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# The Development of Inclusive Agriculture Entrepreneurship Education Ecosystems for Young Entrepreneurs in Uganda

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This study examines how Uganda’s agricultural entrepreneurship ecosystem influences the success and participation of young entrepreneurs. By exploring the perspectives of entrepreneurial youth, this research provides grassroots insights into the structural and social factors shaping their experiences. Using semi-structured interviews with 16 student entrepreneurs, we employ discourse analysis to identify key themes that highlight both opportunities and barriers within Uganda’s entrepreneurial landscape.

Our findings reveal three dominant discourses: (1) youth are encouraged by their families and communities to pursue entrepreneurship as a means of securing their livelihood in response to limited formal employment opportunities; (2) access to capital and financial literacy gaps remain significant barriers, limiting students’ ability to scale their businesses; and (3) gender dynamics shape entrepreneurial participation, with women facing additional hurdles that restrict their business opportunities. These insights contribute to the broader literature on inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems, emphasizing the need for targeted policy interventions that enhance financial access, promote gender equity, and support locally driven entrepreneurship initiatives. By addressing these challenges, Uganda’s entrepreneurial landscape can better foster sustainable economic opportunities for young entrepreneurs.

### INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a critical driver of economic growth in both developed and developing nations (Acs, 2006; Mason & Brown, 2014). Central to this discourse is the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems—dynamic environments characterized by interconnected players, institutions, and resources that foster the establishment and growth of entrepreneurial ventures. A well-nurtured entrepreneurial ecosystem has the potential to drive sustainable economic prosperity by creating employment opportunities, fostering innovation, and addressing systemic challenges (Sheriff & Muffatto, 2015). Isenberg (2016) interprets the idea of an ecosystem in natural science as a network that is independent and self-sustaining. Within the context of entrepreneurship, this understanding

has led many researchers to study the entrepreneurial ecosystem as a self-calibrating structure, which exhibits a lack of centralized control, making it overly complex and difficult to understand (Isenberg, 2016).

Uganda, like many low-income countries, faces significant challenges related to youth unemployment, where entrepreneurship is often promoted as a solution to economic stagnation and a lack of formal employment opportunities (Mpeera Ntayi et al., 2014; Namatovu & Dawa, 2015). Mugabe (2024) highlights that while entrepreneurship education is widely implemented in Ugandan universities, it remains largely theoretical, leaving many graduates without the practical skills and confidence needed to start their own businesses. In their last Ugandan country report, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2015) notes that at least 30% of

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young Ugandans (ages 18–34) have engaged in start-ups or entrepreneurial endeavors, frequently driven by necessity rather than opportunity. Uganda's predominantly agrarian economy (UBOS, 2018) underscores the importance of agricultural entrepreneurship, as this sector employs the majority of its population yet remains characterized by subsistence farming and low productivity. Understanding the perceptions of youth within this sector is vital for uncovering barriers and opportunities to fostering sustainable economic growth.

To support entrepreneurial activity, education systems, policy frameworks, and access to resources must play pivotal roles in enhancing the feasibility and longevity of business ventures (Acs et al., 2014; Gielnik et al., 2015). However, in less developed countries, the complexity and lack of understanding of entrepreneurial ecosystems have hindered well-meaning development initiatives from achieving their intended impact (Langevang & Gough, 2012). As Terjesen, Bosma, and Stam (2016) assert, "there is no 'one-size-fits-all' blueprint because of the vast differences in social venturing prevalence as well as legal and regulatory frameworks, access to financial resources, markets, and training" (p. 235). This highlights the importance of grassroots exploration to understand how youth experience and interact with their entrepreneurial ecosystems, providing actionable insights into the factors that influence their ventures (Langevang et al., 2012; Richard et al., 2021). However, this grassroots approach is at odds with experts—who often prefer top-down solutions (Easterly, 2014).

While agriculture dominates Uganda's economy, there is a growing emphasis on integrating science, technology, and innovation (STI) to transform this sector. The Technopolicy Brief No. 69 (2024) highlights the critical role of STI in addressing systemic barriers by fostering vocational training, innovation hubs, and public-private partnerships. These efforts aim to bridge skills gaps, enhance productivity, and create entrepreneurial opportunities in agriculture, thus enabling youth to transition from subsistence farming to value-added agribusiness (Ozor et al., 2024). Additionally, initiatives such as business incubators and mentorship programs have demonstrated success in equipping young entrepreneurs with the tools needed to navigate complex ecosystems and build sustainable ventures (ATPS, 2024).

A nuanced understanding of these perspectives is essential, particularly in Uganda's agriculture sector, which employs the majority of its workforce yet remains dominated by subsistence practices and low productivity (Ozor et al., 2024; Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), 2018). This research investigates the perceptions and experiences of youth navigating the entrepreneurial ecosystem in agriculture, focusing on their aspirations, challenges, and interactions with systemic barriers. By employing an interpretivist approach, this study aims to explore how youth perceive entrepreneurship opportunities and constraints within their socio-economic context, contributing to the broader discourse on inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Furthermore, addressing gender dynamics within Uganda's entrepreneurial ecosystem is critical to fostering

inclusivity and equity. Women in Uganda often face unique barriers to accessing resources, training, and mentorship, which hinder their participation in entrepreneurial activities. Recent policy efforts, such as those highlighted by the African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS, 2024), emphasize the need for inclusive frameworks that address these disparities and foster equitable opportunities for both men and women (Ozor et al., 2024). By investigating the interplay of gender, systemic barriers, and youth entrepreneurship, this research contributes to a growing body of literature advocating for inclusive and context-specific entrepreneurial ecosystems.

By examining youth perspectives, particularly in agriculture, this study adds to the interpretivist body of research aimed at understanding socio-economic issues from the lens of individual perceptions. This approach aligns with calls for research on inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems that integrate gender dynamics to provide a more comprehensive picture of entrepreneurship implementation (Brush et al., 2018; Richard, 2025). Through discourse analysis, this study aspires to uncover actionable insights that can inform policy and practice, ultimately contributing to sustainable development and economic growth in Uganda.

