

Amplifying Youth Voices in the Green Economy: A youth-led Study in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the aspirations, motivations, and structural barriers that shape young people's engagement with green employment in Uganda. Drawing on a mixed-methods, youth-led research approach combining a survey, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews, the study revealed an overwhelming willingness by young people to engage in green jobs--notably organic farming and recycling activities. While a significant proportion of the respondents indicated that they were not working in their dream jobs, they also expressed pessimism that they would land such decent jobs. Financial constraints, skills deficits, limited land access, and weak policy implementation emerged as the dominant barriers across individual, household, and community levels. Gender disparities further compound these challenges, with young women facing disproportionate obstacles rooted in cultural norms and family expectations. We recommend that unlocking youth potential in Uganda's green economy requires integrated, youth-centred policy reform, gender-responsive programming, and sustained institutional investment.

Keywords: Green jobs, youth employment, Uganda, youth-led methodology, Green economy.

INTRODUCTION

The global transition towards sustainable development has intensified demand for green employment into roles that preserve or restore environmental quality while generating decent livelihoods (ILO, 2021; UNEP, 2008). In sub-Saharan Africa, where the youth constitute the majority of the population and unemployment remains a persistent structural challenge, the green economy represents both an urgent imperative and a transformative opportunity. Uganda exemplifies this dynamic: with over 78 per cent of its population under the age of thirty, the country faces a youth' unemployment rate of approximately 13.3 per cent among those aged 15–24 (BTI, 2024), set against a backdrop of accelerating environmental degradation, erratic rainfall, and deforestation.

The Ugandan government has responded with an ambitious policy architecture, including the 2017-2030 Uganda Green Growth Development Strategy (UGGDS), which targets the creation of more than four million green jobs by the year 2030 (Government of Uganda, 2017; FAO, 2018). Yet the gap between policy aspiration and lived reality for young Ugandans particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds remains wide and poorly understood. Existing research tends to focus on macro-level economic projections or sector-specific analyses, leaving the subjective experiences, aspirations, and structural constraints of young people themselves largely unexamined.

This paper addresses that gap. It presents findings from a youth-led, mixed-methods study conducted in Jinja City and Nakasongola District, two contrasting socio-ecological contexts within Uganda, as part of the broader Green Jobs and Young People in Africa project. The study was designed to amplify the voices of marginalised youth, including young women, persons with disabilities, and rural youth, in conversations about green employment that too often proceed without them.

Global Literature Review on Green Jobs

In the past two decades, the topic of “green jobs” has drawn particular attention, resulting in a diverse and relatively large number of published papers (Stanef-Puică et.al, 2022). According to the European Commission (2019) for instance, the global atmosphere is warming and that may cause the extinction of no less than one of eight million species. Overall, the “green jobs” term has started to grow content in recent years, but the approach to areas that offer such opportunities and specific skills differs from one country to another (Stanef-Puica et. al, 2022). There is also widespread controversy over the lack of a universally accepted definition of green jobs -- including the precise highlight of areas and the accurate number of such jobs.

One of the earliest definitions of green jobs refers to a range of activities that involve the production of goods and services for measuring, preventing, limiting, and minimizing damage to the environment, water, air, and soil (OECD,1999). From this perspective, green jobs play a very important role, as they make substantial contributions to solving problems arising from the need for waste recycling, noise pollution, climate change and the restoration and improvement of ecosystems (Battaglia, et al; 2017). For many scholars, this definition is quite comprehensive, including all activities that use cleaner technologies, products, and services, with the ability to reduce environmental risks, methods and technologies that minimize pollution and any management practices that permit an efficient use of natural resources (Battaglia, et al; 2017).

Another approach to this discourse classifies green jobs either as outcomes or as processes (Van Der Ree (2019). One of the commonest perspectives goes towards generating environmentally-friendly goods or services through these jobs such as green buildings, clean transport, or solar water heating systems. The second angle assumes that green jobs contribute to greener processes, such as by reducing water consumption, controlling air pollution, or improving recycling services. According to this discourse, green jobs drive environmental sustainability by transforming traditional production models into eco-friendly systems. By focusing on emission reductions, waste minimization, and energy efficiency, these roles directly establish a circular economy that counteracts climate change (ILO, 2021). This perspective posits that green jobs meet decent work standards while operating with processes that fundamentally protect the planet.

