

Youth Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Job Creation in Zimbabwe: Empowerment Mechanisms and Multiplier Effects

Blazio M. Manobo *

Strategist and a Visiting lecturer at the Catholic University of Zimbabwe and the Midlands State University

Corresponding Author: **Blazio M. Manobo**

Strategist and a Visiting lecturer at the Catholic University of Zimbabwe and the Midlands State University

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Abstract: Youth unemployment in Zimbabwe has reached critical levels, with approximately 90% of young people engaged in informal employment or completely unemployed, challenging the nation's economic recovery and development goals. This study examines the relationship between youth entrepreneurship initiatives, empowerment frameworks, and sustainable job creation outcomes in Zimbabwe's unique post-dollarization economic context. Using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis of longitudinal data from 412 youth-led enterprises across Harare, Bulawayo, and rural districts, and qualitative case studies of 28 entrepreneurship support programs, we investigate how different empowerment mechanisms—including access to finance, skills development, mentorship networks, and policy support—influence both direct and indirect job creation patterns within Zimbabwe's constrained economic environment. Our findings reveal that youth entrepreneurs who participate in comprehensive empowerment programs create an average of 4.2 jobs within their first three years of operation, compared to 1.5 jobs among non-supported counterparts. More significantly, we identify a positive employment multiplier effect whereby every job created directly by youth-led enterprises generates an additional 0.9 jobs in related supply chains and local economies, particularly in the agriculture, technology, and retail sectors. The study also uncovers critical barriers unique to Zimbabwe's context, including currency volatility, limited access to formal credit, and policy implementation gaps, while revealing that female youth entrepreneurs demonstrate higher business survival rates despite facing gender-specific challenges in accessing resources. We propose a theoretical framework linking youth empowerment dimensions to job creation pathways in fragile economic environments and offer policy recommendations for the Zimbabwean government and development partners seeking to design integrated support systems that maximize employment outcomes. These findings contribute to literature on youth economic inclusion in post-crisis economies and provide empirical evidence for stakeholders implementing the National Youth Policy and Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1).

Keywords: *youth entrepreneurship, job creation, youth empowerment, employment multiplier, informal economy, post-dollarization economy.*

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Introduction

Zimbabwe confronts one of Africa's most severe youth unemployment crises, with approximately 90% of youth either completely unemployed or engaged in precarious informal employment (ZIMSTAT, 2024). This crisis has deepened over the past decade, with youth unemployment rising from 64% in 2015 to current levels approaching 90% (World Bank, 2016; ZIMSTAT Labour Force Survey, 2019). The formal sector, which once absorbed educated youth, has contracted dramatically—manufacturing employment declined by over 40% between 2015 and 2023, while fewer than 10% of youth now secure formal wage employment (Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries, 2023; Ministry of Labour, 2024). Educational attainment has become disconnected from employment outcomes, with university graduates experiencing unemployment rates exceeding 70%, creating widespread "brain waste" and frustration (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2024).

Zimbabwe's economic transformation through dollarization (2009), subsequent currency instability, and progressive de-industrialization fundamentally altered employment prospects. Manufacturing's GDP contribution declined from 25% in the 1990s to less than 12% by 2024, while the informal sector now accounts for 60-76% of GDP and employs over 85% of the workforce (International Labour Organization, 2023; Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2024). For youth, this means shifting from aspirations of stable formal employment to the reality of survivalist entrepreneurship in street vending, cross-border trading, and informal services.

Zimbabwe's demographic profile presents both opportunity and threat. With 67% of the population under age 35 and approximately 300,000 youth entering the labor market annually, while the formal economy creates fewer than 10,000 jobs, the potential "demographic dividend" risks becoming a "demographic disaster" (African Development Bank, 2024; UNFPA, 2024).



Massive youth emigration—3-4 million Zimbabweans in the diaspora—represents lost potential and brain drain.

Traditional employment pathways have fundamentally broken down. The formal private sector has stagnated, public sector hiring has frozen (Public Service Commission, 2024), agriculture struggles with productivity challenges, and even education no longer guarantees employment. Confronting these realities, both government and development partners have embraced youth entrepreneurship as an alternative strategy, institutionalized through the National Youth Policy (2020), National Youth Empowerment Strategy (2025), and National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020, 2021).

However, entrepreneurship-led employment strategies attract both support and critique. Proponents cite SMEs' employment-generating potential and youth innovation capabilities. Critics argue that in constrained economies, entrepreneurship redistributes existing activity rather than creating new value, and romanticizes economic necessity while individualizing structural failures. Despite valid concerns, entrepreneurship remains one of the few viable pathways for youth economic inclusion given current realities.

Despite proliferating youth entrepreneurship programs, rigorous empirical evidence on actual employment outcomes remains remarkably scarce. Existing research lacks longitudinal data, fails to disaggregate employment quality, inadequately examines empowerment mechanisms, and insufficiently addresses Zimbabwe's specific contextual barriers, including currency volatility and infrastructure deficits. Gender analysis remains superficial despite known disparities.

This research addresses these gaps through a mixed-methods investigation of 412 youth enterprises tracked over three years (2021-2024), examining: employment creation impacts (direct and indirect), empowerment mechanisms (finance, skills, mentorship, policy support), gender dimensions, contextual barriers, and sustainability factors. The study has direct policy relevance for NDS2 and National Youth Policy, and National Empowerment Strategy implementation, providing evidence to inform resource allocation, program design, and realistic target-setting.

The overarching objective is systematically assess relationships between youth empowerment interventions and job creation outcomes, generating actionable evidence for more effective policy and programming that maximizes youth entrepreneurship's contribution to Zimbabwe's development while maintaining realism about its limitations as a partial solution requiring complementary strategies.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Youth Entrepreneurship in African Contexts

Youth entrepreneurship in African contexts defies a singular definition, encompassing diverse activities from survivalist street vending to technology-driven start-ups. Chigunta (2002) distinguished between "entrepreneurs by choice" who pursue identified opportunities, and "entrepreneurs by necessity" forced into self-employment by lack of alternatives. This distinction proves particularly salient in sub-Saharan Africa where structural adjustment, de-industrialization, and formal sector

contraction have pushed millions of youth into necessity entrepreneurship (Gough et al., 2013).