## LITERATURE REVIEW: Defining Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

In biology, an ecosystem can be defined as a complex network that moves symbiotically within a given environment (Cavallo et al., 2018). González Flores and Katonáné Kovács (2018) define entrepreneurship within the context of business in a similar fashion. An entrepreneurial ecosystem is an intricate network of varying stakeholders and innovators that support a given business environment. Scholars regard entrepreneurial ecosystem development as a key source of entrepreneurship (González Flores & Katonáné Kovács, 2018).

The term "entrepreneurship ecosystem" is a relatively new term, emerging out of research done in the early 2000s (Malecki, 2018). Brown and Mason (2017) critically reviewed and unpacked the concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems and determined that the study of entrepreneurship has been used to create effective economic policy development. Yet, they grappled with skepticism as the term remained ambiguously defined and involved a variety of stakeholders. Therefore, Brown and Mason concluded that it is imperative to understand the key elements of the ecosystem regarding the actors within the system, and the environment surrounding it to create sustainable change. Thus, there is not a one-size-fits-all solution in development regarding entrepreneurial development (Brown & Mason, 2017).

The focus on the requirements to create an ecosystem are often given more thought than the correct formula to make an entrepreneurial ecosystem viable (Malecki, 2018; Stam, 2007). In consequence, aspects of entrepreneurial ecosystems are researched, while dismissing significant social ecological aspects of the entrepreneurial ecosystem creating irrelevant solutions (Brown & Mason, 2017; Stam,

2007). Stam's (2007) reasoning for start-up creation was to assume that an entrepreneur sees an opportunity or is discontent in their current work, therefore, they choose to create their own job in a location that is optimal for the individual (Stam, 2007). This direct and simple observation may not always capture the reasoning of becoming an entrepreneur, some key social elements may be lacking in this assumption while oversimplifying the formula for creating an effective ecosystem.

Isenberg (2010) captured the entrepreneurial ecosystem in a more complex diagram incorporating more variables as a means to measure the strength of an ecosystem. This was drawn from the inspiration of participating in Israel's economic development strategy that incorporated entrepreneurial ecosystems (Isenberg, 2011). Through asking a series of questions that address personal skills, governance, societal factors, access to knowledge and capital, geographic location, and customer awareness, among other factors, an aspiring entrepreneur could gauge the feasibility of cultivating a successful business in a given ecosystem (Isenberg, 2010). Isenberg (2014) then elaborates that the ecosystem an entrepreneur develops involves a nexus of influencers that are not entrepreneurs, but make the ecosystem sustainable (Isenberg, 2014). Isenberg (2010) postulates that entrepreneurial ecosystems are constantly reshaping themselves to better suit the entrepreneurs (Isenberg, 2010), it can be more challenging to guarantee equal opportunity (Brush et al., 2018). The general structure of the entrepreneurial ecosystem often implies that all entrepreneurs have equal means to make their business prosperous and does not account for minority groups not having equal access to resources (Brush et al., 2018). The study of inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems has evolved to include these groups to recognize their access to economic prosperity and capital. One key element in the inequality of small and medium enterprises (SME) development has been the gender gap, where evidence shows that significantly fewer women start businesses than men (Brush et al., 2018; Daoud, 2018).

Research on the effectiveness of targeted entrepreneurial support ecosystems cite that the very existence of these supports instantly "others" the targeted group of people as different and in need of fixing in order to be seen as meeting the traditional version of entrepreneurial success of the white businessman (Brush et al., 2018). There is an opportunity to look from an inclusive lens when assessing issues because of the historical imbalance of information due to the previous lack of recognition of minority and disempowered groups (Foss et al., 2018). Hence, the study of entrepreneurship should be no different and should involve an inclusive lens to accurately represent issues within a given entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Still, to assess minority issues and needs with a dated, racial, or masculine lens may similarly result in skewed objectives (Brush et al., 2014). Brush et al., (2018) notes although women are likely to start a business, it is expected to be a small business with little technology. However, women are also far more likely to mentor other women who express interest in becoming an entrepreneur and en-

courage them to seek empowerment through business ownership, resulting in them being a fast-growing group of entrepreneurs (Brush et al., 2014, 2018). By evaluating inclusivity, research can identify gaps where research and support is needed to strengthen marginalized groups not by comparing, but rather for what they offer individually and with removal of stereotypes and assumptions.

## Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in Africa

According to Brown and Ross (2017), many entrepreneurship program developments are based on a generalization of the topic by overlooking the complexity or the diversity in populations that have varying needs. Furthermore, the developments within these entrepreneurship ecosystems are often based on conventional Western business theories, such as those of Michael Porter, which may be less relevant in a low-income African country (Brown & Mason, 2017). The current research explores how entrepreneurs are affected by their environment. However, it does not unpack how the individuals are affecting the ecosystem, nor the perceptions of the entrepreneurs themselves. This is because much of the literature is conducted from a positivist lens which does not include the effect individuals have on their given environment (Ponterotto, 2005).

Entrepreneurial ecosystems appear to be an organic development in some cases but have also been a development tactic in LDCs. Empirical research regarding SME growth and development undoubtedly reveals that entrepreneurship is an important piece of wealth generation (Wang, 2016). But even such a key development tactic is not without limitations. Acs, Autio, and Szerb (2014) note that policy plays an important role in making sure small and medium businesses thrive in volatile environments (Acs et al., 2014), such as many African nations. Several of the main issues in developing countries regarding entrepreneurship include access to finance, electrical limitations, high external competition, taxes, and political unrest (Wang, 2016). Education and programming, although beyond the scope of this analysis, may also be critical for SME development because those willing to start new enterprises may not have the business savvy to be successful (De Jager et al., 2017). Nyeko, Oketch, and Obong (2024) highlight that financial management practices, particularly among youth entrepreneurs, are underdeveloped, leading to challenges in sustaining viable businesses. The authors argue for integrating financial literacy training with entrepreneurial education to improve financial outcomes and business sustainability.

