

Level of Implementation of Youth Empowerment Programs in Addressing Relative Poverty: Evidence from Vihiga County, Kenya

Edward Alema

Department of Criminology and Social Work, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

Email: edwardalema7@gmail.com

Orcid Id: <https://orcid.org/000900043980-074X>

Dorice Molly Ambasa

Department of Criminology and Social Work, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

Email: dorisambasa@gmail.com

Orcid Id: <https://orcid.org/00090071702756>

Abstract	<i>Journal of Policy and Development Studies (JPDS)</i>
<i>Relative poverty among youth remains persistently high in Kenya despite the proliferation of youth empowerment programs. While outcomes such as employment and income are widely documented, evidence on how implementation processes shape poverty alleviation is limited, particularly in rural counties such as Vihiga. This study assessed the level of implementation of youth empowerment programs in addressing relative poverty among youths in Vihiga County, Kenya. A descriptive cross-sectional design was adopted. The target population was 138,665 youth; a sample of 399 was determined using Yamane (1967) formula. Simple random sampling was used for youth respondents and purposive sampling for 12 key informants. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and key informant interviews. The Objective 1 scale reliability was Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.821$. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation (SPSS v27); qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Results showed moderate but uneven implementation. Coverage was rated at 74.3% (38.7% agree, 35.6% strongly agree). Quality was rated high: relevance 93.8%, trainer competence 95.2%, and skills/knowledge gain 96.9%. Accessibility and equity: ease of access 79.7%, equity 88.4%, and consideration for marginalized youth 85.1%. Fidelity: 92.9% reported delivery as planned and 94.6% reported large effect on objectives. Accessibility ($r = .444, p < .001$) and fidelity ($r = .563, p < .001$) were significantly and positively correlated with livelihood improvement, while participation constraints were not ($r = .070, p = .189$). The study concludes that implementation quality, particularly fidelity and accessibility, is a critical pathway for relative poverty alleviation. Recommendations include strengthening monitoring and evaluation, institutionalizing ward-level decentralization, and standardizing training protocols.</i>	Vol. 20 Issue 6 (2026) ISSN(p) 1597-9385 ISSN (e) 2813-1091 Home page: https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jpds ARTICLE INFO: Keywords Youth empowerment, relative poverty, program implementation, fidelity, Vihiga County Received: 28 July 2026 Revised: 2 September 2026 Accepted: 21 September 2026 DOI https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jpds.v20i6.2

1. Introduction

Relative poverty, defined as the inability to attain a standard of living considered acceptable within a given community compared to others in the same socio-economic context, remains a pressing challenge among youth globally (World Bank, 2024). Unlike absolute poverty, which emphasizes subsistence, relative poverty emphasizes economic participation, access to opportunities, and social inclusion. Vulnerable groups such as youth are disproportionately affected due to structural inequalities, unemployment, and limited access to productive resources (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023).

Globally, over 1.2 billion youth aged 18-35 constitute 16% of the world population (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2023). In Africa, approximately 420 million youth aged 15-35 reside on the continent (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2022), yet their potential is undermined by high unemployment and poverty. In Kenya, youth unemployment and income insecurity contribute to social exclusion and marginalization, particularly in rural counties (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2023).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In response to youth poverty, Kenya has implemented multiple empowerment programs including the Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF), National Youth Service, county-based vocational training, and SACCO-linked initiatives. However, relative poverty persists, especially in densely populated rural counties like Vihiga. Implementation research argues that program outcomes are contingent not only on design but on how interventions are delivered in practice (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2005). Dimensions such as coverage, quality, accessibility/equity, and fidelity often explain variations in outcomes more than design alone. Despite the presence of empowerment programs in Vihiga County, empirical evidence on their implementation level remains fragmented. This paper addresses that gap by assessing the level of implementation of youth empowerment programs in addressing relative poverty among youths in Vihiga County, Kenya. The specific objective was to assess the level of implementation of youth empowerment programs in Vihiga County.

2. Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Framework

Youth Empowerment and Relative Poverty

Empowerment refers to enabling youth to gain control over decisions affecting their lives through enhanced skills, knowledge, confidence, and access to economic and social resources (Zimmerman, 1995). Relative poverty among youth manifests through unstable employment, inadequate income, and exclusion from opportunities enjoyed by majority peers. Recent evidence indicates that rural youth are nearly twice as likely to experience relative poverty compared to urban counterparts due to limited infrastructure and market access (UNICEF, 2024).

Dimensions of Program Implementation

This study adopts four implementation dimensions grounded in implementation science (Carroll et al., 2007; Dane & Schneider, 1998): (a) Coverage – extent to which programs reach intended beneficiaries; (b) Quality – relevance of activities, competence of trainers, and perceived impact on livelihoods; (c) Accessibility and Equity – ease of access in terms of location, time, cost, and fairness across gender, economic status, and vulnerability; and (d) Fidelity – degree to which programs are delivered as originally designed, including adherence, dose, and consistency. Failures in any dimension can undermine poverty alleviation capacity, especially in rural contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995) which posits that empowerment involves processes enabling individuals to gain mastery and control over issues affecting them, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (Maslow, 1943) which highlights that youth must meet basic physiological, safety, and belonging needs before achieving self-actualization through economic empowerment. Together, they explain how well-implemented programs can move youth from subsistence to participation and independence.

Conceptual Framework

The independent variable is level of implementation (coverage, quality, accessibility/equity, fidelity). The dependent variable is alleviation of relative poverty, measured as livelihood improvement through skills/knowledge gain and economic well-being compared to peers. The framework hypothesizes that higher coverage, quality, accessibility and fidelity lead to improved livelihood and reduced relative poverty.

3. Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive cross-sectional design was adopted to capture implementation status at one point in time, appropriate for assessing perceptions and implementation processes.

Study Area

Vihiga County, Kenya, comprising five sub-counties: Vihiga, Sabatia, Hamisi, Luanda, and Emuhaya. It is one of Kenya's most densely populated rural counties characterized by smallholder agriculture and high youth unemployment.

Population and Sampling

The target population was 138,665 youth aged 18-35 years (KNBS, 2019 census projection). Sample size of 399 was determined using Yamane (1967) formula: $n = N / [1 + N(e^2)]$, $e=0.05$. Simple random sampling was used for youth respondents and purposive sampling for 12 key informants including sub-county youth officers, cooperative society managers, and program coordinators.

Method data Collection

Structured questionnaire with 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) covering coverage (3 items), quality (3 items), accessibility/equity (3 items), fidelity (3 items). Key informant interview guide was used for qualitative triangulation. Secondary data were obtained from program reports and policy documents.

Validity and Reliability of Research instrument

Content validity was ensured through expert review and Content Validity Index (CVI). Reliability for Objective 1 scale was Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.821$ indicating strong internal consistency. Test of sampling adequacy (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) and normality (skewness/kurtosis within ± 2) confirmed suitability for parametric analysis.

Method of data Analysis

Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) and Pearson correlation to examine relationships between implementation indicators and livelihood improvement (proxy for relative poverty alleviation) using SPSS v27. Qualitative data were analyzed via thematic content analysis with verbatim quotes to support quantitative findings.

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity were upheld. Approval was obtained from Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology and National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI).

4. Results and Discussion

Level of Implementation

Coverage of Youth Empowerment Programs

Table 1 presents respondents' ratings on coverage. A majority expressed positive views that programs reach most youth in their community: 38.7% agreed and 35.6% strongly agreed (total 74.3%). Only 8.2% disagreed (2.3% strongly disagree, 5.9% disagree) and 17.5% were neutral. Qualitative responses supported broad geographic spread across wards and sub-counties: 'The programs are accessible across most wards, with outreach efforts to marginalized and rural areas, though some remote regions still face access challenges' (Key Informant 5). 'They are spread across all sub-counties... accessible through local Cooperative branches, community meetings and outreach activities, though coverage varies in remote areas' (Key Informant 1). However, 17.5% neutral responses suggest some youth remain unaware or unreachable, indicating uneven coverage.