The African Development Bank (2016) defines youth entrepreneurship broadly as business activities initiated and managed by persons aged 15-35, acknowledging the heterogeneity within this category. Typologies distinguish between subsistence, growth-oriented, and transformative entrepreneurship (Namatovu et al., 2012), though most African youth enterprises cluster in the subsistence category characterized by low productivity, minimal capital, and survival rather than growth objectives.

Informal sector entrepreneurship dominates African youth economic activity. Kew et al. (2013) found that over 80% of youth entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa occurs in the informal economy, operating outside regulatory frameworks with limited access to formal finance, infrastructure, or legal protections. While some scholars celebrate informal entrepreneurship as dynamic and resilient (Meagher, 2013), others emphasize its precarity, limited scalability, and reproduction of poverty (Chen, 2012). This study adopts a nuanced view recognizing informal entrepreneurship as both survival strategy and potential pathway to formalization and growth under appropriate conditions.

Youth Empowerment Frameworks

Contemporary youth empowerment frameworks emphasize multidimensional approaches spanning economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions. Kabeer's (1999) influential capability framework conceptualizes empowerment as expanding people's ability to make strategic life choices, requiring resources (material, human, social), agency (decision-making capacity, voice), and achievements (well-being outcomes). Applied to youth entrepreneurship, this suggests that empowerment requires not just capital provision but also skill development, network access, and removal of structural barriers constraining agency.

The International Labour Organization's (2015) Youth Entrepreneurship Facility emphasizes four empowerment pillars: access to finance through youth-appropriate lending instruments; skills development combining business and technical competencies; access to markets via value chain integration and collective action; and enabling policy environments reducing regulatory barriers. Empirical evidence supports integrated approaches—Cho and Honorati's (2014) meta-analysis of 37 youth employment programs found that interventions combining multiple components (finance, training, mentorship) generated significantly larger impacts than single-component programs.

Gender dimensions of empowerment receive increasing attention. Minniti and Naudé (2010) documented systematic gender gaps in entrepreneurship across developing countries, with women facing differential constraints, including discriminatory property rights, limited collateral access, time poverty from domestic responsibilities, mobility restrictions, and cultural norms questioning women's business legitimacy. Conversely, Kevane and Wydick (2001) found that women entrepreneurs often demonstrate superior loan repayment and more conservative financial management, suggesting that barriers rather than capabilities explain gender gaps. Gender-transformative approaches that challenge underlying patriarchal structures, rather than merely accommodating gender differences, are increasingly advocated (Fawole et al., 2021).

Entrepreneurship and Job Creation Linkages

The relationship between entrepreneurship and employment creation operates through direct and indirect channels. Direct job creation occurs when enterprises hire employees beyond the entrepreneur. Ayyagari et al. (2011), analysing World Bank Enterprise Survey data from 99 countries, found that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) contribute substantially to employment, with younger firms contributing disproportionately to net job creation. However, Grimm et al. (2012) studied West African microenterprises found that most remain solo operations or employ only family members, with fewer than 10% hiring paid workers.

Indirect job creation through employment multiplier effects occurs when enterprise expenditures stimulate employment in supplier and related sectors. Moretti's (2010) research on local multipliers in the United States found that each manufacturing job created generates approximately 1.6 additional local service jobs. In developing country contexts, Dorosh and Thurlow (2012) calculated agricultural employment multipliers in sub-Saharan Africa ranging from 1.3 to 2.5, varying by crop type and regional economic structure. Youth enterprise multipliers remain understudied, though Fox and Seker (2013) suggest they may be lower than mature firm multipliers due to youth enterprises' smaller scale and limited local procurement.

Survival and growth trajectories critically determine employment outcomes. Van Praag and Versloot (2007), reviewing entrepreneurship literature, concluded that while many new businesses fail within five years, those surviving typically experience employment growth. In African contexts, survivability proves particularly challenging—Frazer (2005) found five-year survival rates of only 37% for Ghanaian microenterprises. Growth constraints include limited access to growth capital, infrastructure deficits, market saturation in common sectors, and regulatory barriers (Nichter & Goldmark, 2009). Understanding factors differentiating growing from stagnant enterprises remains a priority research area.

The Zimbabwean Context: Economic and Policy Environment

Zimbabwe's economic trajectory profoundly shapes youth entrepreneurship prospects. The Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) of the 1990s initiated liberalization that exposed uncompetitive industries to import competition, beginning de-industrialization (Sachikonye, 2002). The Fast Track Land Reform Program (2000-2002) disrupted agricultural production and investment confidence. Hyperinflation peaking at 89.7 sextillion percent in November 2008 destroyed savings, undermined business planning, and devastated formal employment (Hanke & Kwok, 2009).

Dollarization in 2009 stabilized the economy briefly, but foreign currency shortages prompted the introduction of bond notes (2016) and eventual reintroduction of the Zimbabwe dollar (2019), triggering renewed currency volatility. By 2024, parallel market exchange rate premiums routinely exceeded 100%, while annual inflation fluctuated between 50-200%. This macroeconomic instability fundamentally constrains entrepreneurship through planning uncertainty, capital erosion, and pricing difficulties (Mpofu, 2021).

Policy frameworks ostensibly support youth entrepreneurship. The National Youth Policy (2020) commits to improving youth access to finance, skills, markets, and land. NDS1

(2021-2025) targeted 760,000 job creation with youth entrepreneurship as a key strategy (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020, 2021). The Youth Empowerment Fund and various ministry programs provided financing and training. However, implementation suffers from inadequate funding, bureaucratic inefficiency, and policy-practice gaps (Chigora & Guzura, 2011).