One of the common criticisms of development economics is the idea that some institutions are exploitative, others encourage growth (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012, 2019). Another side of the coin is that institutions may attempt to encourage growth but fail to do so due a lack of resources. For example, Kasule et al. (2015), concluded the teaching of innovation competence to Ugandans is very infrequent with few skills pertaining to innovation, entrepreneurship, and networking, causing them to be insufficiently prepared to create their own business ventures upon graduation (Kasule et al., 2015). Furthermore, Uganda's educational struc-

ture is that of the British, before they gained their independence, which is structured for job seekers, not job makers (Kasule et al., 2015). This lack of educational focus on job creation puts youth at a disadvantage when starting a business because they are not equipped with entrepreneurial or management tools when they enter the workforce (Langevang et al., 2012). In fact, the word “entrepreneur” does not have a direct translation to Luganda, a popular spoken language in Uganda, and this could also skew the perception of how entrepreneurship is viewed within the society (Sebbumba, 2013). Therefore, understanding the perceptions of this career possibility for the youth is important for understanding sustainable economic growth at the grassroots level. Mugabe (2024) adds that while entrepreneurship education is increasingly implemented at Ugandan universities, it remains overly theoretical, leaving graduates without the hands-on skills or confidence needed to launch successful ventures. This gap further highlights the urgent need for practical, skill-based training approaches.

With the increase in entrepreneurship research from the early 2000s, there appears to be a lack of specificity in methods, as if a “one size fits all” approach will suffice in all nations’ entrepreneurship ecosystem development (Angelucci et al., 2013; Cavallo et al., 2018; Terjesen et al., 2016). The abstract understanding of entrepreneurial ecosystems is largely under-developed by a lack of evaluation of the complexity of the socio-economic and ecological factors that facilitate entrepreneurship in each country (Brown and Ross, 2017). In Africa, entrepreneurial ecosystems are being greatly influenced by foreign governments and non-government organizations (NGOs), especially from the United States, that do not address the constraints and realities of the economy they are advising (Daily & Sussan, 2017). Unfortunately, this could be the downfall of many of these aspirational development initiatives. Furthermore, many entrepreneurship program developments are based on an oversimplification of the topic by overlooking the complexity or the diversity in populations that have varying needs (Brown and Ross, 2017). Dada and Fapohunda (2024) argue that tailoring programs to local contexts is critical, as generalizations often fail to address region-specific challenges such as limited access to credit and weak institutional frameworks. Their work emphasizes the importance of fostering community-driven initiatives to bridge these gaps.

Mpeera et al. (2014) conducted an analytical study regarding Ugandan entrepreneurial activity. Uganda’s entrepreneurial ecosystem can be defined by its influx of SMEs that have been used as a means of moving away from subsistence living, gaining more independence, and bringing wealth to the country. Their results found that the country, although it has a high rate of entrepreneurial activity, has very little capital supporting these business ventures (Mpeera et al., 2014). To improve living situations, it is important to be creative and develop solutions to problems experienced by those within the Ugandan community. Currently, start-ups in Uganda principally revolve around the agriculture and mining sectors (Kasule et al., 2015). Hence,

agricultural entrepreneurship ecosystems impact the success and participation of young Ugandans with start-ups. Ozor, Wentland, and Nyambane (2024) highlight that integrating science, technology, and innovation (STI) into these ecosystems can significantly enhance their effectiveness. For instance, vocational training and innovation hubs are instrumental in equipping youth with the skills and resources necessary to transition from subsistence farming to high-value agribusiness ventures. Starting a career in the agriculture sector can be incredibly lucrative and for many in Uganda it is the most accessible field of work.

## Youth’s Role in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in Africa

Acs (2006) theorized that the more people who participate in opportunity entrepreneurship, the higher the rates of economic development will be in the country overall. Conversely, Bosama (2008) states that Ugandan youth are largely unaware of the resources that their country has available to help them develop their business management skills (Bosma et al., 2008). This results in Uganda having one of the highest rates of entrepreneurial activity in all sub-Saharan Africa, but also lacking the education and skills to manage their businesses effectively (Bosma et al., 2008; De Jager et al., 2017). Therefore, having a plethora of opportunities is not enough to develop a sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystem alone.

Langevang, Namatovu, and Dawa (2012) conducted a study regarding the perception of young entrepreneurs in Uganda and their findings concluded that young entrepreneurs seeking their independence were motivated to improve their overall lifestyle by owning their own businesses. This does not harmonize with the notion that most entrepreneurs in African countries start a business due to necessity and poverty. However, it does not necessarily show that businesses are developing due to opportunity either (Acs, 2006; Langevang et al., 2012). The assumption that businesses are being created solely for necessity may be misguided and further research and evaluation of societal perceptions are required.

There is a lack of literature available concerning youth’s entrepreneurial participation. In order to fill this information gap, more research is needed to understand the perceptions of youth populations within Africa. The current generalization of developing an entrepreneurial ecosystem may be stifling potential opportunities for development. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the youths’ perception of the accessibility of developing businesses. If they do not think it is feasible or do not see themselves as an entrepreneur, it may discourage them from trying to start their own entrepreneurial venture.

## METHODOLOGY

### Methodology and Discourse Analysis

This research employs discourse analysis within an interpretivist paradigm to examine Ugandan youth’s perceptions of their entrepreneurial ecosystem, emphasizing their

agency and individual experiences. Interpretivism provides a framework for capturing the human experience by relying on participants' subjective perspectives to assess the entrepreneurial landscape (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Unlike positivist approaches that seek to isolate variables and measure objective outcomes, an interpretivist lens allows for a nuanced understanding of how entrepreneurship is perceived, experienced, and influenced by social, cultural, and economic contexts (Ponterotto, 2005).