There are also cases where global literature frames the green transition as an opportunity to create jobs in existing and emerging economic sectors (Urban et. al; 2023). Under this discourse, the European Union further advocates for the need to re-skill workers to ensure a socially-just green transition. Despite this renewed surge in interest- partly propelled by the necessity to mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis as well as external shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine however--the notion of green jobs is not a recent phenomenon (Urban et.al; 2023).

Further review of the global literature on this subject shows that several countries embraced the green economy model much earlier and at varying levels. Denmark, Switzerland and Germany were among the countries at the forefront of promoting the green economy (Maia, et.al; 2021), while emerging economic powers such as China are now making huge commitments to green energy production and have clearly shown their intentions to play a dominant role in renewable energy-associated industries (such as wind-powered turbines). In Africa, South Africa has one of the most carbon-intensive economies in the world, thus making the greening of the electricity mix a national imperative. For instance, with one of the best solar resources globally and available land, there are opportunities for the successful roll-out of concentrated solar power (CSP) and photovoltaic (PV) solar power projects. This is also complemented by the country’s wind energy potential and the relatively mature stage of their technological development (Maia, et.al; 2021).

Overall, a review of the literature shows that critics of "green jobs" center on their perceived vague definitions, inconsistent job quality and limited net-employment growth. Many analyses further show that transitioning sectors can yield lower wages and less security for low-skilled workers, while methodologies used to measure these roles often misclassify or exclude essential workers (Villani, et.al; 2025). Some researchers also point to the lack of a universally accepted definition of “green job” (Bowen et. al; 2019) while others believe that the concept of “green job” seems to be in a state of permanent construction (Rodriguez, 2019).

On the other hand, some authors choose to address the issue of green jobs starting from the definition given by an international body, such as that those by the partnership between the Program United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the International Organization of Employers (IOE) and the International Labor Organization (ILO). Nonetheless, the key denominator to all these definitions is that they present green jobs as roles that actively preserve or restore the environment. Despite shortcomings on their definitional ambiguity, skill mismatches and the risk of exacerbating socio-economic inequality during the transition to a low-carbon economy among others, the gaps in the global literature present a compelling case for this study for many low and middle-income countries such as Uganda.

The conceptualization of green jobs and youth' employment in the African context

The concept of green jobs was formally introduced through the Green Jobs Initiative--a collaboration between the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Trade Union Confederation, and the International Organisation of Employers--launched in 2008. The ILO defines green jobs as 'decent work that contributes to preserving or restoring the environment, whether in traditional sectors such as manufacturing and construction or in new, emerging green sectors such as renewable energy and energy efficiency' (ILO, 2021). Crucially, a role qualifies as green only if it also adheres to decent work standards, encompassing fair wages, workplace rights, social protection, and community dialogue (Renner et al., 2008).

Two broad categories are commonly distinguished: roles that actively generate environmentally sustainable products (such as organic farming, waste recycling, and eco-construction), and roles that enhance the environmental performance of existing production processes (such as cleaner industrial methods and energy efficiency). While no universally accepted definition exists, most researchers argue that green jobs must integrate environmental responsibility with equitable labour standards (see Al-Ammarat & Al-Mashaqaba, 2022; Stanef-Puică et al., 2022).

Youth unemployment is a defining challenge of the twenty-first century. Globally, forecasts suggest that by 2030, up to 25 million individuals aged 15–29 will be entering the labour market annually in search of work (Okijie et. al., 2023). The ILO's 2018 World Economic and Social Outlook projected a potential net global increase of 18 million jobs through a transition to clean energy by 2030 (Mwaura & Glover, 2021). In Africa, where the majority of youth work in sectors highly vulnerable to climate variability including agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, the green transition carries particular urgency.

Yet the pathway from green policy to green employment for young Africans is faced with obstacles such as the relevant skills and educational credentials that are out of reach for many of them. Besides, critical sectors such as agriculture and construction are also perceived by some as undesirable or economically precarious (IFAD, 2016). Overcoming these barriers therefore, requires targeted investments in education, skills training, and inclusive policy development (Zabin, 2020; GIDJY, 2017).