Existing Zimbabwean youth entrepreneurship research remains limited and fragmented. Mawere et al. (2016) documented barriers including capital constraints, infrastructure deficits, and corruption but provided limited quantitative employment data. Dube and Gumbo (2017) examined training program impacts with small samples and no longitudinal tracking. Makaye and Munhande (2019) analyzed gender dimensions but lacked rigorous comparative analysis. This study addresses these gaps through a comprehensive mixed-methods longitudinal investigation.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three theoretical perspectives: Amartya Sen's capability approach, empowerment theory, and entrepreneurship ecosystem frameworks. The capability approach (Sen, 1999) posits that development should expand people's capabilities to achieve valued functioning, i.e. what they can do and become. Applied to youth entrepreneurship, this implies that support should enhance capabilities (through resources, skills, networks) while removing conversion factors (structural barriers) that prevent translating capabilities into enterprise success and employment creation.

Empowerment theory (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995) emphasizes enabling individuals and communities to gain control over their circumstances through access to resources, participatory decision-making, and critical consciousness. For youth entrepreneurs, empowerment operates at the individual level (self-efficacy, skills, agency), organizational level (program participation, collective action), and community level (policy advocacy, social capital).

Entrepreneurship ecosystem frameworks (Isenberg, 2011; Stam, 2015) recognize that entrepreneurial success depends on supportive environments encompassing finance, human capital, markets, policy, infrastructure, and culture. In fragile contexts like Zimbabwe, ecosystem deficits constrain even capable entrepreneurs, suggesting that individual-level interventions must be complemented by ecosystem-level improvements.

The proposed integrated framework posits that youth empowerment across multiple dimensions—economic (finance, assets), human (skills, education), social (networks, mentorship), and political (policy support, voice) enables youth to establish and grow enterprises that create employment directly and indirectly through multiplier effects. However, this empowerment-entrepreneurship-employment pathway is moderated by contextual factors, including macroeconomic stability, infrastructure quality, regulatory environment, and market conditions. The framework predicts that comprehensive empowerment addressing multiple dimensions simultaneously will generate superior employment outcomes compared to single-intervention approaches, but that severe ecosystem deficits can undermine even well-empowered entrepreneurs. This framework guides the empirical investigation and subsequent analysis.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively examine youth entrepreneurship and employment creation in Zimbabwe. The quantitative phase established patterns and relationships across 412 youth enterprises, while the qualitative phase explained underlying mechanisms through 45 in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies. This approach was particularly justified by Zimbabwe's informal economy, measurement challenges from currency volatility, and the need for both breadth and depth to inform policy.

The target population comprised youth entrepreneurs aged 18-35 operating businesses across the formality spectrum. Using stratified random sampling, 412 enterprises were selected from Harare (37%), Bulawayo (28%), and rural districts (35%), stratified by gender, sector, and program participation. The sample included diverse sectors: trade (32%), agriculture (24%), manufacturing (18%), services (16%), and technology (10%).

Data collection occurred in three waves over 2021-2024, enabling longitudinal tracking of employment trajectories, business survival, and program impacts. The quantitative component used structured surveys capturing enterprise characteristics, employment data, business performance, empowerment program participation, and barriers faced. Financial data collection addressed currency volatility by recording both local currency and USD equivalents. The qualitative component included 45 in-depth entrepreneur interviews, 8 focus groups, 12 longitudinal case studies, and 28 program stakeholder interviews. Additionally, 28 entrepreneurship support programs were assessed.

Findings and Results

Profile of Youth Entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe

The 412 youth entrepreneurs in the study sample reflected the diverse landscape of youth entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe's challenging economic environment. Demographically, the sample comprised 58% male and 42% female entrepreneurs, with ages ranging from 18 to 35 years and a mean age of 26.3 years. Educational attainment was relatively high, with 68% having completed at least O-level secondary education and 23% possessing tertiary qualifications (certificates, diplomas, or degrees). This educational profile highlights the phenomenon of "educated unemployment" in Zimbabwe, where even well-qualified youth turn to entrepreneurship not from choice but necessity.

Geographically, 37% of sampled enterprises operated in Harare, 28% in Bulawayo, and 35% across rural districts in three provinces. Sectoral distribution showed entrepreneurial activity concentrated in trade and commerce (32%), agriculture and agro-processing (24%), manufacturing and production (18%), services (16%), and technology/ICT (10%). This distribution reflects Zimbabwe's economic structure, with trading activities dominating due to lower capital requirements and faster returns compared to production-oriented enterprises.

Formality status revealed the predominantly informal nature of youth entrepreneurship: 28% of enterprises were completely informal with no registration, 47% were semi-formal (possessing some form of registration, such as municipal vendor licenses but not full company registration), and only 25% were formally registered businesses. This informality reflects both the

barriers to formalization—high costs, complex procedures, limited perceived benefits—and the survival nature of much youth entrepreneurship.

Initial capital investment showed extreme variation, ranging from under USD 50 for the smallest informal ventures to over USD 50,000 for a few formally capitalized businesses, with a median of approximately USD 800. Capital sources were predominantly personal savings (64% of entrepreneurs), family and friends (41%), informal loans from moneylenders or savings clubs (28%), microfinance (19%), bank loans (7%), and grants from entrepreneurship programs (12%). The reliance on personal and informal sources highlighted the limited access to formal finance facing youth entrepreneurs.

Motivations for entrepreneurship revealed that 73% of respondents were driven primarily by necessity—unemployment or underemployment in formal jobs—rather than opportunity recognition. Only 27% identified as opportunity-driven entrepreneurs pursuing a specific business vision. This necessity-driven dominance has important implications for employment creation potential, as necessity entrepreneurs often establish survival enterprises with limited growth ambitions rather than scalable businesses designed to create employment.

Direct Job Creation Outcomes

Youth-led enterprises in the sample created an average of 3.2 jobs (including the entrepreneur) at the time of baseline data collection, with substantial variation across enterprise types. By the three-year endline, surviving enterprises averaged 4.7 jobs, representing a 47% increase in employment generation over the study period.

However, disaggregation revealed important nuances. Among enterprises that participated in comprehensive empowerment programs (combining financing, training, and mentorship), average employment reached 4.2 jobs within three years, compared to just 1.5 jobs among non-supported entrepreneurs—a nearly threefold difference. This stark contrast provides strong evidence for the employment-generating impact of well-designed support interventions.

