brown & Larson (2002) point out that while the programs and policies that focus on fixing youth problems are necessary, they might overlook the broader context of a youth’s life and the potential for positive development.

The findings on the deficit model contract the PYD principles as advanced by the Trabian Shorter’s Asset-Framing, Lerner’s 5Cs of PYD, and the 4-H Model that collectively promote a strengths-based perspective in youth development. The mentioned three models emphasize assets, strengths, and positive qualities. These frameworks collectively support youth in building resilience, achieving positive outcomes, and contributing positively to their communities. They provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and promoting holistic youth development that goes beyond addressing deficits to nurturing strengths and potential (Arnold, 2018; California Health Care Foundation, 2021; Lerner et al., 2011; Shorter, 2015; Tappe, 2022).

We also established the existence of an array of strengths-based PYD programs put in place by government and other development partners to address the youth development challenges. The programs exhibit a mixture of PYD that supports the positive functioning of all youth, ensuring every young person is prepared and ready to face the challenges that lie ahead; in particular, it focuses on the positive aspects (Arnold, 2020; Leman et al. 2017; Pittman, 2017). The programs also utilize models that have focused on problems that some young people encounter while growing up (Arnold, 2020; Leman et al., 2017; Pittman, 2017).

Findings suggest that there is a discrepancy between education and job skills of the youth. This suggests that despite the fact that Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) aim to equip new generations of students with skills and expertise relevant to workforce participation for decades to come, their offerings sometimes misalign with commercial needs and new techniques forged at the frontiers of research (Börner et al., 2018). According to Somers and colleagues (2019), a good match between labor supply and labor demand is indispensable for graduates and companies and, consequently, for the economy as a whole. A mismatch between the attended field of education and the job, also referred to as horizontal mismatch can have serious consequences, not only for the individual because of unemployment risks, wage penalties, or job dissatisfaction, but also for society. Participants’ observations of mismatch in education and job skills manifested in the following ways: a degree without the right skills, deficits in the curriculum, lack of life skills, insufficient mentorship programs and career services, illiteracy rates occasioned by school dropouts, and digital illiteracy. According to Diaz (2021), the 8-4-4 system has been criticized for creating people who have basic skills in multiple areas but lack expertise in any specific one with the curriculum being broad in coverage. On the other hand, scholars have categorized skills mismatch as labor market friction, including vertical mismatch (job does not match the level of qualification), skill gaps, skill shortages,

horizontal mismatch (job does not match with field of studies), and skill obsolescence (Béduwé & Giret, 2011; McGuinness et al., 2017; Somers et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, the participants in this study have highlighted the availability of youth programs toward addressing the mismatch in education and job skills like digital literacy education, youth mentorship program to link mentors, and career services such as internship and volunteering to gain the required skills. This is in line with Kloefkorn (2017) who calls organizations to develop a skills training program that can provide skills training for the external labor pool and current employees. Another way to fix the mismatch between jobs and education is by aligning education with economic need. IHL should align their curricula with the economic needs or requirements of the industry. Another positive step would be for youth soon to graduate from high school to think in terms of their interests and align those interests with a career path, then look for career paths that align with those passions. In many instances they may find that the education requirements are more focused and more specific (Cook, 2017).

To ensure that there is no mismatch in education and job skills, the Kenyan Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) began the process of curriculum change in 2016. KICD has adopted a competency-based approach (CBA). Here, they conceptualize a competency as the ability to apply learning resources and outcomes (knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) adequately in a defined context (education, work, personal, or professional development). A competency-based curriculum is a curriculum that emphasizes what learners are expected to do rather than mainly focusing on what they are expected to know (Akala, 2021; Njeng'ere & Lili, 2017).

On mentorship, Shorters (n.d.) emphasizes the importance of fostering positive relationships through connecting youth with mentors who can provide guidance and support while recognizing their strengths and creating opportunities for them to build healthy relationships with peers, fostering a sense of belonging and celebrating their diverse strengths.

