

## Employability pathways in a sport-for-development programme for girls in a Sub-Saharan impoverished setting

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### Abstract

*Problem statement:* In Africa, youth unemployment is projected to worsen by 2050, partly because of an increase of about 6 million youths (15-24 years) per year entering the job market. Youth employability and employment mostly refer to formal wage employment without considering the earning capacity in different sectors of the informal economy. There is a significant knowledge gap relating to the potential contribution of the sport-for-development sector to youth employment. Pathway training for girls to ensure sustainable livelihoods – either as a contribution to household survival or socio-economic independence, informs the current research question. *Purpose:* The research aimed to unpack issues relating to youth employment/employability and pathway development of employability by evaluating relevant outcomes of a sport for development (SfD) programme of a non-government organisation (NGO). *Methods:* A mixed-method approach required the completion of a questionnaire on resilience by 255 participants (adolescent girls and young women/ACYW) and 19 leaders among school children (goal champions/GCs) from 19 different primary schools in impoverished communities within the Tshwane Metropole (Gauteng Province in South Africa). Qualitative data entailed focus groups in which 14 GCs, 37 ACYWs and 11 youth sport leaders (YSLs as programme implementers) participated. Four in-depth interviews focused on the employment strategies of YSLs delivering sport and a “money savvy” programme to vulnerable youth. *Results:* Contextual realities shaped the agency of all research participants from relatively impoverished households. The results show an increase in several dimensions of resilience, the mastery of fundamental life skills and a positive development trajectory towards entrepreneurship, personal savings, social connectivity, job-related experience and access to formal education and employment. *Conclusions:* Such a programme delivers different outcomes to different age cohorts associated with the level of maturity and roles and responsibilities of participants and coaches (YSLs). Particularly soft skills are envisaged to be highly transferable to the world of work as the youth find employment or engage in entrepreneurship.

**Key Words:** livelihood, sport for development, youth, employment, employability, volunteering

### Introduction

Africa is a young continent with half of the population under the age of 18 years, where 15-25 year olds make up 30% of the total population, which constitutes the youngest population globally and an average of seven years younger than those in South Asia being in second place (Fox, Senbet & Simbanegavi, 2016). A decrease in infant mortality and high fertility rates in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) accounts for a mean age of 24 years of the total population which is expected to grow at 6 million annually until 2050 (Betcherman & Khan, 2015). The ‘youth bulge’ provides the potential of surplus labor to be harnessed for economic growth, but multiple barriers exist for a large portion of rather low-skilled young workers.

How would African leaders contribute to the 8<sup>th</sup> Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) while striving for “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”? Subsequently, targets (8.5 and 8.6) of this SDG focuses on “substantially [and] reducing the proportion of youth in unemployment”, and “developing and operationalising a global strategy for youth employment” (Schwebel, Estruch, Wobst & Grandelis, 2019). Such a commitment features in the vision of the African Union’s Agenda 2063, supported by the Ouagadougou Declaration and Ouagadougou +10 Declaration on Employment and Strategy related to Poverty Eradication Inclusive Development in Africa that placed youth and female employment at the core of development (AU Commission, 2015).

The large cohort of youth entering the labor market annually needs to boost economic growth, but provide little absorption into wage employment within the formal sector. This gives rise to the ‘youth unemployment problem’ as a growing policy issue since the 1990s (Fox et al., 2016). The slow growth of wage employment for skilled workers, and lack of labor intensive enterprises, such as the manufacturing and service sectors to create a demand for relatively low-skilled youth workers, leave the informal (particularly agriculture) as an alternative for income-generation opportunities and household survival (Schwebel et al., 2019). A narrow focus on the definition of employment, obscures the phenomenon of youth employment that in real terms only measures 3%

(wage and non-wage related) considering their engagement in the informal economy (Fox et al., 2016).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 10% of the youth work in the formal wage employment sector, whilst two-thirds of the rest work in agriculture (farming) or household enterprises (firms) and thus considered 'under-employed'. Underemployment refers to marginal productivity and earnings below the minimum wage as per country or "vulnerable employment" (Betcherman & Khan, 2015, p. 8). As economic growth is largely driven by commodities and aid, the level of vulnerability is high for youth and households trapped in subsistence farming or small family-owned enterprises. Most lack the educational status or competencies to enter a competitive formal labor market.