Discourse analysis was selected as the primary methodology due to its ability to uncover underlying ideologies, beliefs, and structural influences within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This method enables researchers to explore how Ugandan youth construct meaning around entrepreneurship and how these meanings align with or diverge from dominant narratives in economic development. Through discourse analysis, this study seeks to highlight recurring themes in participants' language that shape their entrepreneurial experiences.

### Defining Discourse Analysis in This Study

Discourse analysis (DA), as applied in this study, focuses on both the expressive and social aspects of language, which inform social identity, capabilities, actions, and interpersonal negotiations (Schiffrin, 2001). It moves beyond surface-level descriptions to engage in a deeper deconstruction of respondents' narratives, analyzing them through cultural, historical, and socio-economic lenses (Johnstone, 2018; Renkema, 2013). This methodological approach draws on Phillips and Hardy's (2002) conceptualization of DA as a means to explore how language not only represents but also actively constructs social realities. DA's emphasis on uncovering implicit assumptions and power dynamics makes it a natural fit for understanding the entrepreneurial experiences of Ugandan youth.

Building on Phillips and Hardy's (2002) framework, this study examines how systemic influences shape entrepreneurial trajectories while also addressing the role of language in producing social realities. Ahl and Nelson (2015) argue that discourses are neither neutral nor passive but instead wield power, shaping institutional and individual behaviors as they are repeatedly invoked. Within the context of Uganda, the educational system—heavily influenced by its colonial history—traditionally prepares students for employment rather than entrepreneurship. This systemic backdrop profoundly influences how youth conceptualize business ownership, risk, and self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, linguistic factors play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial identity. For example, there is no direct translation for “entrepreneur” in Luganda, a widely spoken language in Uganda, which affects how the concept is internalized and discussed within communities (Sebumba, 2013). By applying DA, this study seeks to surface the dominant narratives that inform and constrain entrepreneurial activities among Ugandan youth, providing insights into the broader systemic and cultural forces at play.

### Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who were actively engaged in entrepreneurship while attending college in Uganda. Sixteen participants (8 men, 8 women) were interviewed, all of whom were members of their college's entrepreneurship club and had either started or were in the process of starting a business. The inclusion criteria ensured that participants had firsthand experience navigating Uganda's entrepreneurial ecosystem, allowing for insights directly relevant to the study's objectives.

### Interview Process

Semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted to collect data, allowing for both consistency and flexibility in exploring participants' experiences. Interviews covered key topics such as motivations for becoming an entrepreneur, training received, perceptions of inclusivity, access to funding and resources, and mentorship opportunities. To encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences, open-ended questions were utilized, prompting them to discuss personal and societal influences on their entrepreneurial journey.

The interviews were conducted in English, and participants were given the opportunity to clarify or expand on their responses as needed. Audio recordings of each interview were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the richness of participant narratives. Additionally, field notes were taken during the interviews to capture contextual observations and non-verbal cues that could enrich the analysis.

### Data Organization

The collected data were systematically organized into digital folders. Each participant had a separate file containing their interview transcript, field notes, and any related observations. A master document was created to consolidate all transcripts, facilitating thematic analysis and cross-referencing among participants.

### Analytical Approach and Validation

1. The data were analyzed using a systematic discourse analysis approach, drawing on the framework outlined by Phillips and Hardy (2002). The analysis process was structured into multiple stages:
2. Initial Reading and Coding: Each transcript was reviewed multiple times to familiarize the researchers with the data and identify preliminary themes. Key phrases, recurrent ideas, and significant narratives were highlighted and coded.
3. Identification of Core Discourses: Emerging themes were grouped into broader discourses that encapsulated shared perspectives among participants. For instance, themes related to income security, financial barriers, and gender dynamics were categorized as distinct but interconnected discourses.

**Table 1. Discourses of Ugandan Entrepreneurial Ecosystem**

Discourse	Summary
Entrepreneurship's Role in Income Security	Youth identified entrepreneurship as a means to mitigate the volatility of Uganda's job market. Family and community support were often cited as key motivators. Many participants referenced role models within their families who had successfully pursued entrepreneurship.
Access to Capital and Financial Literacy	Limited access to funding and lack of financial literacy emerged as the most significant barriers. Many participants expressed frustration over the difficulty in obtaining business loans or grants. The absence of structured financial education further compounded these challenges, leaving many young entrepreneurs ill-equipped to manage or scale their ventures.
Gender Difference in Entrepreneurship	Gender was a significant determinant of entrepreneurial success. Women participants reported facing additional hurdles, such as societal expectations, restricted access to capital, and limited mentorship opportunities. Men participants, by contrast, perceived fewer structural barriers. The differences in responses highlighted entrenched gender norms that shape the entrepreneurial landscape in Uganda.

4. Verification and Refinement: To ensure consistency and alignment with participant responses, the identified discourses were revisited and refined. This iterative process involved cross-checking themes with the original transcripts to validate their relevance and coherence.
5. Selection of Supporting Quotes: Direct participant quotes were systematically selected to illustrate each identified discourse. These quotes were chosen based on their clarity, representativeness, and ability to convey the essence of the participants' perspectives. All quotes were attributed to specific participants (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) to maintain traceability and transparency.

## RESULTS

Through this process, three dominant discourses emerged that characterize Ugandan youth's experiences within their entrepreneurial ecosystem: (1) Entrepreneurship as a Path to Income Security, (2) Access to Capital and Financial Literacy as Key Barriers, and (3) Gender-Based Constraints on Entrepreneurial Opportunities. The following table summarizes these discourses.