Although women and young girls are capable of thriving across all green job categories, they remain systematically underrepresented, particularly in higher-paying, non-traditional roles (ILO, 2015; Bhatta, 2017). As climate change exacerbates existing gender inequalities which disproportionately affect such vulnerable groups' livelihoods, food security, and mobility, the impetus for gender-responsive green economy policy becomes even more pressing (UN Women, 2025; UNDP, 2015). Elder & Kring (2016) for instance, document a 'double strike' facing young women in developing countries: the combined disadvantage of youth and gender in labour markets. In most African countries, this double disadvantage is compounded by a range of socio-cultural norms that restrict women's participation in public and outdoor activities, their access to land and credit and education opportunities.

The Ugandan Policy Landscape

Uganda has developed a comprehensive policy architecture for green employment, including the National Employment Policy (2012), the National Climate Change Policy (2013), the Renewable Energy Policy (2007),

the National Agriculture Policy (2013), the Uganda Forestry Policy (2006), and the Uganda Green Growth Development Strategy (2017–2030). The National Development Plan IV (2025/26–2030/31) further emphasises green growth and climate adaptation as pillars of sustainable development (National Planning Authority, 2025).

However, as some researchers have argued, the effectiveness of these policies has been constrained by weak enforcement, insufficient grassroots integration, and a persistent disconnect between national ambition and local reality (Bbaale et al. 2023; Mwaura & Glover, 2021). This paper contributes to this discourse by providing empirical evidence grounded in the voices of young people—one of the most affected populations by the ‘green jobs’ phenomenon.

Research question and study objectives

The overall **research question** for the study from which this paper was written was: How do young people in Uganda navigate their aspirations and opportunities in pursuing green jobs amid the barriers and posed by the climate change impact on their lives?

The **general** study objective was to understand young people’s perspectives on their lives and work experiences in an environment impacted by climate change.

The **specific** objectives were:

- To describe the specific career aspirations and underlying motivations that influence young people (aged 18–35) to seek green jobs.
- To explore the opportunities available to young people in environmental preservation and restoration.
- To assess the barriers faced by young people in their pursuit of green jobs and the areas of support to enable them achieve their aspirations.
- To examine how the policy environment influences young people’s access to green job opportunities at the local, national and international levels.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research design and approach

A cross-sectional research design was used for this study and was adopted to obtain data from a defined population at one point in time during the specified period of study. By using this design, we were also able to examine the characteristics, experiences and barriers to youth’ employment as they obtained at the time of data collection. A mixed-methods approach was also adopted involving both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis.

The researchers adopted a youth’ participatory action research approach (frequently referred to as Youth Participatory Action Research-YPAR) that offers an alternative way to structure the research process with youth at the forefront (Barford & Proefke, 2023). This approach places value on young people’s in-depth knowledge of the issues they face and on ‘the ability of [young] people to critically reflect upon their own experiences to generate scientific knowledge without the intermediary of the outside researcher’ (London 2007: 407). Overall, this approach which positions young people not merely as research subjects but as active co-producers of knowledge.

A total of sixteen (16) youth researchers aged 18–35 (as defined by the Constitution of Uganda, 1995) were recruited and trained in both quantitative and qualitative research techniques before they participated in data collection and the subsequent data management processes. They also participated in the design and piloting of the data collection tools and in a collaborative analysis workshop in which they transcribed data, conducted thematic analysis, and identified key patterns. This approach ensured that the priorities and perspectives of

young people remained central throughout the research process.

Study sites

The research was conducted in Jinja and Nakasongola districts-- selected for their contrasting socio-ecological profiles. Whereas Jinja City--situated in Uganda's Eastern Region, is characterised by agricultural and industrial activity--is a relatively urbanised population, Nakasongola District--located in central Uganda-- is predominantly rural and semi-arid, with an economy centred on livestock rearing. The two study districts illuminate the diverse challenges and opportunities for green employment across different environmental and economic landscapes.

Sample size

The quantitative sample was determined using the Kish (2014) formula given as: $N = \frac{p(1-p)Z^2}{e^2}$ where N = is the required sample size, Z = the Z-score corresponding to the desired confidence level (most commonly 1.96 for a 95% confidence level), p = The estimated proportion or prevalence of the attribute within the population (0.05) and 1 is a constant value. Substituting in the above formula:

$$= \frac{0.8 \times 0.2 \times 1.96^2}{0.049^2} = 656$$

Of the targeted 656 respondents, a total of 597 valid responses were obtained (indicating a response rate: 91 per cent). Respondents were selected through simple random sampling from village-level lists provided by local leaders.