The marginality of such youth features a gender dimension. About one out of four girls between the ages of 15 to 19 years in Sub-Saharan Africa, would have had a first child that limits their labor market choices and tie them down to a domestic sphere and child care (Fox et al., 2016). Cultural norms in support of women's roles as mothers and wives, impact on women's entrepreneurial activities and socio-economic empowerment, which lags behind that of men (Campos & Gassier, 2017).

The gender gap finds expression in different domains - at the organisational level in terms of profitability (Awad & Hussain, 2021; Hallward-Driemeier, 2013), in households (regarding control over decision-making) and at the individual level where men would have on average more access to diverse networks and display higher confidence levels than women (Campos & Gassier, 2013). Lower educational levels and norms embedded in patriarchal ideology generate persuasive stereotypes that contribute to keep women disadvantaged and resource-deprived, whilst exposing many to gender-based violence (Chakravarty, Das & Vaillant, 2017).

Youths face multiple barriers relating to low awareness of opportunities and should they enter into domestic enterprises, they experience a lack of access to credit, poor health, poor education, early motherhood and lack of supportive infrastructure (including access to transport) (Fox & Thomas, 2016; Ihensekhien & Asekome, 2017). Such factors include exposure to learn from good practices of labor initiatives, gerontocracy in terms of the advanced age of political leadership in African states (Fox et al., 2016), and the hybridity of youth positioned between traditional African and Western value systems (Lo-oh, 2019).

Employment (including unemployment and underemployment) have different facets associated with economic manifestations within the formal, non-formal and informal sectors. The development of hard or technical skills, and soft or psycho-social (life-related) skills are an integral part of the life-long learning trajectory of people (Khasanzyanova, 2017). For young (underemployed) individuals volunteering in communities and local organizations have become a pathway to acquire relevant knowledge, skills and competencies as part of non-formal (complementary to formal) and informal (self-directed) learning (Taimur & Mursaleen, 2020; Wallrodt & Thieme, 2020). Education and training programmes are key interventions to address youths' socio-economic vulnerability and aim to develop the key critical skills (e.g. social skills, communication, problem-solving, self-control and positive self-concept) in addition to finding pathways to become more employable (Chakravarty et al., 2017).

Several programme assessments reported on labor market outcomes of youth volunteerism (Taimur & Mursaleen, 2020). For instance, the MLSE Launch Pad programme offered at a sport for development facility in Toronto (Warner, Robinson, Heal et al. 2020) and sport-based employability programmes implemented in the Netherlands (Rotterdam) and the United Kingdom (Stoke-on-Trent) that provided mixed job-market outcomes for youth (Spaaij, Magee & Jeanes, 2013). Such research reports some good practices and effective mechanisms of positive youth development (PYD) related to the transferability of skills (Jacobs & Wright, 2018), role-modelling and mentorship (Darnell, Chawansky, Marchesseault et al., 2018; Whitley, Massey, Blom et al., 2017).

It is against this background that a research project was undertaken to determine the benefits related to employability skills and trajectories within the SID sector in South Africa. The context of chronic poverty and gender-related issues of this girls-only programme have bearing on the wider Sub-Saharan context, although there may be particular nuances and programme effects related to youth empowerment and employability.

### Research methodology

The research followed a descriptive and diagnostic design utilising quantitative and qualitative data sets. Methods included thematic document analysis, self-structured questionnaires (resilience and programme implementation), semi-structured interviews and focus groups. For this paper, only the data set from the resilience questionnaire were included and merged with the narrative data from interviews and focus groups (Burnett & Hollander, 2008).

A random selection of 255 AGYWs (85.6% between the age of 12 and 15 years) and 19 GCs (89.5% between the age of 13 and 15 years) completed the resilience questionnaire during research visits. Four (case study) interviews with one former YSL, one GC and two current YSLs took place. A purposive sample of research participants took part in focus group sessions or were interviewed. These include focus groups in which 5 YSLs, 14 GCs and 37 AGYWs participated. The latter two cohorts were from 19 different schools spread across the six townships or communities.

