



Are Youth Realizing Opportunities?

Notes from a field visit to the Youth in Action Program in Uganda

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I woke to the sound of drenching rain. We were going to visit three groups of young people who were managing their enterprises after received training and financial support from Youth in Action, a six-year \$39.8 million partnership between Save the Children and [The MasterCard Foundation](#).

Launched in 2012, Youth in Action aims to improve the socio-economic status of approximately 40,000 rural out-of-school boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 18, in Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda. This was my second trip to Youth in Action in Uganda, I first visited two years ago when the program was in the early stages of implementation. I was keen to see what had changed since my first trip.

Uganda is home to close to 35 million people and 77% of the population is under the age of 30. Youth suffer from poverty, unemployment and underemployment and lack of basic literacy and education. Jobs are scarce and many people work in the informal sector.

Youth in Action is focused on four districts in Western Uganda and we were going to Kasese, the fifth most highly populated district in Uganda. It didn't feel very populated to me as we drove for 1 ½ hours from Fort Portal, one of the major cities in Western Uganda, to visit our first group. Because of the rain, side roads were filled with mud, making it hard to reach our first appointment. We walked among banana and coffee trees and saw no one, although we could hear voices.

We arrived at a small house with chairs neatly set out for us in the front. The rain had stopped and the sky was clearing. After making introductions, Elmos, the Secretary of the group of eight youth who had formed an enterprise in hybrid pig farming, stepped forward and read carefully from his detailed notes. He proudly described how he had heard about Youth in Action on the radio and attended the learning phase of the program where he acquired life skills and improved his literacy, numeracy and financial skills. Elmos is one of ten children in his family. Like other members of his group he couldn't stay in school because his parents couldn't afford school fees. He had achieved Senior 4 in secondary school and was well-spoken. He was also married to one of the members of the group and they had one child with another one on the way.

After preparing a business plan which was approved by Youth in Action's local partner, Fura Foundation, the group received their cash transfer (one of the components of the program) and bought materials to construct a pig sty. They then bought four pigs, two of which were pregnant. Both pigs delivered ten piglets and so Elmos and the group extended the sty.

The group was doing well and so Elmos diversified his own activities into agriculture, growing coffee, apple, and banana trees. Other members of the group began to expand their individual businesses and, like Elmos, were hoping to build houses and their own pig sties for the group to use. They also saved together in a savings group.

We asked them about challenges. They told us that sometimes it was hard to buy medicine for the pigs and input food prices fluctuated, but they stayed focused on their plan. They also had a strong mentor who lived nearby and raised pigs.

They believe that they have set a good example in the community. Elmos happily told us that they needed no more support from Youth in Action. Importantly, they hoped that other youth would be able to benefit from this type of program which allows young people to select the livelihood pathway that is best for them including establishing an enterprise, receiving a vocational training/apprenticeship or returning to school.



Wherein our next meeting, we saw a group of 13 youth. Unlike our first group which was working together, most of these young people were managing their own enterprises ranging from cassava processing, buying and selling coffee to welding. All but one had traveled to this small town to meet us.

Rosemary, who had her place of business right there in town, was one of six children. She became pregnant when she was in Secondary Two. Her parents stopped supporting her so she left school. Before joining Youth in Action, she said she wasn't doing anything. But after graduating from the program she started to produce and sell cassava flour. With the income from this business she started to make bricks. She continued to expand her activities and bought a goat. Now, Rosemary is also doing hairdressing and has a small, but clean and tidy salon with a brightly painted red floor and blue walls. She also sells cassava flour from her store. She is now married with two children and you can see that she will continue to pursue other business opportunities.



Building her business brick by brick, Youth in Action has helped Rosemary expand her income generating activities to include producing cassava flour and running her own hair salon.

We asked the group about how we could improve Youth in Action and they offered many suggestions. Some encouraged us to consider larger cash transfers (the average transfer is about \$90). Others asked for more mentorship and support for those who do well. All the youth had mobile phones but no internet. They thought it would be helpful to have a Youth in Action center in town for connections and networking.

The last group we visited was comprised of eight youth. Some of whom were in group enterprises and some with their own businesses. Their enterprise activities were mostly agriculture based, with both livestock and produce. In this group, we had an opportunity to talk in greater detail with two young people: Joy and Moses.



With the income she earned from her small market stall, Joy purchased two bicycles and a motorbike and started a transport business.

Joy proudly walked with us to show us her market stall. She completed Primary Level 6 and then dropped out of school when her father died. She benefited from Youth in Action by learning how to manage a small grocery business. Today she rents a stall in the marketplace but she is saving money to buy a plot where she can build a small house. She is planning on storing most of her produce at home. In addition to managing her stall, Joy owns two bicycles and one motorbike. She hires three people to provide transport services to the community and this provides her with another source of income.



Moses (on the right) plans to grow his chapatti-making business into a catering company. In the meantime, he's opened a movie and music rental library.

Moses (on the right) had to drop out of school in Senior Level 3 because of circumstances at home had changed. His father had two wives and decided to stay with the second wife. He asked his first wife and family to leave. Moses heard about Youth in Action on the radio and was excited to join the program. While in the learning phase of the program he started working. His first business was in chapatti making. He learned to do this by training in the Celak catering school which is one of the partners in Youth in Action. He saved money and started another business which is a small library with movies and CDs. He also repairs some electronics. Moses returned to school and finished Senior Level 4 in 2015. He has since bought a motorcycle and now has two contracts for selling his chapattis- one with a secondary school and one with Celak. He would like to go back to school for a certificate in catering.

We finished the day excited and motivated by what we had seen. When I was in Uganda visiting Youth in Action almost two years ago most of the youth were either in the learning phase or waiting for their cash transfers to begin their businesses. While there had been some administrative delays, clearly the program had achieved significant progress since then. This made me think about what more we could do, knowing that this program would reach only 11,000 youth in Uganda. While the number is significant in some

sense. it represents a small fraction of the larger, rural youth populations that is out of school and engaged in diverse livelihoods. The Foundation's recent publication, [Invisible Lives: Understanding Youth Livelihoods in Ghana and Uganda](#), describes their realities in more detail and reinforces how important it will be for development programs to acknowledge them when designing solutions for youth under-and unemployment.

As we move into the final 18 months of Youth in Action we will explore how we can best leverage the lessons learned from this program to inform other youth livelihood programs in the countries where Youth in Action is working. We know that there are opportunities to improve the program and to learn from others. We can see the positive impact it is having on young people, their families and their communities- it will be critical for us to see how this program can engage a broader community of stakeholders for scale. It is the least we can do for Elmos, Rosemary, Joy and Moses and their communities.