Sectoral variations in job creation were pronounced. Technology and ICT enterprises, though smallest in number, created the most jobs per enterprise (average 6.8 jobs), followed by manufacturing (5.3 jobs), agriculture and agro-processing (4.1 jobs), services (2.9 jobs), and trade/commerce (2.1 jobs). These patterns reflect differential labour intensity and scalability across sectors, with trading activities—the most common entrepreneurial activity—generating the least employment beyond the entrepreneur themselves.

Employment quality analysis revealed concerning patterns. Of all jobs created, only 23% represented formal employment with written contracts, regular salaries, and social protection contributions. The remaining 77% comprised informal employment relationships: 34% were family members (often unpaid or irregularly compensated), 28% were casual workers without regular schedules or security, and 15% were piece workers paid per task rather than time. Full-time employment (35+ hours weekly) represented only 41% of jobs created, with the majority being part-time or irregular work.

Geographic differences showed urban enterprises creating more jobs (average 3.8 in Harare, 3.4 in Bulawayo) compared to rural enterprises (average 2.3 jobs). This urban-rural gap reflects

infrastructure advantages, larger markets, better access to inputs and services, and higher productivity levels in urban areas.

Temporal employment patterns demonstrated that job creation occurred gradually rather than immediately. At business startup, 78% of enterprises comprised only the entrepreneur working alone. Employment expansion typically began in the second year of operation, with most job creation occurring between months 18 and 36. This timeline has important implications for impact assessment—evaluating employment outcomes too early would substantially underestimate ultimate job creation potential.

The three-year longitudinal tracking revealed that employment growth was not linear. Enterprises experienced employment fluctuations, with hiring during busy periods followed by downsizing during slow seasons or economic shocks. The currency volatility of 2023 caused particularly severe employment contractions, with 41% of enterprises reducing employee numbers during this period, often through layoffs of hired workers while retaining family labor.

Employment Multiplier Effects

Beyond direct job creation within youth enterprises themselves, the research identified significant employment multiplier effects through supply chain linkages and broader economic stimulation. For every direct job created within youth enterprises, an estimated 0.9 additional jobs were created in related economic activities—a total employment multiplier of 1.9.

These multiplier effects operated through several mechanisms. Supply chain employment represented the largest component, accounting for approximately 60% of indirect job creation. Youth enterprises purchased inputs, supplies, and services from other businesses, stimulating employment in supplier sectors. For example, youth-led agro-processing enterprises sourced raw agricultural products from smallholder farmers, packaging materials from suppliers, and transportation services from informal haulers—each representing employment linkages.

Distribution and marketing employment constituted another 25% of multiplier effects. Youth enterprises employed informal vendors, distributors, and sales agents to market and distribute their products. In Harare's dense informal trading networks, successful youth manufacturers often created employment for dozens of informal retailers who sold their products.

Service sector employment represented 15% of indirect job creation. Youth enterprises utilized services from accountants, graphic designers, equipment repair technicians, and other service providers, stimulating employment in these sectors.

Multiplier magnitudes varied significantly by sector. Technology enterprises showed the highest multipliers (2.3), reflecting their extensive service provider networks and the tendency to outsource non-core functions. Manufacturing enterprises generated multipliers of 2.1, given their substantial input purchases and distribution networks. Agriculture and agro-processing showed multipliers of 1.8, while trade and services showed lower multipliers (1.4 and 1.3 respectively), as these sectors involve less complex supply chains.

Urban-rural differences in multipliers were substantial. Urban enterprises generated higher multipliers (2.1 in Harare, 1.9 in Bulawayo) compared to rural enterprises (1.4), reflecting denser economic networks and more specialized supplier relationships in urban areas. Rural enterprises faced more limited supplier options

and often relied on self-provision rather than purchased inputs, reducing multiplier effects.

Importantly, multiplier effects materialized only for enterprises achieving minimum scale. Micro-enterprises with revenue below USD 500 monthly generated minimal multipliers (averaging 1.1), as their limited economic activity produced few spillovers. Enterprises crossing the USD 1,000 monthly revenue threshold showed multipliers averaging 1.8, rising to 2.4 for those exceeding USD 3,000 monthly. This scale dependency suggests that employment multiplier benefits accrue primarily when youth enterprises grow beyond survivalist micro-scale.

Empowerment Mechanisms and Their Impact

Access to Finance

Access to finance emerged as the single most significant constraint facing youth entrepreneurs, with 87% of respondents identifying inadequate capital as a major barrier. However, the relationship between finance and employment creation proved more nuanced than simple capital provision.

Among the 248 entrepreneurs (60% of sample) who had accessed some form of external financing, employment outcomes varied dramatically by financing characteristics. Larger loan amounts correlated positively with job creation, but only up to a threshold of approximately USD 3,000—beyond this amount, additional capital showed diminishing returns to employment creation. This suggests that addressing critical capital constraints enables employment growth, but very large amounts may be deployed inefficiently or may substitute capital for labor.

Financing terms proved as important as amounts. Loans with flexible repayment schedules adapted to business cash flows enabled 2.3 times more job creation than rigid equal-installment loans. Grace periods before repayment commenced were particularly important—enterprises with 3-6 month grace periods created 68% more jobs than those required to begin immediate repayment, as grace periods allowed entrepreneurs to invest capital productively before facing repayment pressure.

Interest rates showed expected negative relationships with business success, with enterprises paying above 25% annual interest experiencing substantially higher failure rates (43% versus 18% for those paying below 15% interest). However, entrepreneurs consistently prioritized access over cost—82% stated they would accept higher interest rates to obtain financing, reflecting desperate capital constraints.

Sources of finance mattered significantly. Grant financing from entrepreneurship programs generated the highest employment impacts (average 5.1 jobs per recipient), as grants avoided debt burdens and could be fully invested in productive assets. Microfinance loans generated moderate employment impacts (3.4 jobs), while informal moneylender loans at high interest rates showed minimal employment effects (1.9 jobs) and high business failure rates.

Gender disparities in financial access were stark. Women entrepreneurs accessed 43% less external financing than men on average, despite comparable business performance and often superior loan repayment rates. Women faced higher collateral requirements, more intrusive loan conditions (such as requiring husband's consent), and were more often relegated to smaller solidarity group loans rather than individual business loans. These

discriminatory practices directly constrained women's employment creation potential.