The analysis of documents, reports and captured data over three years, provided information on the planning, implementation and changes to the programme. Interview and focus group protocols included biographical, resilience and programme related questions and concluded with recommendations.

Trustworthiness of interviews and focus groups and validity criteria for the research questions and emergent data was ensured through applying the modalities of: (i) authenticity; (ii) member checking during interviews and focus groups with participants; and (iii) credibility and rigor (interviewing knowledgeable participants from a representative sample for in-depth data and interpretations of themes). A preliminary report was communicated to stakeholders for discussion that contributed to the qualitative validity and development of hierarchical content trees (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011).

### ***The programme***

A local Sfd, non-governmental agency (NGO) implemented the *Let's Lead, Let's Coach* programme funded by several international agencies. Fifty-nine (59) Youth Sport Leaders (YSLs) were recruited by word-of-mouth, screened, interviewed and contracted for programme delivery in six impoverished townships within the Tshwane metropole (within the Pretoria area and Gauteng Province). They attended 43 training sessions to deliver a sport, value-based and financial literacy ("Money Savvy") programme. They provided different services to adolescent girls and young women (ACYW) from 79 different primary schools and were assisted by 59 selected peer-to-peer school leaders selected from the previous year's participants (Goal Champions/GC).

The YSLs recruited 3,452 AGYWs and exceeded the target of 750 set for a three-year period. Within this timeframe, the programme catered for girls only and consisted of life-skill sessions, sport activities, financial literacy, 36 events and community outreach activities, tallying to 2,856 life skill and sport sessions delivered to 115 groups, as well as 16 community activity programmes. Programme implementation continued despite local political strikes, poverty-related challenges and vandalism of facilities and property. The NGO has a successful track record of more than 20 years, but is still dependent on donor-funding for programme implementation – including funding a 'stipend' (allowance based on a minimal wage hourly rate) to YSLs, who only received payment for sessions delivered and contracted activities.

The international funder focused on an intentional curriculum based on leadership and economic empowerment pathways (LEEP) that would lower the cost of girls' participation and equip youth leaders to take up leadership opportunities within the organisation. A strategy for programme sustainability targeted schools and teachers to take over delivery should external funding dry up. Extra-curricular programme sites were at the different schools or community facilities in close proximity of schools.

### ***Data analysis***

Quantitative data were captured and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Tables and graphs or frequencies were compiled in order to examine and finally report the collective responses of respondents as percentages. Structured interviews, case studies and focus groups provided narrative accounts from research participants that were reflective of individual situations, experiences and lived-realities. Following a line-by-line open coding, allowed for the clustering according to axial coding and theme-generation based on a grounded-theory approach (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011). Probing of issues during interviews and focus groups ensured a reflection on concepts for thematic development (Mills, Butt, Maynard & Harwood, 2012).

## **Results**

### ***Community context and programme environment***

Most girls, who often fear for their safety in community and household settings, mention high levels of abuse, violence and criminality. In one community, a girl was murdered and her body dumped close to a community sport facility. Transactional sex (sex in exchange for payment or access to resources) is an everyday occurrence and contributes to a high teenager pregnancy rate. Entrenched patriarchal ideology underpins popular belief systems that 'black girls could have a baby by mistake' and leave the particularly vulnerable. A GCs explained:

*Teenage pregnancies among girls as young as 14 years are many. Some do not want to tell their parents and seek an abortion. The clinics stopped giving injections. You have to control yourself. Girls have a will to be with men and they give them "blesar". [Giving goods in exchange for sex]*

Positive local experiences for girls, seen through the eyes of the AGYW relate to positive social relationships that are described as 'places where people can mix freely' and where 'people can communicate with their neighbors or were several households run house shops (spazas). However, poverty is tangible and evident in the lack of public infrastructure and destruction of the environment through vandalism – including community sport facilities.

Teenage girls particularly fear public violence associated with drug abuse and heavy drinking at local taverns making streets unsafe, especially in the late afternoon or evenings. In South Africa, one in three households do not go to open spaces or walk alone in parks, and one in five households do not allow their children to play on their own in the area they live because of fear for crime and violence (Statistics South Africa, 2017). School-based violence relates to 12.2% children who were threatened with violence and 4.5% had been robbed (Burton & Leoschut, 2013).