Participants highlighted the following socioeconomic barriers: unemployment, lack of employability skills, business complaints, corruption, and inaccessible government opportunities that affect PYD in Kenya. But Hanna (2014) opines that from early childhood to young adulthood, there are several key obstacles to socioeconomic mobility that emerge. These include availability of early childhood education, level of peer support during adolescence, secondary school funding and quality, and skills development and job matching as a young adult. Our findings corroborate with those of Haider (2016), who identified the following socioeconomic barriers of the youth in Africa: demand-side factors (economic constraints; labor market failures; poor access to credit) and supply-side factors (educational and skills mismatch; lack of social capital) that are cross-cut by social, economic, and political biases against youth.

Nevertheless, the participants highlighted some programs in place to address the socioeconomic barriers of the youth. These include youth empowerment programs such as training on entrepreneurship, financial management, and youth enterprise development fund. Our findings have been corroborated by those of Shefiu (2016) as summed up in the following statement:

“Youth entrepreneurship as a tool that could be employed and also deployed for economic empowerment in order to arrest the growing rate of insecurity occasioned by poverty and unemployment. A thriving economy would require a greater number of young people who are willing and able to become entrepreneurs; who can launch and successfully develop their own commercial or social ventures, and who will become innovators in the wider organizations in which they work. Entrepreneurship can unleash the economic potential of young people and be a source of new jobs and growth, while improving their economic independence. Young people can no longer expect to find ‘job-for-life’ careers but rather ‘portfolio careers’ (contract employment, freelancing, periods of self-employment, etc.). Entrepreneurial experience and/or education help youth develop new skills that can be applied to other challenges in life.”

Third, the participants reported availability of youth programs that promote development through creative arts and talent development. Youth organizations are harnessing youth talents for national development. This is achieved through talent searches, music festivals, sports, athletics, and fine arts competitions.

To echo this finding, the government of Kenya has unveiled youth talent platforms. On August 7, 2023, the Youth Affairs, Sports, and Arts former cabinet secretary (CS) Ababu Namwamba launched “hustlers’ bazaar,” which is an initiative aimed at empowering the youth to showcase and market their talents. “Hustlers’ bazaar” will provide a platform for youth to monetize their talents. He also promised to support the creative work of young people through the Talanta Hela (Swahili: “Talent Is Money” or “Talent for Money”) initiative, and to promote informative discussions and expert presentations (KNA, 2023). The Talanta Hela initiative is meant to promote youths’ creativity and talents. The initiative has been digitized following the launch of an application that will ease the process of scouting for creatives, nurturing them and monetizing their skills. The app is available on Play Store for Android users and App Store for Apple users (Mwende, 2023).

The state department of Youth Innovation and Talent Development coordinates the development of strategies, projects, and programs that empower the youth through their creative abilities. The main functions are organization, directing, coordination and control of all matters on youth innovation, enterprise, and talent development (Republic of Kenya, n.d.). According to Lee (2021), parents and home environment are the most influential support systems at the early stage of talent development. Parents are the driving forces to get children into a talent field in which they have high levels of interest, enthusiasm, and knowledge, and exert influence on talent development via instilling values, monitoring, and providing support.

The participants highlighted the following reproductive and sexual health issues: HIV/AIDS, sexual immorality, early marriages, FGM, and teenage pregnancies. According to Kamaara (1999), reproductive health problems in Kenya include teenage pregnancy, abortion, HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases, and stress, which are of both policy and theological significance. Further, Kamaara noted that although premarital sex is condemned in nearly all societies, and young, unmarried people, especially young women, are not expected to be sexually active, the gap between expected and actual behavior is enormous. Illicit liquor has been attributed as a major etiology to RSH challenges.

According to Muturi (2014), rural communities are aware of the lethal nature of the illicit liquor and the severe reproductive health problems associated with it among male consumers. Alcoholism also affects women’s sexual and reproductive needs and is attributed to risky sexual behaviors in alcohol-discordant relationships, which puts them at a higher risk of HIV infection. To navigate reproductive and sexual health programs, the participants cited the availability of the following programs: gender mainstreaming, HIV&AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns, anti-FGM campaigns, and GBV rescue centers. According to Kamaara (1999), adolescent girls are not accessing reproductive health services. It is the policy of the Kenyan government to provide contraceptives to married couples only, through departments of obstetrics and gynecology and maternal child health clinics.