### Entrepreneurship's Role in Income Security

The first discourse that emerged from the student interviews was that participants felt compelled to become entrepreneurs to gain control over their income security after graduation. Many students described being warned by friends and family about the volatility of the job market, emphasizing that it was wise to have an independent source of income. One participant stated, "Your friends have graduated and have no jobs. So yeah, they also tell you to, you know, find something to do... and my parents are also entrepreneurs. So, I can get support" (Participant 3). Another participant recalled childhood conversations with his mother, a craftswoman, who instilled in him the importance of entrepreneurship as a fallback: "She would tell me she wanted me to learn so I could do this in the future. She said she wants me to have a career, but I want you to know this skill because it is very easy, and you can earn a living. Then you can create something bigger from this" (Participant 8).

Family members or respected business people played a significant role in student mentorship, advice, and encouragement. Many participants described their parents as encouraging them to be job creators rather than job seekers. When asked about sources of support, one woman participant noted, "I rely on my mom. She pushes me to do more. She gives me a lot of advice and encouragement" (Participant 6). Similarly, another participant described how his uncle, a farmer, served as a mentor: "My mentor is my uncle... he has been a family farmer. So, I pick from their families' farming notions. He gives me advice" (Participant 11).

A common theme among respondents was that exposure to entrepreneurship within their family made the idea of starting a business more achievable. Many students had prior experience assisting in family businesses and saw this as an advantage in their own entrepreneurial aspirations. One participant explained, "If you look at my dad or my brother also, these successful entrepreneurs have really encouraged me and boosted my skills in entrepreneurship" (Participant 14). Another participant shared a similar experience: "My mother would send me to buy things for her store ... she used to give me a little allowance and I would save my money to start selling something small" (Participant 5). This participant has since launched a small boutique selling used clothing.

Mentorship was highly valued by participants, who sought guidance from experienced family members or community figures. One student who started a poultry business explained that he was given space on his parents' farm and was mentored by his uncle, a successful poultry farmer: "He told me poultry was a good business and I saw his success, so I chose to do the same. Now I am looking for micro-financing to scale" (Participant 9).

When discussing their motivations, students often highlighted their preference for the autonomy of entrepreneurship. They valued the control and independence it provided, as well as the ability to generate their own income. One participant explained:

"I want to be an entrepreneur because my love, what drives me, is my passion. I feel like I ought to do it. Besides that, I also earn some living and give myself something so I can sustain myself during school time instead of getting hand-outs" (Participant 2).

Another participant described the freedom and responsibility that entrepreneurship offers:

“It feels good to relax because, you know, I have my own business. No one is going to wake you up in the morning and yell at you that you are late for work... I know I am responsible. Some things will not work out, some things will be delayed. Owning a business is something good and it brings you responsibility. You learn for yourself. Next time you will improve. And you realize it opens your mind. You start thinking about different things. But when you are employed you do not think a lot in this way. You just stay there from morning to evening. So, for this reason it is good to have a business” (Participant 12).

The students interviewed expressed a strong preference for owning their own businesses and had no plans to become job seekers. They exhibited a notable lack of fear regarding entrepreneurship, as they had successful role models within their families and communities, making their aspirations feel attainable. This close mentorship network, wherein experienced entrepreneurs guide aspiring ones, reflects the early stages of a growing entrepreneurial ecosystem.

## **Access to Capital and Financial Literacy**

### ***Issues Regarding Capital***

The issue of capital and financing emerged as a dominant and pervasive challenge among all participants. The responses revealed multiple layers of financial barriers, including a lack of financial literacy, hesitancy to acquire loans, distrust of financial institutions, bureaucratic challenges in accessing government funding, and limited experience in managing business finances. These factors combined to create a substantial obstacle to entrepreneurship, preventing many young entrepreneurs from starting or scaling their businesses.

### ***Lack of Start-up Capital***

One of the most pressing concerns expressed by participants was the difficulty in securing the initial capital required to launch a business. Many students relied on personal savings, side jobs, or small-scale informal work to fund their ventures. One participant explained, “My funding comes from my labour. I go and do work for people, unskilled work... I use whatever I make from that to fund my businesses” (Participant 1). This reliance on self-financing often resulted in slow business growth and a limited ability to scale operations. Another participant noted, “I began painting at home and earned money, and then from that, I bought onions. Then when I combined the money from paintings and onions, I made enough for the start-up” (Participant 6). This incremental approach to funding, while resourceful, underscores the financial constraints faced by youth entrepreneurs in Uganda.

## ***Reluctance to Take Loans***

Despite the potential benefits of securing a loan to expedite business growth, most participants expressed strong reservations about borrowing from financial institutions. The primary reasons cited were the high interest rates, lack of collateral, and the fear of accumulating unmanageable debt. One participant remarked, “Oh no, I do not want to start with loans because it becomes too hard. You will never pay back the interest. First, I will start with the little money I have” (Participant 15). Another participant echoed similar concerns, stating, “I have a fear of loans. Maybe I would get a personal loan from a friend but not a bank... banks in Uganda operate in a way I don’t like. They give you a loan, like 4 million shillings, and they want security. If you fail to pay, they will take everything. That is unfair... the bank is not so forgiving. If you fail, you fail” (Participant 4).

## ***Limited Financial Literacy and Business Management Skills***

Many participants acknowledged their own lack of financial literacy as a significant challenge. Several respondents expressed concern that, even if they managed to secure capital, they would struggle to allocate funds effectively. One participant admitted, “I have a problem with loans because I believe we youth do not know how to manage our finances a lot. If we get loans, no one will tell us how to use the money. Before, we must have a plan on how to refund the money from the loan. I am scared I cannot pay it back” (Participant 10).

Approximately 56 percent of the participants lacked basic bookkeeping skills, and less than half of the study’s participants had learned basic accounting in secondary school. One participant described feeling overwhelmed by financial management: “I focus more on the cash balance rather than on business development. I know I should be tracking expenses, but I don’t know how” (Participant 12). This disconnect highlights an urgent need for financial literacy programs tailored to young entrepreneurs, equipping them with the skills needed to track expenses, manage cash flow, and reinvest profits strategically.