The qualitative component comprised 16 FGDs (8 per district, including both women-only and mixed-gender groups) involving 160 participants, and 12 purposively selected KIIs with government officials, cultural leaders, environmental officers, and civil society representatives.

Table 3.1: Summary of Sample Composition

Participant Group	Method	Sample Size	Gender (M/F)	Age Range	Location
Young people	Survey	597	316 / 281	18–35 years	70% Rural, 30% Urban
District/local stakeholders	KII	12	7 / 5	—	60% Rural, 45% Urban
Young people	FGD	160 (16 groups)	83 / 77	18–35 years	80% Rural, 25% Urban

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel, with descriptive statistics used to identify trends, frequencies, and patterns. Qualitative data were subjected to participatory thematic analysis: youth researchers transcribed FGD and KII data, conducted preliminary deductive coding aligned with the research questions, and refined emerging themes through iterative review. Findings were validated through community and stakeholder presentations in both districts, enabling participants to interrogate and refine the analysis.

Ethical considerations

The study was undertaken following formal ethical clearance from a recognized University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the national regulator for research activities in Uganda. Informed consent was obtained from all participants; anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms and unique codes; and data were stored in password-protected, encrypted files. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study as and when they deemed it necessary.

Study limitations

Although the youth-led research approach which enabled young people to participate in its design, data collection and dissemination is arguably one of the strengths of this paper, the authors acknowledge the following limitations associated with its adoption:

- (i) Bias in the recruitment of youth researchers for the study: Given that the youth researchers who participated in the study were recruited through the structures of Restless Development—an international youth-focused Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)—it is possible that only the young people involved were those who were available to at the time of recruitment or those who were interested in the process but lacked the necessary profile of the target population. This was however, mitigated by targeting a high sample size of the young people involved in the study.
- (ii) Limited researcher experience and skills for the young people: During the latter stages of the study, it emerged that some of the young people recruited to participate in the study had limited experience in interviewing techniques, data recording and management. Some of them were also found to be lacking skills in data coding and analysis. This was mitigated by further training of such researchers which increased the cost of the research and time involved in data collection and report writing.
- (iii) Diversity of the youth: Fully aware of the fact that youth are not a homogeneous group, we tried to recruit as many respondents based on education, location, socio-economic status and age; among other factors. However, we noticed that there was disproportionate representation of some categories of youth such as those living with disabilities. To mitigate this limitation, we involved more youth with disabilities in the data validation and study dissemination meetings at both the sub-national and national levels.
- (iv) Multi-response questions and denominators: In this study, we had several cases where we allowed the respondents to select multiple responses to a particular question. In this case, we present some statistics in this paper where some percentages presented may sum to more than 100. Such cases should not be interpreted as either an error during the analysis or inconsistency in the data that would have been undetected by the authors.

FINDINGS

The study findings in this paper are presented in four subsections, each corresponding to the specific objective objectives of the study from which it was written namely: (i) career aspirations and motivations; (ii) opportunities in environmental conservation and restoration; (iii) barriers and support needs; and (iv) the policy environment.

Demographic profile of respondents

The largest age cohort of the study respondents was 26–30 years (38.9 per cent), followed by 22–25 years (27.8 per cent), 18–21 years (17.4 per cent), and 31–35 years (15.9 per cent). The male respondents constituted 52.9 per cent of the respondents while the female respondents accounted for 47.1 per cent. Secondary (Ordinary Level) education was the most common attainment (42 per cent), followed by primary level (29 per cent) while only 4 per cent indicated that they held a university degree. Vocational education and other levels of tertiary education constituted the remaining 25 per cent of the responses given by the respondents.

Livelihood activities for the respondents

Crop cultivation was given as the primary source of livelihood by the majority of the respondents (60.3 per cent), followed by animal husbandry (27.7 per cent) and self-employment (10.6 per cent). Only 1.4 per cent of respondents reported formal employment, underscoring the dominance of informal and subsistence-level economic activity. A closer analysis of the findings showed that Jinja City respondents showed greater engagement in brick-making, self-employment, and small business, while the Nakasongola district respondents

were more concentrated in agriculture and livestock keeping—a pattern that enhanced the contrasting socio-economic profile of the two districts.

Career aspirations and motivation for engaging in the ‘dream job.’