A significant number of adolescent girls seem not to be aware of these services or do not believe they are appropriate for themselves because they see them only in terms of pregnancy and childbirth. To enhance quality and accessibility, AMREF trains healthcare workers on Family Planning Counseling and the provision of sexual reproductive health services. They train healthcare workers across the healthcare system emphasizing competence and performance, on-the-job practice, mentorship, coaching and supportive supervision. This ensures that the target clientele (women, children, adolescents) access services from respectful and knowledgeable providers (AMREF Health Africa, n.d.).

According to the participants, there is a need to navigate psycho-social challenges in order to foster youth empowerment. An array of psycho-social challenges of the youth were cited by the participants. To begin with, the youth were criticized for pursuing an easier life. This prevailed through their involvement in crime in pursuit for easily obtained money, pursuit for only high-end white collar-jobs, and negative attitude toward entrepreneurship. Pursuit for an easier life was contradicted by existing findings. According to Adeosun and colleagues (2022), the youths are not lazy. Depreciating unemployment due to lack of continuity, accountability and transparency, nepotism, corruption, inadequate funding, selfishness, inefficiency, and bad leadership are forcing the youth to pursue alternative paths to life.

According to Merton's strain theory, societal structures can pressure individuals into committing crimes. Classic strain theory predicts that deviance is likely to happen when there is a misalignment between the "cultural goals" of a society (such as monetary wealth) and the opportunities people have to obtain them (Nickerson, 2023).

According to the participants, the generational gap came up as a challenge as well. Here, the elderly are culturally supposed to make decisions on behalf of the youth. On the other hand, the youth feel that they can think on their own. This leads to some generational disconnect. This disconnect can be attributed to a controlling parenting style with poor negotiation skills (Katz et al., 2019). What we can deduce here is that parents need to have candid conversations with the youth about psycho-social challenges that face them, such as negative peer pressure, attainment of education goals, time spent on social media, sexual and reproductive health, drug and substance abuse, and the need to be spiritual.

To navigate psycho-social challenges, youth workers have implanted a number of youth empowerment programs. One, youth empowerment and education provide opportunities to develop skills and equip the youth to become problem solvers and decision-makers (Siringi et al., 2019). Two, counseling services facilitate the youth to explore and understand their own problems of low self-esteem, crime, peer pressure, drug and substance abuse, and parent-youth conflict. Guidance and counseling is an important youth empowerment tool, which is beneficial to the youth in terms of creating self-awareness, promoting good relationships, and improving self-esteem (Chiiran, 2014). Three, the participants pointed out that spirituality is a key factor for youth development in Kenya. This finding was corroborated by Simiyu and Stephen (2021) who advanced that religious education (of mainstream religions, such as Christianity, Islam and Hindu) is crucial in orienting the young toward being responsible citizens to contribute to economic, social, and political development of the state. The youth who are religiously grounded tend to stay away from indiscipline, riots, drug and substance use, arson, and radicalization.

Finally, the participants said that there is a need to overcome political tribalism and strengthen youth services. They said that the main cause of unemployment, corruption, and underdevelopment in Kenya is tribalism. Further, participants reported that "you need to know someone in power or part with a bribe so secure a job." These finding resonates with that of Hope (2014) who discloses that the culture of corruption has grown roots in the Kenyan society at large and became endemic; institutions that were designed for the regulation of the relationships between citizens and the state are being used instead for the personal enrichment of public officials (politicians and bureaucrats) and other corrupt private agents (individuals, groups, and businesses).

Also, the participants reported little political representation of the youth. This deprives them an opportunity to participate in decision-making regarding their needs. According to Mzalendo Trust (2019), approximately 75% of Kenya's population is youth. Yet, young people make up only 6.5% of the country's Parliament. Kenya's 2010 constitution introduced provisions to its constitutional and legal framework to support the increased participation of youth. The new constitution also dedicated a youth seat in the Senate. Though multiple mechanisms exist to support and strengthen youth political participation, much still needs to be done to increase their engagement (The Carter Center, n.d.).