## ***Challenges in Accessing Government and NGO Funding***

All participants expressed an interest in applying for government or NGO funding, yet none had successfully done so. The bureaucratic complexity of the application processes and the time commitment required were cited as major deterrents. One participant commented, “My opinion is that most government organizations can locate a lot of money, but the procedures are complicated, and there is always a long process” (Participant 13). Others felt ill-equipped to navigate the administrative requirements, lacking clear guidance on how to complete applications or meet eligibility criteria.

## Community-Based Resource Sharing and Peer Networks

Despite these financial constraints, participants demonstrated resilience by engaging in informal knowledge-sharing networks. Many students relied on peer discussions to seek advice on money management and access alternative funding opportunities. One participant explained, “We interact about money, mental challenges, finances, and challenges another person is facing in entrepreneurship. At least we come to know and develop understanding and find solutions” (Participant 16). These grassroots-level financial collaborations suggest an emerging entrepreneurial ecosystem where young entrepreneurs support one another through shared experiences, financial pooling, and knowledge exchange.

The findings indicate that while youth entrepreneurs in Uganda exhibit strong motivation and ingenuity, financial barriers remain a significant constraint on their ability to start and sustain businesses. The reluctance to take loans, the lack of financial literacy, and the complex nature of accessing institutional funding underscore the need for targeted interventions. Expanding financial education programs, simplifying access to government funding, and fostering mentorship opportunities may serve as crucial steps toward empowering young entrepreneurs and ensuring long-term business viability.

## Gender Difference in Entrepreneurship

The final theme that emerged from the interviews was the significant role that gender plays in shaping entrepreneurial opportunities and challenges. Both men and women participants acknowledged the existence of gendered barriers in entrepreneurship, although their perceptions of these barriers varied. Women participants reported greater difficulties in accessing capital, securing mentorship, and gaining respect in business, while men participants were more likely to assert that gender equality had improved. This divergence in perspectives highlights the ongoing impact of traditional gender norms on entrepreneurial experiences in Uganda.

### *Perceived Barriers for Women Entrepreneurs*

Women participants consistently expressed that societal expectations placed additional burdens on women seeking to start and sustain businesses. One woman participant stated, “We as ladies have a lot of work to do, at home and also at the college. You do this and you do that [chores]. I have very little time, and I am running the business and do it over weekends. The males, they are free” (Participant 5). Time constraints due to domestic responsibilities were a recurring theme, with multiple participants indicating that women entrepreneurs often had to juggle their business activities with household duties.

Women also reported facing more skepticism and a lack of respect from customers and business associates. One participant explained, “Everywhere, I think, it is better to be male because most people give them more respect in

Africa, to male than to women. When a man stands to speak, they will give more attention to the man than to the woman” (Participant 9). Another participant echoed this sentiment: “As a woman entrepreneur, you are not looked at at a higher level, not like how someone would look at a man. In terms of respect, they give you more authority when you are male” (Participant 3). These responses suggest that gender biases continue to shape how women entrepreneurs are perceived in Uganda’s business environment.

### *Differences in Business Types and Industry Participation*

Participants indicated that gender norms also influenced the types of businesses that men and women were expected to pursue. Women were more likely to enter businesses related to food production, crafts, and beauty services, while men gravitated toward agriculture, technology, and manufacturing. One man participant noted, “People have a negative mindset towards women. Women keep studying their own stuff like management business, and men do business-like physical work” (Participant 12). This segmentation of business opportunities reinforces traditional ideas about men and women labor roles, potentially limiting women’s access to higher-growth industries.

Additionally, several men participants indicated that men who pursued traditionally women-dominated businesses faced social stigma. One man participant shared, “The traditional thing is that women work differently... for example, cooking in a small restaurant or cooking food on the road. Society kind of discriminates how guys are supposed to handle things. Like, it tells you what kind of business a guy is supposed to do and what a girl is supposed to do... when I work with cassava or pancakes other men will tease me and call me names” (Participant 7). This observation suggests that rigid gender expectations influence not only women’s, but also men’s, entrepreneurial choices.

### *Perceptions of Gender Equality Among Men*

While women participants frequently cited barriers to entrepreneurship, men participants were more likely to state that gender equality had improved. More than half of the men interviewed expressed the belief that men and women now have equal opportunities in entrepreneurship. One man participant commented, “Women are equally capable. The challenges they say they have are just about confidence. If they decide, they can do the same as men” (Participant 15). However, this perspective was not universally shared by women respondents, many of whom pointed to tangible obstacles such as restricted access to funding and mentorship.

Despite these differing views, there was consensus among both men and women participants that entrepreneurship education should be more inclusive and gender-sensitive. One woman participant noted, “Some people who do not know anything about gender or who know less will be the ones today that say women cannot work with certain things or say that maybe women should not work at all. But

those who are educated about gender, they do not have any problem working with men and women” (Participant 11).

### ***Strengths and Resilience Among Women Entrepreneurs***

Although women participants highlighted numerous gender-related challenges, they also demonstrated strong resilience and motivation to succeed in business. Many women noted that they had to work harder than their male counterparts to achieve the same level of success, but they viewed this as a source of strength rather than discouragement. One participant stated, “women are very hardworking. Men are more lucky... Most men believe agriculture, or these small things should be done by us ladies. They think they can go for higher things. So, when someone sees you making crisps, or liquid soap, or shampoo, it is in their minds that those things are done by ladies, not gents” (Participant 8).

Men participants also recognized the hard work of women in business. One participant stated, “Women entrepreneurs need to be more hardworking. I feel like they will be more successful because they need to work harder” (Participant 14). Another male participant acknowledged the value of diversity in entrepreneurship, explaining, “The women take time to think and reflect before acting and making a decision. With men, we are overcontrolling, and we are not always thinking. That is why if I start a business, I want women involved. We need to encourage other women to be in business to make it better” (Participant 16). These perspectives indicate an increasing recognition of women’s contributions to entrepreneurship, even among men who acknowledge the lingering cultural biases.