Tables

Table 1: Respondents' Ratings on Coverage of Youth Empowerment Programs (n=399)

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Positive %
Programs reach most youth in community	2.3%	5.9%	17.5%	38.7%	35.6%	3.99	74.3%

Source: Field Data, 2026

Quality of Youth Empowerment Programs

Table 2 shows strongly positive perception of quality. Relevance of program activities: 30.8% agree, 63.0% strongly agree (total 93.8% positive); only 2.0% negative and 4.2% neutral. Trainer competence: 27.4% agree, 67.8% strongly agree (total 95.2%); 2.0% negative. Skills/knowledge gain for livelihood improvement: 22.3% agree, 74.6% strongly agree (total 96.9%). Qualitative themes highlighted structured implementation: 'Regular monitoring and evaluation, training by qualified facilitators, and feedback mechanisms from participants. Officers adhere to policy guidance and project rules and regulations' (Key Informant 1). Another noted 'Youth training before funding and follow-up on loans and recovery. Groups are taken through training on governance and financial management before funds are released' (Key Informant 7).

Table 2: Respondents' Ratings on Quality of Youth Empowerment Programs (n=399)

Quality Indicator	SD	D	N	A	SA	Positive %
Relevance of activities	1.1%	0.9%	4.2%	30.8%	63.0%	93.8%

Trainer competence	1.4%	0.6%	2.8%	27.4%	67.8%	95.2%
Skills/knowledge gain	0.8%	0.8%	1.5%	22.3%	74.6%	96.9%

Source: Field Data, 2026

Accessibility and Equity

Table 3 shows generally positive perceptions. Ease of access (location, time, cost): 42.4% agree, 37.3% strongly agree (total 79.7%); 4.2% negative, 16.1% neutral. Equity in access regardless of gender, economic status, or social background: 29.4% agree, 59.0% strongly agree (total 88.4%); 5.6% negative. Consideration of marginalized/vulnerable youth: 32.8% agree, 52.3% strongly agree (total 85.1%); 5.7% negative. Key informants described deliberate strategies: 'Through targeted outreach, mobile training units and collaboration with community elders and local leaders. We carry out aggressive sensitization in all areas in the county' (Key Informant 3). Presence of neutral responses (16.1%) suggests persistent barriers such as transport costs and entry requirements.

Table 3: Respondents' Ratings on Accessibility and Equity (n=399)

Indicator	Negative %	Neutral %	Positive % (A+SA)
Ease of access (location, time, cost)	4.2%	16.1%	79.7%
Equity across gender/status	5.6%	6.0%	88.4%
Marginalized/vulnerable youth	5.7%	9.2%	85.1%

Source: Field Data, 2026

Fidelity of Program Implementation

Table 4 indicates high fidelity. Delivered as planned: 92.9% agreed/strongly agreed, 1.8% disagreed, 5.4% neutral. Regularity/scheduling: 90.4% agreed/strongly agreed, 1.5% disagreed, 8.2% neutral. Achievement of intended objectives (large/very large effect): 94.6% positive, 1.7% minimal/no effect. Qualitative data provided nuance: 'Most activities aligned well with the original design, with some adjustments to suit local context' (Key Informant 2). Findings reflect high adherence with contextually appropriate adaptations, consistent with Carroll et al. (2007) and Fixsen et al. (2005) who note that structured monitoring contributes to fidelity.