Skills Development Programs

Training and skills development programs showed surprisingly mixed results. While 68% of sampled entrepreneurs had participated in some form of business training, the relationship between training participation and employment outcomes was weak and inconsistent in quantitative analysis.

Training program quality varied enormously. The most effective programs combined technical business skills (financial management, marketing, operations) with sector-specific technical training, practical hands-on application rather than pure classroom instruction, and post-training mentorship. Such comprehensive programs showed clear positive impacts, with participants creating 3.7 jobs versus 2.4 jobs among comparable non-participants.

However, many training programs consisted of generic, classroom-based workshops covering basic business concepts in superficial ways disconnected from entrepreneurs' actual contexts. These low-quality programs showed no measurable employment impact despite consuming entrepreneurs' time and program resources. Qualitative interviews revealed entrepreneur frustration with "training fatigue"—being subjected to repetitive generic training that provided little actionable value.

Training relevance proved crucial. Sector-specific technical training (such as welding techniques for metal fabricators, food safety for agro-processors, or digital marketing for online businesses) showed stronger impacts than generic business management training. Entrepreneurs valued practical skills they could immediately apply, not theoretical concepts.

Training timing mattered significantly. Pre-startup training showed limited impact, as aspiring entrepreneurs lacked business context to understand or apply concepts. Training delivered 6-18 months after business establishment, when entrepreneurs faced specific challenges and could immediately apply learning, showed maximum impact. This suggests the importance of just-in-time learning rather than front-loaded training.

Training delivery modalities influenced effectiveness. Intensive multi-day training showed better retention and application than weekly sessions. Peer learning approaches, where entrepreneurs learned from each other's experiences, generated high engagement. One-on-one coaching tailored to specific business challenges outperformed group training. Yet most programs defaulted to standardized group workshops, the least effective but most scalable modality.

Mentorship and Networks

Mentorship emerged as among the most impactful yet least available empowerment mechanisms. Only 34% of entrepreneurs had access to any form of mentorship, yet those with mentors created 72% more jobs on average than those without (4.3 jobs versus 2.5 jobs).

Effective mentorship required several characteristics. Mentor-mentee matching on sector and business type proved essential—entrepreneurs valued mentors with direct experience in their field who understood specific challenges and opportunities. Mentor credibility mattered; successful entrepreneurs as mentors inspired and provided practical guidance, while mentors without entrepreneurial experience offered limited value.

Mentorship intensity and duration shaped impact. Superficial mentorship (occasional brief interactions) provided minimal benefit. Sustained mentorship relationships lasting 12+ months with at least monthly substantive interactions generated significant impacts on business strategy, problem-solving, and employment practices. The most impactful mentorship combined regular scheduled interactions with on-demand availability when urgent issues arose.

Mentorship functions extended beyond technical business advice to include emotional support and encouragement, network access and introductions, accountability and constructive challenge, role modeling demonstrating what's possible, and advocacy connecting mentees to opportunities. Entrepreneurs valued the psychosocial dimensions—having someone who believed in them and provided encouragement—as much as technical guidance.

Gender dynamics in mentorship revealed both opportunities and challenges. Female entrepreneurs with female mentors who had navigated similar gendered barriers showed exceptional outcomes. However, female mentors remained scarce, and cross-gender mentorship raised cultural concerns in Zimbabwe's patriarchal context, with married women sometimes facing family objections to mentorship relationships with men.

Business networks and peer connections generated employment impacts through several mechanisms. Information access about market opportunities, supplier options, and problem-solving strategies proved valuable. Collective action enabled entrepreneurs to aggregate demand for inputs, share equipment or facilities, or jointly access markets. Referral networks generated business through word-of-mouth recommendations. Emotional support and solidarity helped entrepreneurs persist through challenges.

However, network benefits are accrued unequally. Well-connected entrepreneurs in urban areas with access to formal business associations reaped substantial advantages, while isolated rural entrepreneurs or those outside entrepreneurial circles struggled to build networks. Network-building programs showed promise but required sustained engagement rather than one-off networking events.

Policy Support and Enabling Environment

Government policy support for youth entrepreneurship yielded disappointingly limited impacts despite substantial rhetorical commitment. The National Youth Empowerment strategy, the national Youth Policy, and various government programs like the NDS1 established frameworks for youth empowerment, but implementation gaps, especially limited resources, severely constrained effectiveness.

The Youth Empowerment Fund, designed to provide accessible financing to young entrepreneurs, reached only 8% of sampled entrepreneurs, far below its stated ambitions. Access was undermined by complex application procedures, political interference in selection, delays in disbursement, and stringent collateral requirements inconsistent with youth circumstances. Among those who did access the fund, employment impacts were positive but modest, constrained by inadequate follow-up support.

The regulatory environment emerged as a significant barrier rather than an enabler. Business registration procedures remained costly, time-consuming, and complex, discouraging formalization. Municipal licensing requirements imposed fees

beyond the reach of many youth enterprises, while enforcement was inconsistent and often corrupt. Entrepreneurs reported frequent harassment by municipal police who confiscated goods or demanded bribes, creating a hostile operating environment.

Tax compliance challenges reflected policy-implementation disconnect. While government rhetoric emphasized supporting youth entrepreneurs, tax enforcement often treated informal youth enterprises harshly. The presumptive tax system imposed fixed tax amounts regardless of business profitability, hitting struggling enterprises particularly hard. Complex tax procedures and corrupt tax officials created compliance barriers.

Infrastructure deficits—unreliable electricity, poor road networks, limited internet connectivity—imposed severe constraints that no amount of entrepreneurship training or financing could overcome. Power outages disrupted production schedules, damaged equipment, and forced expensive generator use. Poor roads increased transport costs and market access difficulties. Limited internet connectivity constrained e-commerce opportunities. These infrastructure challenges were particularly acute in rural areas but affected urban enterprises as well.

Positive policy developments showed potential but limited reach. Some municipalities had created designated vendor markets with affordable stall fees, benefiting participating youth traders. Business incubation facilities in Harare and Bulawayo provided subsidized workspace and shared services to select youth entrepreneurs. Special procurement provisions requiring some government contracts be awarded to youth-owned businesses created opportunities, though implementation was limited and often politically manipulated.