Precious\* (pseudo name) spoke about the plight of pregnant teenagers who would opt for illegal abortions for which they pay about R300 (£17/\$21). Besides the stigma and trauma, teenage mothers usually drop out of school and may have more children for which they 'claim welfare grants'.

In the case study of a youth sport leader who fell pregnant at a young age, joining the programme provided her with support as she found acceptance as teenage mother from her peers in the organisation. She saved money and was supported by family members to ‘bounce back’ and qualify as social worker. Another youth leader has been saving money and in the process to study part time to become a teacher. Many are not so lucky and several girls in the programme became part of national statistics – a reality contributing to chronic poverty, a heavy load of domestic labor and youth unemployment (Philander, 2017).

It is against this background that the programme aimed to contribute to the empowerment of girls by affording them the opportunity to become influential peer leaders and coaches, and that the findings related to programme outcomes should be understood.

**Leadership and increased participation**

All three case studies of YSLs speak to notions of self-improvement as the essence of an individual’s drive to renovate their homes and take care of family members, such as their children or mothers. One YSL qualified as social worker and obtained employment with an NGO. Another one who is completing modules at a distance learning institution and a third engaged in entrepreneurial activities and obtained opportunities to income-generation due to contacts made through her ‘volunteering’ as coach. She could successfully obtain other short-term contracts from government departments and also jointed a ‘stokvel group’. The latter represents a collective saving scheme where members contribute monthly and then once a year would benefit from a ‘large sum from the group’. Yet another scheme to which she contributes entails ‘monthly savings for Christmas when all will receive their money back with interest’.

Being recognised as a leader and mentor is particularly status-conferring to YSLs, who are acknowledged in the communities as ‘coach’ and respected for their services to the community. A former GC established a girls’ soccer team in her community and ran sessions based on learnings obtained from the local organisation. She is held in high esteem by young girls who joined her team. Considering the leadership and efficacy related actions taken by the AGYWs, and then a year or two later when some are selected as leaders (GCs), show an increase of girls being selected in school leadership positions (57.9% and 68.6% respectively). Most girls became more active by joining school sport (77.6% for AGYWs) or took part in other extra-curricular activities (53.9%).

**Resilience**

The measurement of resilience refers to the capacity of individuals to navigate their way through different circumstances by tapping into psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that would contribute to their personal well-being and quality of life (Liebenberg, Ungar, & Van de Vijver, 2012). Resilience has multiple dimensions and is shaped by processes that reduce negative effects of stressors, whilst facilitating positive outcomes for the individual (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). Figure 1 shows that CGs and AGYWs display similar patterns on the measurement of resilience on a three-point Likert Scale.