Table 4: Respondents' Ratings on Fidelity of Program Implementation (n=399)

Fidelity Indicator	Negative %	Neutral %	Positive %	Interpretation
Delivered as planned	1.8%	5.4%	92.9%	High adherence with contextual adaptation

Regularity/scheduling	1.5%	8.2%	90.4%	High consistency
Achievement of objectives	1.7%	3.7%	94.6%	Large/very large effect

Source: Field Data, 2026

Correlation between Implementation and Relative Poverty Alleviation

Table 5 presents Pearson correlation results. Program accessibility showed moderate positive relationship with livelihood improvement ($r = .444$, $p < .001$). Program fidelity demonstrated moderate-to-strong positive relationship with livelihood improvement ($r = .563$, $p < .001$). Accessibility and fidelity were positively correlated ($r = .519$, $p < .001$), suggesting that accessible programs are more likely to maintain fidelity. Participation constraints showed very weak non-significant relationship with livelihood improvement ($r = .070$, $p = .189$) and weak negative with accessibility ($r = -.071$, $p = .180$). This implies that improving accessibility and fidelity significantly enhances skills/knowledge gain and thus relative poverty alleviation, while constraints alone do not directly predict outcomes.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation – Implementation Indicators and Livelihood Improvement (n=399)

Variables	R	p-value	Strength
Accessibility → Livelihood improvement	0.444	<.001	Moderate positive, significant
Fidelity → Livelihood improvement	0.563	<.001	Moderate-strong, significant
Accessibility ↔ Fidelity	0.519	<.001	Moderate positive, significant
Participation constraints → Livelihood	0.070	.189 ns	Very weak, non-significant

Note: ** $p < .01$. Source: Field Data, 2026

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate moderate but inconsistent implementation. Coverage is reasonably high (74.3%) but not universal, aligning with World Bank (2023) and other county-level evaluations which note uneven translation of national youth funds to local level due to delayed disbursement and weak communication. Vihiga's decentralized ward-level approach improves reach, yet remote areas face gaps.

Quality is rated highest (93-97% positive), supporting Lerner (2012) and evidence that well-designed programs enhance employability when trainers are qualified and activities relevant. The practice of pre-funding training on governance and financial management mirrors effective entrepreneurship support models.

Accessibility and equity are perceived positively but lower than quality, with 79.7% reporting ease of access. This reflects infrastructure and cost barriers noted in FinAccess 2024, where 45-46% of rural youth aged 18-25 remain excluded from formal financial systems. Strategies such as mobile training units and collaboration with chiefs mitigate but do not eliminate barriers.

High fidelity (92.9%) aligns with implementation science literature: programs with ongoing monitoring and supervision achieve intended outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2005). Adaptation to local context without altering core objectives represents structured adaptation, not deviation (Hawe et al., 2004). Correlation findings confirm that implementation quality explains variation in poverty outcomes. Fidelity had stronger association ($r = .563$) than accessibility ($r = .444$), suggesting that delivering programs as designed matters most for livelihood improvement.

Conclusion

The level of implementation of youth empowerment programs in Vihiga County is moderate to high in quality and fidelity, but uneven in coverage and accessibility. Where programs are accessible and delivered as designed, youth report significant skills and livelihood gains, indicating contribution to relative poverty alleviation. However, 17-25% of youth remain neutral or unreached, and remote areas face implementation inconsistencies. The statistically significant positive correlations between accessibility/fidelity and livelihood improvement demonstrate that implementation processes are critical pathways for poverty reduction.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen programme coordination and monitoring systems: Institutionalize regular supervision, fidelity checklists, and feedback mechanisms from participants.
2. Enhance decentralized delivery: Sustain ward-level structures, SACCO partnerships, mobile units, and involvement of local leaders to improve coverage in remote areas.
3. Standardize training and mentorship: Ensure refresher training for facilitators, adequate mentor-to-youth ratios, and follow-up support post-funding.
4. Reduce accessibility barriers: Subsidize transport, flexible scheduling, and inclusive targeting for marginalized groups including young women and youth with disabilities.
5. Policy reform: Streamline eligibility criteria, reduce bureaucratic delays, and ensure stable funding to improve continuity.

Limitations and Future Research

This paper focuses on implementation level; it does not fully address financial and policy challenges (Objectives 2 & 3 of the larger thesis). Cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and disaggregate by gender, sub-county, and program type (YEDF, vocational training, agribusiness).

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