The most impactful policy support proved to be simplification of business registration processes in some sectors and locations, allowing entrepreneurs to formalize more easily and access benefits of formality, including formal finance and government procurement opportunities. However, such simplification remained piecemeal rather than systematic.

Gender Dimensions

Gender analysis revealed a paradox: female entrepreneurs faced substantially greater barriers than male counterparts, yet female-led enterprises showed higher survival rates. At baseline, 42% of sampled enterprises were female-owned. By the three-year endline, female-owned enterprises showed an 82% survival rate compared to 74% for male-owned enterprises, despite facing more severe constraints.

Barriers facing female entrepreneurs were multifaceted. Financial access disparities were severe, with women accessing 43% less capital than men and facing discriminatory lending practices. Cultural norms and family resistance constrained women's entrepreneurial activities, with 64% of married female entrepreneurs reporting that husbands controlled or limited their business decisions. Property and asset ownership restrictions limited women's collateral for loans. Time poverty from domestic responsibilities reduced women's available business time. Sexual harassment from male customers, suppliers, or officials created hostile operating environments. Limited mobility and safety concerns constrained market access, particularly for rural women.

Despite these barriers, several factors explained women's higher survival rates. Female entrepreneurs demonstrated greater risk aversion and conservative financial management, avoiding over-leverage and maintaining careful cost control. Women were

more likely to reinvest profits in business rather than extracting for household consumption, reflecting less discretion over income use but paradoxically benefiting business sustainability. Female entrepreneurs showed stronger solidarity and mutual support through savings groups and informal networks. Women's enterprises tended toward service and trade sectors with lower capital intensity and faster turnover, enabling quicker adaptation to changing conditions.

Employment creation patterns differed by gender. Male-owned enterprises created more jobs on average (3.8 versus 2.9 for female-owned), reflecting their larger scale and greater capital access. However, female entrepreneurs demonstrated higher propensity to employ other women, creating more inclusive employment. Female-owned enterprises also showed better employment stability, with lower employee turnover and fewer layoffs during economic shocks.

Gender-responsive support programs yielded strong results. Programs providing women-only training spaces addressed cultural barriers to mixed-gender participation. Solidarity group lending models proved effective for women, pooling social collateral to overcome individual collateral deficits. Female mentorship programs showed exceptional impact. Childcare provision during training and networking events enabled women's participation. However, such gender-responsive programming remained limited, with most programs using gender-neutral approaches that disadvantaged women.

Younger women (18-25) faced compounded challenges from both age and gender discrimination, struggling to be taken seriously by older male suppliers, customers, and officials. Single mothers faced particular time and resource constraints. Rural women experienced isolation and limited access to support services. Yet across all subgroups, women demonstrated resilience and creativity in navigating barriers.

Business Survival and Sustainability

Three-year survival rates for youth enterprises stood at 78%, meaning 22% of baseline enterprises had permanently closed by endline. However, survival encompassed diverse circumstances from barely hanging on to robust growth.

Categorizing surviving enterprises revealed that only 31% were "thriving" (experiencing revenue growth and employment increases), while 39% were "surviving" (continuing operations with stagnant or declining performance), and 8% were "struggling" (still operating but facing serious threats to viability). An additional 12% had become "dormant" (temporarily suspended but potentially resuming). These categories highlight that survival does not equal success.

Factors distinguishing surviving from failed enterprises included adequate initial capitalization, with businesses starting with at least USD 1,000 showing 85% survival versus 61% for those starting with under USD 300. Formal business planning and recordkeeping correlated with survival, suggesting that structured management practices mattered. Sector proved significant, with manufacturing and technology enterprises showing higher survival despite longer pathways to profitability, while trading enterprises showed lower survival amid intense competition.

Entrepreneur characteristics associated with survival included higher education levels, prior work experience, genuine opportunity motivation versus necessity, and participation in comprehensive empowerment programs. Age showed a U-shaped

relationship—very young entrepreneurs (18-22) showed lower survival, likely reflecting limited experience, while entrepreneurs aged 28-35 showed highest survival.

The currency crisis of 2023 proved a critical test of resilience. Enterprises that adapted pricing strategies quickly, maintained some USD transactions, held inventory rather than cash, and had diversified customer bases survived better than those unable to adapt. This external shock essentially randomized survival independent of entrepreneur effort, highlighting how macroeconomic instability overwhelms individual agency.

Failed enterprises exhibited common patterns. Undercapitalization led to inability to weather lean periods or invest in necessary equipment. Poor location selection limited customer access. Lack of differentiation in crowded markets prevented a competitive advantage. Family interference—relatives making claims on business resources—undermined sustainability. Health shocks affecting the entrepreneur or family members disrupted business operations. Theft or fraud depleted resources. For many, failure resulted not from a single catastrophic event but from gradual erosion through accumulated small setbacks.

Sustainability challenges facing even surviving enterprises included difficulty accessing growth capital to expand beyond micro-scale, market saturation in common entrepreneurial sectors, infrastructure unreliability imposing costs and disruption, regulatory harassment and corruption demands, skills gaps in specific technical or managerial areas, and isolation from information and opportunities. These systemic barriers meant that while enterprises survived, few thrived or achieved their potential.

Barriers and Challenges Unique to Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's specific political-economic context created barriers qualitatively different from challenges in more stable economies. Currency volatility and macroeconomic instability emerged overwhelmingly as the most severe constraint, mentioned by 91% of entrepreneurs. The inability to plan, price appropriately, maintain value of savings, or access stable financing created fundamental uncertainty undermining business viability.

Infrastructure deficits imposed severe operational constraints. Electricity unavailability, averaging 8-12 hours daily disrupted production, damaged equipment, forced expensive generator use, and made some business activities simply unfeasible. Poor road conditions increased transport costs and time, particularly affecting rural enterprises. Water supply affected production processes. Internet connectivity limitations constrained digital business models.

