



Optimising Youth Contribution to Socioeconomic Development – Case from Rwanda

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Abstract

Rwanda is one of the leading countries in creating sustained progressive socioeconomic development in the last two decades. However, this development is clearly linked to the government of Rwanda's efforts to bring in many top-down initiatives that addressed the conditions of its citizens rather than led by the community itself. In relevance to the youth of Rwanda, despite the high-quality national youth plan, the rare literature shows that Rwanda youth still have many opportunities to lead initiatives of their own projects that lead to socioeconomic development using a bottom-up approach.

This paper shows some of the approaches that were followed by the Socioeconomic Institute for Advanced Studies (SIAS) to optimize the youth contribution in the socioeconomic development of Rwanda. Further longitudinal study of the outcome of this approach is highly advised.

Keywords: Youth, Rwanda, Socioeconomic Development, Community Development

1.0 Introduction

Since its inception, in April 2023, the Socioeconomic Institute for Advanced Studies (SIAS), which is based in Kigali, Rwanda, has realized the importance of optimizing the role of youth in the socioeconomic development of the country, using a bottom-up approach. This specifically became one of the goals of SIAS after completing its needs assessment, which formulated the essence of its existence and its required approaches. SIAS realized that if it is to be successful in engaging youth in the contemporary and future development of the socioeconomic challenges of Rwanda, it needs to work on their mindsets that comprehensive approaches. Ahmed et. al. (2020), Buheji (2020a)

Being committed to supporting the already successful Rwandan government efforts, launched a series of approaches to bring in more models and frameworks that can be

replicated by different organizations, once successful of how to trigger youth engagement or involvement with their communities' issues. Buheji (2022)

Youth in Rwanda and East Africa found to be in need of understanding how they could play a role in their socioeconomic problems and manage the complications and the complexity that come with addressing them with more focus, Buheji (2019d). In order to accomplish this, SIAS in collaboration with a variety of youth organizations in Rwanda, established a series of workshops and initiatives that would both raise curiosity and involve youth in the socioeconomic challenges using a bottom-up approach, i.e. being independent from waiting empowerment from government or large organizations. The initiative started with the internship program that the International Inspiration Economy Project (IIEP) and SIAS produced. Buheji (2019a), Buheji (2019b).

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Basis for the Necessity of Youth Contribution to Socioeconomic Development

SIAS, as part of its program alignment, besides analysis and scan of its targeted stakeholders, carried a 'needs assessment study' that helped to construct its goals, and approaches and then sharpen its postgraduate academic programs. The needs assessment found that youth in Rwanda and in East Africa in general are rarely involved in the collection of observations, whether as students, or even if they work within their communities' development circle. Buheji (2018b)

Youth, as seen by the author as potential stakeholders, since youth have the time, spirit, energy and condition in many parts of their life cycle to contribute immensely to socioeconomic projects. For many youths this might be considered to be a game changer since many of them would participate in such projects while they are in school getting their specialization, during holidays, or even when they graduate but waiting for a job. 'NEET youth', i.e. those not in education, not in employment, not in training, would be the most beneficiaries of such programs. Buheji (2020b), Buheji (2019b), Buheji (2019e).

2.2 Role of Youthineering in Creating the Formula of Socioeconomic Change

In (2019) the author developed a concept called 'Youthineering'. The idea here is to fulfil the youth, or the targeted community, specific needs. Through youthineering, the challenges can be turned to be a source of curiosity or inspiration. Buheji and Ahmed (2019)

Youthineering helps to generate ideas on how the youth economy can improve in the future and what is the trend on youth political economy and vibrant youth contribution to socioeconomic development. Thus, through youthineering we will break the constraints that limit young people in Rwanda from creating new jobs, or eliminate their frustration while searching for non-existing jobs. By bringing youth entrepreneurship with youthineering we might have a good effect on the mainstream of the economy. With this concept, the demanding issues such as 'youth migration' and 'the migrant youth' in Rwanda could be shaped better with pragmatic yet tested solutions. Buheji and Ahmed (2019)

The issues of youth and the rural area economy is also another important subject that could be addressed by youthineering. Through such engagement, we can extend youth's impact towards the sustainable development goals (the SDGs). In a nutshell, Youthineering could be a unique platform that would integrate Rwandan youth education and their active learning in relevance to socioeconomic challenges.

2.3 Rwandan Youth National Plan

The government of Rwanda (2005) released its first 'Rwanda National Youth Plan and Policy', which targeted to bring comprehensive development through clear planning. The plan focused on youth's economic empowerment with a strong emphasis on mainstreaming job-based budgeting in all sectors. The plan envisages the decentralization of youth structures and a strong mobilization mechanism down to the village level. Buheji. (2018c)

The national youth policy helped to mobilize the efforts that devise and help implement the policies and the programs specifically intended for youth and which are already integrated in all sectors of the Rwanda's life. Beside, understanding the demographics of youth, the plan covered the economic characteristics, the socio-political characteristics, the regional and international context, but that was till 2005. Government of Rwanda (2005)

Despite that, this national plan did cover how the Rwandan youth is related to socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty reduction strategy, the plan is based on a top-down approach and does not address how youth would deal with the complexity of the socioeconomic problems around them. For Rwanda, youth are considered the driver for national unity and reconciliation. Besides, the youth national plan encourages youth to take a role in civic education, social reforms, employment, poverty and environment. Buheji (2019g).