Approximately 82 per cent of the respondents reported that they were not working in their ‘dream job.’ On the other hand, 18.4 per cent of the respondents indicated that their career aspirations in private business ownership while those who aspired to work government-employment ‘dream jobs’ represented 9.5 per cent of the respondents¹. This strong entrepreneurial orientation reflects both a desire for autonomy and dignity, and a perception that formal sector employment is inaccessible to many young people.

Pessimism about the prospects of achieving dream employment was pervasive: A total of 66.1 per cent of the respondents considered it ‘unlikely’ (35.6 per cent) or ‘very unlikely’ (30.5 per cent) that they would ever attain their desired career. Only 5.9 per cent considered it ‘very likely’ to land their ‘dream jobs.’ This perception gap between aspiration and perceived feasibility of engaging in the ‘dream jobs’ reflects cumulative experiences of rejection, unemployment, and limited social networks and resources to access such employment.

The most common constraint to achieving the ‘dream job’ employment cited by the respondents was the lack of required education (35.1 per cent), followed by insufficient working capital (29.8 per cent) and inadequate skills training (18.1 per cent). Nepotism and tribalism were cited by only 1.3 per cent of the respondents suggesting that more immediate structural barriers dominate young people's experience of exclusion.

Motivation for green work

Despite widespread pessimism about formal employment, environmental motivation among respondents was high. A significant 86.4 per cent of the respondents expressed willingness to engage in activities that preserve or restore the environment, followed by organic agriculture (51.4 per cent), recycling and waste reuse (34.1 per cent), tree planting (20.2 per cent) and renewable energy production (14.3 per cent). Energy efficiency, a technically demanding and less familiar domain, was cited by only 5.6 per cent, suggesting that youth engagement in green work is concentrated in practical, land-based activities such as planting trees.

Among the 13.6 per cent of the respondents who expressed no motivation for environmental work, the primary reasons were lack of government support (51.1 per cent), insufficient funding for investment (34.6 per cent), and absence of perceived economic benefit (14.3 per cent). These responses confirm that disengagement is driven primarily by external, systemic factors rather than by their indifference or lack of environmental awareness.

Opportunities in environmental conservation and restoration

Tree planting emerged as the dominant conservation and restoration activity, cited by 71.4 per cent of the study respondents. Its prominence reflects both its perceived accessibility requiring minimal resources and no specialist training and its direct relevance to the environmental changes experienced by the youth in their communities such as: rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, soil erosion, and biodiversity loss.

This was explained by one female FGD participant from Jinja City:

In our community, young people are actively involved in tree planting every year to replace the trees that have been cut down. It's become a way for us to give back to nature and address the damage caused by deforestation. We believe tree planting can help improve vegetation cover and restore the environment for future generations.

But much as tree planting arguably seems to be the ‘most-straight forward’ activity for environmental conservation and restoration, young people face constraints such as limited access to land and financial

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resources—as explained a KII respondent in JROP Village, Walukuba sub-county, Jinja City:

Young people face many obstacles in green jobs, starting with land. Engaging in agroforestry or large-scale tree planting is impossible without access to affordable land. Even when we have ideas, we lack the financial backing to start or expand projects.

District and gender variations in engaging in environmental conservation and restoration

District-level analysis revealed that Jinja City respondents showed higher engagement in most environment conservation and restoration activities namely: wetland reclamation (81.8 per cent of the responses in Jinja City compared to 18.2 per cent in Nakasongola district)—a reflection of the likely more immediate and visible environmental threats to the more densely populated Jinja City. On the other hand, the Nakasongola district responses showed higher engagement in avoiding toxic materials (57.9 per cent responses).

Similarly, an analysis of the gender variations revealed significant disparities. Men dominated physically intensive activities such as wetland reclamation (81.8 per cent male responses) and soil erosion control (58.1 per cent female responses), while women showed higher engagement in avoiding toxic materials (57.9 per cent female) and community sensitisation. These patterns reflect gendered divisions of labour rooted in cultural expectations, differential access to resources, and perceived social roles; dynamics that have direct implications for programme design and implementation.

Innovative youth-led initiatives

Beyond conventional conservation activities, the qualitative data documented a range of innovative, youth-led green initiatives. In Jinja City for instance, one of the young community leaders-- developed synthetic hair products from banana fibres; an eco-entrepreneurial venture that simultaneously addresses plastic pollution and provides dignified livelihoods to other young people.