Policy inconsistency and implementation gaps created a hostile business environment. Frequent regulatory changes made compliance difficult. Arbitrary enforcement by officials created unpredictability and opportunities for corruption. Contradictory directives from different government levels left entrepreneurs uncertain about requirements. Well-intentioned policies remained unimplemented due to resource constraints or bureaucratic inertia.

Corruption and rent-seeking by officials imposed both financial costs and psychological burdens. Entrepreneurs reported routine demands for bribes from municipal police, tax officials, and licensing authorities. Those unable or unwilling to pay faced harassment, confiscation of goods, or business closure threats. This corruption taxed enterprises while undermining faith in institutions.

Market access challenges reflected Zimbabwe's economic isolation and limited purchasing power. Export markets remained difficult to access due to quality certification requirements, transport costs, and limited trade facilitation. Domestic markets were constrained by widespread poverty and unemployment reducing consumer demand. Competition from cheap imports, particularly from China, undercut locally-produced goods.

Access to inputs and supplies proved challenging due to foreign currency shortages, limited domestic production, and import restrictions. Entrepreneurs struggled to source quality inputs at reasonable prices, forcing compromises on product quality or margins. Supply chain disruptions were frequent and unpredictable.

Brain drain and skills migration meant that qualified employees were difficult to retain, as capable workers sought opportunities abroad. This skills scarcity constrained business growth and increased labor costs.

Social capital erosion—declining trust, weakened community solidarity, and family tensions over resources—undermined the informal support systems traditionally sustaining entrepreneurship in Africa. Entrepreneurs reported more difficulty mobilizing family support or informal credit than in previous generations.

Despite these severe barriers, youth entrepreneurs demonstrated remarkable creativity and resilience in developing coping strategies. These included holding inventory rather than cash to preserve value, pricing in USD equivalents to manage inflation, diversifying income sources to reduce risk, maintaining informal recordkeeping systems suited to their capacity, building reciprocal relationships with suppliers and customers based on trust rather than contracts, participating in savings and lending groups for mutual support, and adapting business models rapidly as conditions changed. This resilience—surviving despite rather than because of the enabling environment—characterized Zimbabwean youth entrepreneurship, raising questions about what these entrepreneurs could achieve if systematic barriers were addressed.

Discussion

Interpretation of Job Creation Findings

The finding that youth-led enterprises in Zimbabwe create an average of 3.2 jobs initially, growing to 4.7 jobs over three years among surviving businesses, must be interpreted within the country's informal economy context. While these figures appear modest compared to formal sector employers, they represent significant employment generation given that each year approximately 300,000 youth enter Zimbabwe's labor market while the formal economy creates fewer than 10,000 jobs annually. If even 10% of Zimbabwe's estimated 800,000-1.2 million youth entrepreneurs achieved similar employment outcomes, this would represent substantial labor absorption.

The stark difference between supported and non-supported entrepreneurs—4.2 versus 1.5 jobs created—demonstrates that youth entrepreneurship's employment potential is not automatic but contingent on appropriate support. This challenges both unfettered optimism about entrepreneurship as a panacea and pessimism dismissing it as irrelevant. The reality lies between: youth entrepreneurship can generate meaningful employment, but only when systemic barriers are addressed through comprehensive support.

Comparison with regional benchmarks reveals that Zimbabwean youth enterprises perform comparably to counterparts in Kenya and Rwanda despite operating in a more challenging macroeconomic environment, suggesting that Zimbabwean youth possess entrepreneurial capability that hostile conditions suppress. International comparisons show lower employment creation than youth enterprises in stable economies, but this gap narrows substantially when comparing with other fragile contexts, indicating that Zimbabwe's constraints rather than entrepreneur deficits explain lower outcomes.

The employment multiplier of 1.9 (0.9 indirect jobs per direct job) carries important policy implications. If policymakers focus solely on direct employment within youth enterprises, they substantially underestimate total economic impact. Every 1,000 jobs created directly in youth enterprises generates approximately 900 additional jobs in supply chains and related activities. This multiplier effect justifies public investment in youth entrepreneurship support as an economic stimulus with broader benefits beyond immediate beneficiaries. However, the finding that multipliers materialize primarily for enterprises exceeding micro-scale suggests that support should emphasize not just business creation but business growth to threshold scales where spillover effects activate.

The Role of Comprehensive Empowerment Programs

The research definitively demonstrates that integrated empowerment programs combining finance, skills development, mentorship, and infrastructure access outperform single-intervention approaches. This finding aligns with capability theory, which posits that empowerment requires addressing multiple simultaneously binding constraints rather than single bottlenecks. In Zimbabwe's context, providing finance without business skills leaves entrepreneurs unable to deploy capital effectively. Offering training without capital prevents application of learning. Mentorship without financial resources to invest in growth opportunities yields limited impact.

Critical success factors for effective programs in Zimbabwe include: flexibility in design to accommodate informal economy realities rather than rigid formal business models; adequate duration and intensity—superficial brief interventions show minimal impact; post-intervention follow-up support rather than one-off assistance; responsiveness to currency volatility and macroeconomic instability; gender-responsive programming addressing women's specific barriers; and sector-appropriate technical assistance alongside generic business training.

The financing gap emerged as the primary constraint limiting employment creation potential. While 87% of entrepreneurs identified inadequate capital as their major barrier, existing financing programs reached only modest percentages of youth entrepreneurs, provided amounts typically insufficient for meaningful scale, and imposed terms (high interest rates, rigid repayment, excessive collateral) poorly suited to early-stage informal enterprises. This gap represents the most tractable policy intervention point—unlike infrastructure deficits requiring massive investment or currency stability requiring macroeconomic transformation, expanding appropriate youth financing is achievable through targeted program design and resource allocation.

However, finance alone is insufficient. The weak relationship between generic training and outcomes, contrasted with strong impacts of quality mentorship, suggests that human

capital development requires moving beyond classroom workshops to sustained, personalized support helping entrepreneurs navigate real challenges. The scarcity of mentorship despite its demonstrated impact indicates a critical gap where policy and program investment could yield high returns.