2.4 Optimizing the Youth Contribution to Socioeconomic Development

Optimization is about raising or maximizing the constraints that lead to the development of the targeted group capacity compared to the demand that needs to be addressed. In this paper, we try to link what is the gap we found out a study of the Rwanda needs assessment in relevance to socioeconomic development and realize the approaches that already or can be adopted to prepare the mindset of youth to deal with their communities challenges. Buheji, (2021).

3.0 Case Study- Integrating Youth into Socioeconomic Development Needs

3.1 SIAS-IIEP Internship Program

In order to integrate the Rwandan and East African youth with their communities' socioeconomic problems, one of the tools of the SIAS-IIEP internship was to publish a paper based on the fourth months' experience with the program.

The interns have gone through basic research methodology orientation, one of which was

carrying out focus group discussion through field visits to the targeted community members who are going through a socioeconomic challenge using a bottom-up approach.

Part of the internship program was to introduce the students to how to lead the community to appreciate their non-financial resources. The youth were also introduced to the type of challenges against initiating socioeconomic change and when to utilize the community resources (wealth) to deal with such conditions. Buheji (2018a)

This internship program is dedicated to students of Universities, and some pioneers of high schools who would like to contribute to their community, learn by doing, and know more about Inspiration Economy and its projects. The target of the internship is to keep youth engaged quarterly with their selected area of socioeconomic focus.

Buheji (2021) confirmed that through such internship programs Rwandan and East African youth become candidates to lead projects in a specific community with a clear socioeconomic goal, such as targeting specific poverty elimination, or family instability, etc. The interns would be qualified to lead social-for-profit companies, or coops, or propose to initiate a project scheme, or even organize a conference, forum, or workshop. Later, these interns are expected to write a case study or paper about their specific socioeconomic intervention.

3.2 Nyagatare Project Model

This project showed how youth could identify and prepare the community for their socioeconomic needs. Using coops approach, the Nyagatare project showed a model that could be carried out in the different provinces of Rwanda, regardless of the condition of the community, or the type of stakeholders. Their was a balance between the gender of the coop participants and a fair age distribution similar to the Rwanda demographic statistics. The coop members in Nyagatare came from a variety of education levels, led by both undergraduate students and one of the community leaders.

The integration between the youth and the sources of income in this northeastern district raised their socioeconomic experience on how to create an impact that leads to realized socioeconomic development.

3.3 Workshops To Measure & Gauge the Gap of Community Readiness

SIAS carried out a series of workshops that addressed community readiness and engaged youth in creating change from within. The workshop participants were equipped with the type of intrinsic resources within the community capacity that helped it to create the change independently.

The youth appreciated the tools within the workshops and how that enhanced their socioeconomic awareness.



Figure (1) Photo of one the Post-Workshops Activities that Youth Participated in to Enhance their Community Engagement Readiness

3.4 Round Table Dialogue Sessions

Leading youth NGOs in Rwanda, as AIESEC, FEYS, ... shared their experiences in relevance to the socioeconomic initiatives through the round table. Even the participating university students showed how socioeconomic programs can improve the correlation between their education and the school of life. The participants visualized the key success factors for life-purposefulness when it coincides with applied academic-driven socioeconomic programs, including those programs that can help in discovering the abundance of community resources.



Figure (2) Photo of one of the Post-Dialogue Sessions Led by Youth to Develop tools that boost their Contribution to Socioeconomic Challenges

3.5 Youth Open Days

SIAS also initiated youth open days, which is a youth-led program that mixes between discussing freely the socioeconomic problems in Africa in general and in Rwanda specifically and what are the common threads proposed that could bring the needed change in the communities. Buheji (2019d).

The open days are meant to ensure the spread of SIAS approaches amongst youth and build their capacity towards effective outcomes through projects generated from each workshop. The open days are run with Rwandan experts in collaboration with the SIAS experts, as per the topic of the workshop. It is worth mentioning that such workshops are attended over Zoom by participants from East Africa, besides the physical attendance from the Rwandan participants.



Figure (3) Photo representing one of the SIAS Open-Days that focus on Youth Engagement

3.6 Youth Competitions

SIAS started youth competitions with clear themes or objectives that would help develop their problem-solving skills within the community through applied experience. SIAS focus on competitions that bring engagement of youth through research, learning, and exploration. The participants were engaged with new information, ideas, and approaches related to the competition topic, broadening their knowledge and intellectual horizons. Buheji (2019f)

Through competitions, youth can focus on valuable networking opportunities where participants can connect with peers, mentors, judges, and professionals in their field, potentially opening doors to collaborations, partnerships, or job opportunities. Successfully winning competitions can boost participants' self-confidence, but the experience of every participant is beyond get recognized as a winner. Participating in a socioeconomic-focused competition can lead to recognition from peers, experts, and even the public, depending on the scale of the competition. Buheji (2017)



Figure (4) Photo representing one of the Rwandan Youth Competition Winners run by SIAS

4.0 Discussion and Conclusion

In support the tremendous government of Rwanda's efforts to bring in socioeconomic changes and improve the quality of life of its youth, through the well-structured national plan, the SIAS initiative comes to complement this effort and bring in a bottom-up engagement program. Such a program seems to address essential needs for the country and the African region in general.

The necessity for youth contribution to socioeconomic development is touched upon to support how the current and the coming Rwandan generation would be creating a new formula for this socioeconomic change. The internship program and the coops led by youth in Nyagatare generate new models for youth engagement that can be further developed.

To gauge the gap between community readiness and youth capacity, workshops similar to that run by SIAS need to be adopted by more NGOs in the country. The round table dialogue sessions and the youth open days, besides the youth competitions, open doors for foresighting the future coming models of youth contribution towards Rwanda and Africa's socioeconomic development. Time would show only the importance of such a collective methodological approach.

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