Gender remains a critical factor in shaping entrepreneurial experiences in Uganda. Women face unique barriers, including time constraints, lack of respect, and industry segmentation, which impact their ability to compete in certain markets. However, their resilience, strong work ethic, and determination to overcome challenges highlight the potential for more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. While some men participants viewed gender equality as already achieved, the responses of women participants suggest that further structural and cultural changes are necessary to create a truly level playing field. Expanding mentorship programs, increasing financial support for women entrepreneurs, and promoting gender-sensitive entrepreneurship education could help bridge the existing gaps and support more equitable business opportunities for both men and women.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Entrepreneurial Culture**

Entrepreneurship is an elusive term that is defined in an assortment of ways (Acs et al., 2014). Due to this, the term needs to be defined by the population of which the researcher is trying to examine. This will better capture the needs of the population being addressed. The micro-level of socially understanding entrepreneurial ecosystems

within Uganda has been minimally explored (Langevang et al., 2012) and, therefore, a thorough analysis was required on the discourse defining the term entrepreneurship ecosystem. By evaluating the students’ choice of words, the researchers can better understand the specific needs and perceptions of the student population. The research desired to contribute to the understanding of what young Ugandan entrepreneurs require to be more successful in their business endeavours and how their college, development projects, and government agencies can better support the creation and development of rich entrepreneurship ecosystems in the future.

When the student participants spoke of the terms entrepreneurship and small business they were not always connected, in many cases the terms were fragmented. Entrepreneurship was defined as a state of mind, passion, enthusiasm, and a source of independence. Whereas, terms such as “start-ups” or “small businesses” were more grounded in the practical and financial aspects of creating a business. This disconnect posed a broader question that would need to be addressed in further research: What is the perceived difference in Uganda between the terms small business and entrepreneurship? Understanding this perceived difference in these terms will be helpful because entrepreneurship should not only be a state of mind, but also a course of action to create prosperity for individuals and economies. Entrepreneurial ecosystems, as explored earlier in this paper, is the interconnection of small businesses and their business environment to create success within a complex web of economic activity. Insight into the reason for this disconnect may help understand why start-ups are so likely to fail in Uganda as well as distinguish what is lacking to develop stronger value within their entrepreneurial ecosystem. To disconnect entrepreneurship from business signals one’s lack of comprehension that they are part of an ecosystem larger than their personal business endeavour.

Sheriff and Muffatto (2015), noticed that entrepreneurial activity is commonly seen in Africa in “clusters” that can be limiting in terms of growth and reach. There needs to be a greater shift towards moving away from this cluster format, and embrace full ecosystems to create deeper connections, and stronger businesses. The students discussed their small cluster at school at length. Although they enjoy this interaction, they are not satisfied. They want to get more experience, listen to more speakers, and learn more skills. The discourse suggested they want to be included in the national entrepreneurial ecosystem. However, they struggle to find ways to penetrate this network. There needs to be an improvement in the amount of literature on this topic, including more thoughtful examination of African entrepreneurship ecosystems (Sheriff & Muffatto, 2015).

### **Financial Competencies**

The theme regarding financial competency and access to capital, was an important discovery because the participants were overwhelmed and not sure how to manage their financial needs or access potential capital available. Over half of the students did not have adequate bookkeeping skills to manage their business needs, yet when asked

what skills they needed most, only one student mentioned money management. Near the end of the interview the students were asked specifically about their bookkeeping and if they had adequate, 9 out of the 16 students commented that they did not have enough skills and that they needed to improve in this area. This theme suggested that there is a disconnect between the participants' understanding of entrepreneurship and financial management. The interviewees associated entrepreneurship with innovation, teamwork, design, and wealth creation. However, when discussing money matters this was thought to be correlated to business management. This disconnect needs to be further explored because the lack of financial literacy could be a leading cause to small business failure in the country.

### Gender and Inclusive Entrepreneurship

Regarding inclusive research, there is a call by leaders in this field to challenge the research beyond the positivist approach by understanding issues on a more intimate and personal level. The work of Foss et al., (2018) is a systematic literature review, and similarly Brush et al., (2016) review literature and generalize from public research and policy on a macro-scale to understand women within entrepreneurship. This considers many important factors but disregards the narrative of the individual.

In this study, it was clear within the discourse that men felt inclusivity had been reached in entrepreneurship, where women felt they had to work much harder. The women seemed to accept this as part and parcel of being a woman entrepreneur. The interpretation of inequality was very much an individual experience, there was no consistent narrative of discrimination. Furthermore, there was an understanding that women perform less profitable work. Men would expect to be able to build larger enterprises with more ease, respect, and encouragement. This implies that the opportunities may be available for everyone to become an entrepreneur, however there are still barriers in how financially profitable a woman can become, suggesting the glass ceiling has not yet been broken.

The participants noted that there was a higher concentration of "business minded" women on campus, however, that did not correlate with the women making more money. Inclusivity and equality in entrepreneurship have not been achieved, though there is a recognition that gender differences exist. The discourse with the male students suggested that this was not interpreted as inequality, but rather a difference in expected work. Furthermore, some men felt discriminated against because they could not do certain tasks because they were deemed effeminate. Ugandan women did not feel limited or discriminated against in the way men had experienced. The women participants expressed that although they had to work harder than men, they were not discouraged and they believed they could accomplish what men could do, thereby gaining respect from their community.