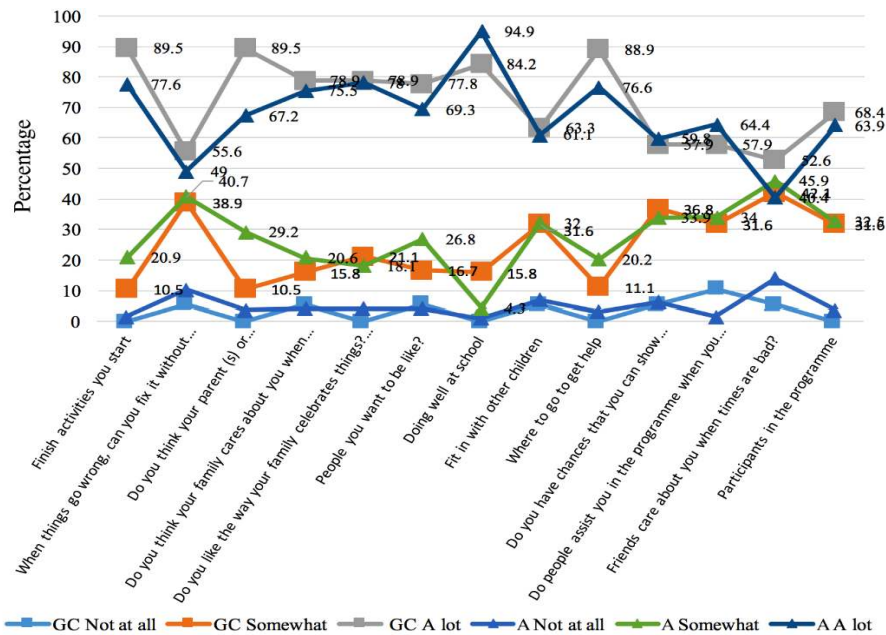


Figure 1. Comparison of GC and AGYW (A) on frequencies of Resilience items

Relatively more GCs indicated that their parents/guardians understand them (‘a lot’) and they know where to get help (‘a lot’). This corresponds with the ‘somewhat’ categorial choice of the option mentioned (parents/guardians understand them) where the frequency balanced out for relatively more AGYW who chose this option.

From these findings, it appears that both cohorts demonstrate a high level of resilience relating to the clustering of responses according to sub-indexes of the Resilience Questionnaire for Youth (<http://www.resilienceresearch.org/>). Items corresponding to high agreement ('a lot') category, include: (i) psychological care giving (items 5.3, 5.8 and 5.11); (ii) individual/personal skills (items 5.4 and 5.5); (iii) individual/social skills (items 5.6, 5.10 and 5.13) indicate that less than 60% from both cohorts have chances to prove themselves to others; (iv) cultural aspects (item 5.1); (v) educational aspects (items 5.2 and 5.7); and (vi) peer support (items 5.9 and 5.12) indicated that GCs (63.3%) and AGYW (61.1%) fit in with other children.

A ripple effect emerged as indicated by respondents who discussed their involvement with the programme with household members and friends, or would provide advice to others outside of the programme. The overarching sense of belonging with the programme demonstrates and serves as influences for identity formation and many said they were proud to be a 'girl' (gender identification) and to be associated with the programme.

#### **Socio-economic effects**

Being 'money savvy' was a novel and meaningful initiative and contributed to personal savings and entrepreneurial activities. Most participants managed to save money (73.3% for AGYWs and 85.7% for GCs), despite the fact that only 49% (AGYWs) and 57.1% (GCs) drew up budgets. Qualitative data confirm this observation that such savings had direct bearing on individuals and households in different settings.

Saving money became a means of building positive relationships of trust and increased the status for a person among family members and friends. For many girls it was impossible to save money if they only got R5 (US\$ 0.33) per week pocket money or to 'buy something to eat'. In such cases, some would go without food to build up some savings. Participants used their savings to buy gifts for their loved ones on their birthdays, to spoil a friend, or to purchase clothes or 'luxuries' for themselves. Most spent their savings to overcome hardship and (collective) hunger by buying 'food for the house'. The following narratives attest to the building of trusting and caring relationships in this regard:

*I saved R300 [£16.7] in 2017 and bought clothes and toiletries. In 2018 I saved R700 [£38.9] and helped my mother to buy food for our children.*

*I saved R420 [£23.3] and bought stationery and school things in 2017. This year I saved R120 [£6.7] to spend on my brother's wedding.*

*I saved R500 [£27.8] and used it to buy a new bra and slippers for my mother.*

*I saved more and had R600 [£33.6]. I have a special relationship with my grandmother and she borrows money from me, when she wants something. She wants it now and cannot wait for her grant [to be paid out]. I would lend her R100 [£5.6], but if she is a week late, I charge her R10 [£0.6] interest and R20 [£1.2] for two weeks late. She always pays back with the interest.*

*I saved R700 [£38.9] and will buy myself a cell phone. I also saved R150 [£8.3] from last year and will spend it on entrepreneur's day to make more money.*

Having access to savings enabled girls to support their households in time of need, to invest in relationships of social significance or to engage in entrepreneurship (lending and charging interest or selling and making a profit at school). Many found it very rewarding and the average savings reported per focus group was around R300 [£16.7] per annum with some outliers of up to R800 [£44.4] or even R1200 [£66.7] per annum.

#### **Employability**

Most youth sport leaders claimed to have experienced personal development and acquired 'soft skills'. Although only a few found wage employment or made contacts through their work to gain entry into the job market, they were relatively optimistic that they had improved opportunities to find work. Nine (15.3%) YSLs accessed income-generating opportunities (jobs) in different work environments. These included finding employment as (salaried) cashiers or administrators, working in sales (earning a percentage), or opening own businesses (driving instructor, aerobics instructor, financial advisor or trading). Most thus engaged in vulnerable employment of short duration (contracts), whereas engagement in the informal economy was risky.