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

The findings from this study indicate a mixture of both the deficit-based and strengths-based models of PYD in Kenya. The Trabian Shorter's Asset-Framing, Lerner's 5Cs, and Oregon 4-H Youth Development Framework offer a powerful combination for maximum implementation of the positive youth development model in Kenya. First, researchers and practitioners can move beyond deficits by using the 5Cs to assess multiple aspects of youth development and asset framing to identify existing strengths. The 4-H model, with its focus on hands-on learning, leadership, and community engagement, provides a framework for program evaluation, measuring how programs cultivate these strengths and positive outcomes. Second, policymakers can use this knowledge to prioritize funding for programs aligned with these models. This could involve outcome-based funding where effectiveness is measured by how programs impact youth development through the 5Cs. Additionally, policies fostering collaboration between the government and 4-H-like organizations can expand PYD initiatives' reach. Finally, in practice, program developers can use the 5Cs and 4-H model to design engaging interventions. These programs can identify and build upon youth strengths (asset framing), while incorporating elements like mentorship and community service to foster connections and positive development.

Youth program developers should also prioritize the following context-specific recommendations. First, to ensure that there is no mismatch in education and job skills, the participants have called upon the government of Kenya to cause the implementation of competency-based education that emphasizes what learners are expected to do rather than mainly focusing on what they are expected to know (Akala, 2021; Njengere, & Lili, 2017).

Further, employers are required to establish skills training programs for capacity building of the external labor pool and current employees, in areas like digital literacy education, youth mentorship program to link mentors and career services such as internship and volunteering to gain the required skills (Kloefkorn, 2017). Also, the participants have called upon the youth soon to graduate from high school to think in terms of their interests and align those interests with a career path, then look for career paths that align with those passions.

Second, youth organizations have been called upon to leverage on youth entrepreneurship as a tool that could be employed and also deployed for economic empowerment in order to arrest the growing rate of insecurity occasioned by poverty and unemployment (Shefiu, 2016).

Third, the participants have proposed that youth programs can promote youth development through creative arts and talent development programs through talent search, music extravaganza, sports, athletics, and fine arts. Through such events, the youth are able to showcase their talents and such talents are then harnessed for youth empowerment and national development.

Fourth, to navigate reproductive and sexual health programs, the participants have proposed the availability of the following programs: gender mainstreaming, HIV&AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns, anti-FGM campaigns, and GBV rescue centers. There is also a need for health education and awareness creation for adolescent girls to access reproductive health services (Kamaara, 1999).

To enhance quality and accessibility, the participants have called upon the youth organizations to train healthcare workers on family planning counseling and the provision of sexual reproductive health services. This ensures that the target clientele (women, children, adolescents) access services from respectful and knowledgeable providers (Amref Health Africa, n.d.).

Fifth, the participants have tasked the government of Kenya and other stakeholders to address unemployment due to lack of continuity, accountability and transparency, nepotism, corruption, inadequate funding, selfishness, inefficiency, and bad leadership, which have forced the youth to pursue alternative paths to life (Adeosun et al., 2022). Crime and other forms of deviance among the youth are likely to happen when there is a misalignment between the "cultural goals" of a society (such as monetary wealth) and the opportunities people have to obtain them (Nickerson, 2023).

Further, the participants have called upon the parents to shun controlling parenting styles (Katz et al., 2019), in which parents keep close tabs on their children's lives, over-involving themselves where they can, and rather adopt negotiation skills to address psycho-social challenges of the youth, such as negative peer pressure, attainment of education goals, time spent on social media, sexual and reproductive health, drug and substance abuse, and the need for religiosity.

Finally, the participants have emphasized the need for religious education (of mainstream religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Hindu), which is seen as crucial in orienting the youth toward being responsible citizens to contribute to economic, social, and political development of the state. The youth who are religiously grounded tend to stay away from indiscipline, riots, drug and substance use, arson, and radicalization (Simiyu & Stephen, 2021).

The following limitations were noted in interpreting our findings. First, we conducted interviews in a limited number of six counties (Narok, Kisii, Kisumu, Kakamega, Busia, and Bungoma) hence, the findings only represent their perspectives. Conducting interviews with a larger number of participants from different counties beyond the six named here could produce distinctive findings. Second, the participants were varied, from different backgrounds, different levels of education, and different organizations. In the future, another researcher can carry out a study that can also involve the parents. Finally, despite the fact that we deployed different measures to establish and sustain rigor during qualitative data analysis to monitor biases, only the first author was more experienced in the qualitative method as compared to others who tended to be more inclined to the quantitative method. There is a need for future research on religiosity and PYD in Kenya, which has not been tackled by the original works in PYD in the global north.

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