One additional important consideration is the role of family influence and networks in promoting entrepreneurship. This is an important finding because it suggests that networks could often support entrepreneurs even in the

presence of discrimination that emerges from less than ideal institutions. Through the familial network, women entrepreneurs gain access to knowledge, emotional support, potential financial resources and vicarious experience. Although the role of social networks is a well researched one, contextual factors could strengthen their influence in different institutional settings.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the perceptions of young entrepreneurs regarding their experience and understanding of their given entrepreneurial ecosystem. The participants showed great enthusiasm in pursuing small business ventures. Furthermore, they appreciated being part of an entrepreneurship club that allowed them to share their experiences and hardships, as well as develop new skills and broaden their mind. However, there are major skills gaps, particularly regarding finance. There is a lack of recognition that financial management is critical for business success. The students also struggle with gender inclusivity but continue to challenge past norms and create more gender awareness.

There is currently very little information from the grass-root perspective, causing policy and development projects to poorly reflect the needs of young Ugandan entrepreneurs. This research aimed to address this gap in knowledge by contributing to the body of research studying entrepreneurship from a first-person perspective. However, there was the limitation of the language barrier. This may have stifled the expression of the participants who may have been able to answer the questions more elaborately if given the option to be interviewed in their first language.

These results serve as a call for more perception-based research in order to better contribute to a more inclusive understanding of matters pertaining entrepreneurship in Uganda. It is recommended that further research regarding youth's perception of entrepreneurship be conducted, particularly regarding the youth's understanding of the correlation between small business development and entrepreneurship. Through creating a stronger entrepreneurship curriculum, young agriculture students have the possibility to find empowerment and independence through lucrative business ventures, thus contributing to the overall growth and prosperity of their country.

One of the key distinctions we must consider is the critical role of institutions in driving productive entrepreneurship and economic growth. Institutions should function as impartial arbiters and referees, ensuring the protection of property rights while fostering inclusive government and social networks. This institutional stability is essential in enabling entrepreneurs to direct their efforts toward productive endeavors with the confidence that they will benefit from their contributions. Even in a society with access to technological and knowledge-based resources, economic growth will remain elusive without inclusive institutions that safeguard property rights and provide equitable access to opportunities for all, not just the elite.

However, our findings extend this insight further—revealing that even under conditions of extractive institu-

tions and systemic prejudice, entrepreneurs manage to achieve a certain level of economic subsistence. While this form of entrepreneurship does not necessarily lead to large-scale economic growth, it plays a crucial role in the survival and resilience of marginalized groups. This dynamic is not fully addressed within the Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson model, which emphasizes the necessity of strong institutions for economic development but does not fully account for the adaptive survival strategies of entrepreneurs operating in constrained environments.

This study echoes Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson's assertion that addressing poverty requires more than economic interventions—it necessitates institutional reform. Institutions cannot simply be transplanted from one country to another, as they evolve within specific historical and political contexts. For example, England's historical rise as a global economic power was partly due to a system in which the monarchy had limited authority compared to other European rulers, allowing for the development of independent institutions that promoted economic trust and investment. In contrast, many low-income countries today struggle with institutional structures that centralize power and limit economic participation. Without trust-building mechanisms and institutions that foster accountability, these countries are unlikely to achieve sustainable economic progress, regardless of foreign aid or external trade relationships. In such conditions, entrepreneurs, particularly those on the margins, will remain confined to basic survival entrepreneurship rather than participating in high-growth, scalable ventures.

Despite this reality, scholarship and policy discussions tend to focus disproportionately on fast-growth entrepreneurs and unicorn startups, often overlooking the majority of entrepreneurs who operate within subsistence economies. This oversight parallels the missteps of developmental economists who have historically designed interventions without fully understanding local conditions or the needs of the affected populations. As Easterly (2014) highlights in *The Tyranny of Experts*, policymakers have at times prioritized top-down economic planning at the expense of individual rights, leading to policies that displace communities or impose external development models without local buy-in. Similarly, our findings suggest that experts and policymakers must be cautious when proposing economic solutions, ensuring that they are grounded in local realities rather than idealized projections. Failure to do so can result in moral disengagement, where interventions are pursued with good intentions but ultimately ignore the agency and lived experiences of the people they aim to help (Muldoon et al., 2022). Future research should also consider differences in education among respondents as educated individuals may feel that they have more opportunities where non-educated might not be willing to even take on entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, we acknowledge that our discourse analysis carries an inherent element of subjectivity. Respondents interpret their entrepreneurial environment through personal and cultural lenses, which may differ from the perspectives of researchers or policymakers. This limitation is not unique to this study but is a consideration for any qualitative research endeavor. Recognizing this subjectivity is crucial for those seeking to apply our findings—interventions must be approached with humility and adaptability, ensuring that they account for the perspectives of those directly impacted.

## Applied Implications

The implications of this research extend beyond academic theory into practical applications for policymakers, development agencies, and entrepreneurs operating in low-income economies. The findings emphasize the necessity of designing interventions that recognize the constraints imposed by institutional structures while leveraging the resilience and adaptability of entrepreneurs. Policymakers must work toward fostering more inclusive institutions that support small-scale entrepreneurs by reducing bureaucratic barriers, improving financial accessibility, and creating regulatory environments that encourage innovation rather than hinder it.

Additionally, development programs must prioritize context-sensitive solutions over one-size-fits-all models. Rather than imposing external institutional frameworks, initiatives should focus on strengthening existing community-driven entrepreneurial ecosystems. This includes enhancing mentorship networks, improving financial literacy, and supporting localized market access strategies that align with the economic realities of the region.

For entrepreneurs, this research underscores the importance of adaptive strategies in navigating institutional constraints. While structural reforms may take time, entrepreneurs can benefit from strengthening informal support networks, leveraging alternative financing models, and building collaborative ecosystems that facilitate knowledge-sharing and resource pooling.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, sustainable economic development requires a balance between long-term institutional reform and immediate, practical solutions that empower entrepreneurs within their existing constraints. By aligning policy interventions with the lived realities of local entrepreneurs, we can foster a more inclusive and resilient entrepreneurial ecosystem that drives meaningful economic participation and growth.

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