In Nakasongola district, another young community leader mobilised a group of young men to plant eucalyptus, mvule and a range of fruit tree species on family land, generating income from timber and poles while restoring degraded landscapes. Overall, these two case studies illustrate the entrepreneurial potential of Ugandan youth when provided with even minimal support and the transformative impact that structured investment could achieve.

Barriers and support needs

(i) Financial Constraints

Financial limitations were the most consistently cited barrier by respondents in both study areas. At the individual level, 62.3 per cent of responses identified lack of financial support as a primary obstacle; at the household level, 60.4 per cent; and 56.4 per cent at the community level. This cross-cutting financial barrier encompasses the inability to purchase equipment, access training, or cover the opportunity costs of participation in unpaid or voluntary environmental conservation and restoration work.

(ii) Education and skills deficit

The second most frequently cited barrier was a lack of education and skills, reported by 54.1 per cent of responses given at the community level, 40.3 per cent at the household level, and 39.4 per cent at the individual level. Without practical environmental literacy or technical competencies, many youth felt unqualified to engage in restoration activities particularly those requiring specialist knowledge such as ecosystem management, energy efficiency, or land rehabilitation. The analysis of qualitative data showed that participants consistently emphasised the need for hands-on, practical training rather than theoretical instruction.

The findings further showed that training youth in recycling and sustainable agriculture is essential for building a better future.

(iii) Gender-specific barriers

Gender-disaggregated analysis of the study findings revealed important differences in their perceptions of the barriers and support to engagement in environmental conservation and restoration. At the household level, lack of family support was cited by 57.9 per cent of the responses by the female compared to 42.1 per cent of the responses by the male; reflecting the disproportionate influence of family approval on women's participation in public and voluntary activities.

Cultural norms, while cited less frequently overall (4.0 per cent at the individual level), showed a higher female response at the community level (24.0 per cent) compared to 14.0 per cent of the responses by the male. This is one of the indicators to the traditional gender expectations that subtly constrain women's freedom to engage in community affairs.

Similarly, financial barriers were slightly more pronounced for the responses by the female at the household level (50.2 per cent) compared to 49.8 per cent for responses by the male. This is one of the issues underlying women's economic vulnerability and reduced access to credit and asset ownership.

Further analysis of the qualitative data showed that gender norms intersect with financial constraints to create the situation in which some families tend to prioritise the education of boys at the expense of girls. The findings further showed that young women faced social stigma when pursuing non-traditional green roles. Some of them face varying forms of stigma attached to the involvement in green jobs—a view summarized by a female FGD participant in, Wanyange Village, Mafubira Sub-County, Jinja City:

There is a stigma attached to green jobs. People think waste collection is for thieves or even people with mental health issues. This discourages young people from exploring these opportunities, yet they could earn an honest living while protecting our environment.

For the youth, the key barriers to engagement in green jobs were: social stigma, insufficient financial support, inadequate education and skills and lack of family support. Others included: uncertainties, cultural and social norms, climate change, limited land access, low environment sensitization and high population growth.

When asked what support they required to pursue environmental conservation and restoration activities, the respondents showed prioritization of skills training (52 per cent responses by the female) compared to 49 per cent responses by the male). This was followed by information on available career options (28 per cent of responses by the female compared to 23 per cent of the responses by the male. Market access registered only 8 per cent of responses by the male and 4 per cent by the female; suggesting that foundational capacity-building takes precedence over commercialisation at this stage of youth engagement.

On who bears the responsibility to address the barriers and provide the support needs to engaging in environmental conservation and restoration, the government was identified as the primary actor (66.7 per cent of the responses by the female) compared to 62.8 per cent of the responses by the male. Community involvement ranked second (19.2 per cent responses by the male) and 16.9 per cent by the female.

In terms of the preferred solutions to skills and knowledge barriers, 72.7 per cent of the responses indicated seeking additional formal training or education while 43.4 per cent of the responses valued networking and mentorship. Only 9.9 per cent of the responses endorsed self-directed online learning; a finding that underscores the importance of structured, community-embedded learning environments and the limitations of digital-only approaches in contexts of constrained connectivity.

The Policy Environment

(i) Awareness without access

Policy awareness among respondents was relatively high: 78.9 per cent of responses by the male and 75.9 per cent of responses by the female reported awareness of environmental conservation and restoration policies.