Most YSLs acknowledged the transferable soft and technical skills into the world of work, but had to acquire additional qualifications (computer courses or a driver's license) or found (often borrow) seed funding for start-up small enterprises. The aspiration was to gain access to formal education (bursaries and/or improved academic marks), whilst considering 'office work' as beneficial to 'build a curriculum vitae'.

#### **Discussion and conclusion**

From these findings, it is evident that global and regional development goals associated with economic growth, poverty eradication and decent (sustainable) employment (Fox et al., 2016; Schwebel et al., 2019) is out of the reach of most low skilled youth and young women having at best to settle for vulnerable employment opportunities in the informal economy. Access to 'volunteer work' where they could earn a stipend and gain experience, competencies (soft skills) and earn the appreciation from household and community members, is a key strategy to overcome the everyday hardships of poverty, whilst finding meaning in serving the community with the expectation that it will lead to formal employment or opportunities to sustainable business opportunities (Taimur & Musaleen, 2020). The expectations and envisaged programme outcomes for temporary employed youth articulate with similar findings reported by other sport for development programmes (Spaaij et al., 2013;

Warner et al., 2020). Much value is linked to the transferability of learnings from voluntary work to entering the job market (Jacobs & Wright, 2018).

Although the youths' involvement in the sport for development programme corresponds with other programmes focusing on contributing to the transition into employment (Darnell et al., 2018; Whitley et al., 2017), this programme only addressed youth employability indirectly – a possible value-add to programme outcomes rather than a planned outcome. What are rather novel findings, is the pathway trajectory of positive youth development and the contribution of the 'Money Savvy' programme on the development of entrepreneurship.

In the first instance, the young participants who had only one year of programme experience (ACYWs) engaged enthusiastically to save money, but used such savings for personal items or for building social relationships or assist their families in need. However, it contributed to various dimensions of building personal and household resilience in being voted in as leaders and becoming more active and civic-minded at their schools and in the community. This led to some of them being selected as Goal Champions within the programme to assist the coaches (YSLs) and serve as role models in the programme. Evidence supports a progressive trajectory towards entering into self-constructed entrepreneurship by earning interest from personal loans. For one of the YSLs, self-employment was a viable option in addition to link up with other entrepreneurial activities and saving schemes in the community. For the two other case studies, saving money not only became a way of life, but enabled them to study part-time with the possibility to gain full-time employment in the formal sector. One did find such employment as a social worker, but remained in the service sector where the altruistic traits and soft skills obtained as volunteer, served her well.

The sport for development sector is well aligned with youth volunteering despite the multiple obstacles to engage in sport programmes that could lead to (formal) employment (Kay & Bradbury, 2009). Offering sport-related programmes to young disadvantaged youth, set the scene for positive role-modelling, learning crucial life skills contributing to resilience (Liebenberg, Ungar & Van de Vijver, 2012) and empowering experiences. A voluntary workforce of young coaches may earn a stipend (allowance), have opportunities to forge relationships and make connections, whilst mastering soft and technical skills transferable to the world of work (Peachey, Lyras, Cohen et al., 2013). Similar outcomes and insights emerged from this study and insights drawn from this study, demonstrate that even small inroads made by sport for development organisations, may have significant outcomes for unemployed youth in developing the competencies for employment (Spaaij et al., 2013). Finding a social home, acceptance and support from other youth within a sport for development programme, provides the identification and self and collective acceptance during times of hardship (Warner et al., 2020). Sponsors and agencies should ensure that the socio-economic empowerment of young women speak to realistic outcomes and effective programme designs to deliver on the expectations of the youth's transitioning into the world of work (Betcherman & Khan, 2015; Ihensekhien & Asekome, 2017).

Opportunity-driven (rather than mere opportunist) outcomes and links to existing community-based networks, mentorship and resources would support an asset-based approach for development work. Although youth employment may not be a key programme outcome, impact assessments and research can meaningfully contribute to inform evidence-based actions for diverse pathways into employment and as such, make some inroad into community and economic development.

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