Overall, 89.8 per cent of the responses showed that the existing policies had some influence on conservation efforts. Analysis of the qualitative data showed a profound gap between awareness and the implementation of the environmental conservation and restoration policies among the youth.

While government programmes like the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) provide free seedlings for tree planting, there's limited follow-up or support to ensure the youth projects succeed. Many of the recipients of the seedlings eventually abandon the tree planting projects at varying stages due to the lack of engagement as explained by one of the Male Youth Leaders, at Migyera Town Council, Nakasongola District:

Policies exist, but they are never implemented as designed. The implementing agencies do not reach us on the ground. The National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) for instance has regulations about tree planting in the country, but there's no follow-up to ensure they're enforced. This leaves many projects incomplete or abandoned.

(ii) Lack of youth policy incentives

The absence of youth-centred incentives in the environmental policy framework emerged as one of the critical issues affecting the involvement of the youth in environmental conservation and restoration initiatives. Whereas the Uganda Green Growth Development Strategy (UGGDS) and the National Forestry Policy were acknowledged as progressive frameworks for environmental conservation and restoration, their effectiveness were reported to be undermined by weak enforcement, insufficient grassroots integration and a failure to translate national ambition into locally actionable programmes—a view augmented by a Headteacher at Kasozi Primary School, Busedde, Jinja City.

If policies contained incentives for us to get involved in environmental projects and were implemented effectively, more young people would get involved in green projects. But we don't have tax breaks on green products which could have motivated many to start small businesses.

(iii) Environmental change as a driver of urgency

Deforestation was identified as the primary cause of environmental degradation by 90.2 per cent of the responses by the male while and 88.1 per cent of the responses by the female. This was followed by unsustainable agricultural practices (43.4 per cent responses by the female and 39.4 per cent responses by the male). Radio and television were the dominant sources of climate change information (79.7 per cent responses by the male and 76.5 per cent responses by female), followed by family and social networks (48.8 per cent responses by the female and 44.4 per cent responses by the male).

The low reliance on digital platforms (social media: 41.2 per cent responses by the male and 33.2 per cent responses by the female) and specialist websites (7.5 per cent responses by the male and 5.6 per cent responses by the female) underscores the continued importance of traditional and community-based communication channels for environmental outreach.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this paper show a paradox at the heart of Uganda's green economy ambitions. Whereas many youth are highly motivated to engage in environmental conservation and restoration activities, they are systematically excluded from the opportunities that would allow them to do so. This paradox is not unique to Uganda but a reflection of the global pattern in which the green transition, if left unmanaged, risks reproducing and deepening existing inequalities (Renner et. al., 2008; ILO, 2022). What is distinctive about the Ugandan case is the specificity and depth of the barriers documented here, and the clarity with which young people themselves articulate both the problem and the solution.

The dominance of financial constraints as a barrier reported consistently across individual, household, and community levels points to a structural failure of the financial system to serve young green entrepreneurs. The absence of collateral, the inaccessibility of credit, and the limited reach of government enterprise programmes

such as the Parish Development Model (PDM) leave most youth without the capital needed to translate environmental motivation into economic activity.

This finding aligns with the World Bank (2019) analysis of youth' employment barriers in Uganda and with comparative evidence from Malawi and Mozambique (National Environment Management Authority, 2021).

The green jobs skills deficit documented in this study is equally structural. The concentration of youth' engagement in tree planting and organic agriculture which are activities requiring minimal technical training reflects not only a lack of ambition but also a lack of access to the training that would enable engagement in higher- value green sectors such as renewable energy, waste-to-energy, and environmental governance. The low uptake of energy efficiency activities (5.6 per cent) is particularly telling--the domain in which Uganda's green economy has the greatest growth potential--yet it remains inaccessible to the majority of young people surveyed.

The gender dimensions of engaging in green jobs by the youth also highlight the compounding disadvantages especially faced by young women such as financial vulnerability, family disapproval, cultural stigma, and educational deprivation. These constitute a structural barrier to gender-equitable green employment that cannot be addressed through gender-neutral programming alone. Rwanda's experience with women's cooperatives in green sectors demonstrates that targeted grants, mentorship, and training can meaningfully close gender gaps (Slavova et. al, 2015).

The policy awareness--implementation gap highlighted in this paper is one of the most actionable finding of this study. The fact that over three-quarters of respondents are aware of environmental policies, yet the majority experience them as ineffective or irrelevant to their lives, suggests that the problem is not one of communication but of implementation. Policies that for instance, provide seedlings without tools, training without follow-up, and frameworks without enforcement are experienced by the youth as a form of institutional abandonment. Bridging this gap requires not merely better communication but a fundamental reorientation of policy implementation towards youth-centred, locally grounded, and adequately resourced approaches.

Finally, the innovative green enterprises that emerged from this study such as the banana-fibre hair products, community tree-farming cooperatives, bio-degradable construction materials, demonstrate that Ugandan youth are not just passive recipients of green economy policy but active agents of green innovation. What they lack is not creativity or motivation but visibility, institutional support, and access to markets. Embedding these youth-led initiatives within formal support systems through incubation programmes, public procurement preferences, and green enterprise financing could accelerate inclusive green growth in ways that top-down policy alone cannot achieve.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the empirical findings from the study, this paper recommends to amplify the voices of the youth and enhance their involvement in environmental conservation and restoration activities:

Policy reform, enforcement and incentivisation

- The Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MOGLSD) should involve the youth—particularly young women in the formulation, review and implementation of gender-responsive green employment policies and mentorship programmes. Such policies must include investment incentives that facilitate green job creation at scale.
- The Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry, and Fisheries (MAAIF) should implement the National Agriculture Policy (2013) with dedicated budget allocations for green skills training, climate-smart agricultural interventions, and drought-resistant seed distribution.
- District Local Governments (DLGs) should localise green economy policies, co-designing and operationalising youth' platforms to actively engage young people in local job creation and environmental policymaking.

Gender-inclusive programming

- The Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MOGLSD) should implement targeted programmes that address gender barriers in green employment, including community-based norm-change initiatives, safety provisions for women in outdoor roles, and leadership development for young women in environmental governance.
- Policy and programmes should draw upon comparative evidence from Rwanda and South Africa regarding the effectiveness of women's cooperatives and targeted grant mechanisms in closing gender gaps in green sectors.

Financial inclusion and enterprise development

- The Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development (MoFPED) should establish youth-specific green enterprise financing mechanisms, including grants and low-interest loans, accessible without land title collateral.
- Government programmes such as the Parish Development Model (PDM) should be explicitly extended to support youth-led green enterprises and climate adaptation projects.
- Government, the private sector, and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) should support afforestation programmes by distributing high-quality seedlings alongside tools, water access, and technical follow-up addressing the full value chain of tree-planting initiatives rather than seedling provision alone.

Skills training, education reform and awareness

- The Ministries of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MOGLSD) and that of Education and Sports (MES) should collaborate to develop targeted interventions supporting young people's access to green job opportunities, including the integration of green skills into vocational education and apprenticeship programmes.
- The National Planning Authority (NPA) should include clear indicators and budget allocations for green jobs and climate-resilient infrastructure in the National Development Plan IV (NDP-IV).
- Environmental outreach should prioritise radio, television, and community-based communication channels—the dominant information sources for youth in both districts—rather than digital-only approaches.

Directions for future research

- Policy enforcement and local government: Future research should examine the mechanisms of policy enforcement at the district level and the role of local governments in ensuring that green job initiatives are fully implemented for rural youth.
- Financing and resource access: Research is needed on the effectiveness of microloans, grants, and other financial mechanisms in supporting youth' green entrepreneurship, with particular attention to women and persons living with disabilities.
- Green skills integration in curricula: Researchers should evaluate existing green skills training programmes and explore opportunities for their incorporation into national education systems, ensuring alignment with the evolving demands of the green economy.
- Longitudinal tracking: Longitudinal research is needed to assess whether youth who receive green skills training and enterprise support translate this into sustained employment and environmental impact over time.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this paper show that Uganda's young people greatly aspire to join their dream jobs; some of them green in nature. However, their aspirations and motivation to seek green jobs are hampered by a host of policy and programming barriers. Whereas their awareness of the environmental conservation and restoration opportunities is high, they lack the required financial capital, technical skills, institutional backing, and gender-equitable enabling environment to translate their aspirations to engage in green jobs and improve their livelihoods.

They also face challenges posed by the environmental policy implementation gaps. In most cases, the youth as seen as mere beneficiaries of policy instruments rather than as agents of change. The success or failure of Uganda's green transition will depend on whether or not it can harness the energy, creativity and commitment of its young population.

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