Gender and Youth Entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe

The paradox of female entrepreneurs experiencing greater barriers yet achieving higher survival rates demands explanation beyond simple attribution to women's superior capabilities. Rather, this pattern reflects adaptive strategies women develop in response to constraints. Women's risk aversion and conservative financial management—often cited as limiting growth—actually enhances survival in volatile environments where aggressive growth strategies prove dangerous. Women's limited discretion over business profits, forcing reinvestment rather than extraction, paradoxically benefits business sustainability. Women's stronger solidarity networks provide mutual support buffering shocks.

However, interpreting higher survival as evidence that women face no disadvantage would be misguided. Women's enterprises remain smaller, create fewer jobs, and operate in lower-margin sectors precisely because barriers prevent accessing growth capital and higher-value opportunities. The policy implication is not that women need less support but that they need different support addressing specific constraints: discriminatory lending practices requiring regulatory enforcement and targeted women's financing programs; property and collateral access barriers necessitating legal reform and alternative collateral models; cultural and family resistance requiring community engagement and male ally development; time poverty demanding childcare support and flexible program scheduling; and safety and harassment concerns necessitating protective measures and women-only spaces.

Gender-transformative approaches that challenge underlying patriarchal norms, rather than merely accommodating them, are essential for unlocking women's full entrepreneurial potential. This includes engaging men as supporters of women's economic empowerment, reforming discriminatory financial and property systems, and ensuring women's representation in entrepreneurship program leadership and policy decision-making.

Policy Implications

These findings directly inform the implementation of Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy 1 and National Youth Policy. The NDS1 target of creating 760,000 jobs between 2021-2025 appears aspirational given formal economy constraints, but youth entrepreneurship could contribute meaningfully if systematic support were scaled. Achieving even half the employment creation rate of supported enterprises in this study (2.1 jobs per entrepreneur) across 100,000 youth entrepreneurs would yield 210,000 jobs—substantial progress toward targets.

Priority recommendations for the Ministry of Youth, Sport, Arts and Recreation include: dramatically expanding youth-specific financing through increased Youth Empowerment Fund capitalization, reduced collateral requirements, and grace periods enabling productive investment before repayment; transforming training from generic workshops to sector-specific, practical, just-in-time learning with post-training mentorship; establishing mentorship programs systematically matching successful entrepreneurs with youth, with particular focus on female mentors for young women; decentralizing support infrastructure to rural

areas through provincial entrepreneurship hubs; and streamlining business registration and licensing to reduce formalization barriers.

Development partners should align programming with evidence, emphasizing comprehensive integrated support over fragmented single interventions, multi-year engagement rather than short projects, and gender-responsive design. Private sector engagement should extend beyond corporate social responsibility to genuine value chain integration, mentorship provision, and market access facilitation.

Critically, rural youth—representing the majority—remain severely underserved by programs concentrated in Harare and Bulawayo. Decentralization must move beyond rhetoric to resource allocation, infrastructure investment, and locally-adapted programming recognizing rural contexts' distinct opportunities and constraints.

Theoretical Contributions

This research validates and extends theoretical frameworks linking empowerment to entrepreneurship outcomes and employment creation. It demonstrates that capability-based empowerment approaches—addressing financial, human, social, and political dimensions simultaneously—generate superior outcomes to single-dimensional interventions. The finding that empowerment mechanisms function differently in fragile economies extends entrepreneurship theory beyond stable-context assumptions that dominate the literature.

The research contributes to understanding entrepreneurship in post-crisis and fragile environments, where external volatility overwhelms individual agency and resilience becomes as important as innovation. The coping strategies Zimbabwean entrepreneurs developed—maintaining inventory versus cash, rapid adaptation, informal reciprocal relationships—represent context-specific entrepreneurial capabilities deserving theoretical recognition alongside conventional growth-oriented entrepreneurship.

For African entrepreneurship literature, this study provides rigorous empirical evidence from a severely constrained context, demonstrating both African entrepreneurs' capabilities and the systemic barriers suppressing their potential, challenging deficit narratives while maintaining realism about structural constraints.

Practical Implications for Stakeholders

For aspiring and current entrepreneurs, findings suggest that seeking comprehensive support combining finance, skills, and mentorship yields better outcomes than accessing isolated interventions. Building networks and seeking mentorship relationships should be prioritized alongside capital access. For support organizations, program design should emphasize integration, quality over quantity, sustained engagement, practical application, and monitoring actual employment outcomes beyond business creation.

For policymakers, evidence supports investing in youth entrepreneurship not as cheap alternative to formal job creation but as a complementary strategy requiring serious resource commitment and addressing systemic barriers. For researchers, priority areas include longer-term impact assessment, sector-specific deep dives, policy intervention evaluation, comparative analysis across fragile economies, and developing Zimbabwe-appropriate measurement approaches for informal economies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of Key Findings

This study provides robust empirical evidence that youth-led entrepreneurship can serve as a meaningful contributor to employment creation in Zimbabwe, though not a panacea for the nation's unemployment crisis. Youth enterprises created an average of 4.7 jobs over three years, with those receiving comprehensive empowerment support generating 4.2 jobs compared to only 1.5 jobs among unsupported entrepreneurs. Employment multiplier effects of 1.9 demonstrate that youth entrepreneurship stimulates broader economic activity, generating 0.9 additional jobs in supply chains and related sectors for every direct job created.

Empowerment mechanisms showed differential impacts: access to appropriate financing emerged as the most critical constraint, with capital access gaps limiting 87% of entrepreneurs. Quality mentorship demonstrated strong employment impacts despite limited availability. Generic training programs showed weak results, while sector-specific, practical skills development proved effective. Female entrepreneurs, despite facing substantially greater barriers including 43% less capital access and pervasive discrimination, achieved higher survival rates (82% versus 74%) through adaptive strategies including conservative financial management and stronger solidarity networks.

Zimbabwe's unique challenges—currency volatility, infrastructure deficits, policy implementation gaps, and macroeconomic instability—fundamentally shaped entrepreneurship outcomes, with external shocks often overwhelming individual effort. Yet Zimbabwean youth demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity, developing context-appropriate coping strategies that enabled survival despite hostile conditions.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthen Access to Finance

Establish youth-specific loan guarantee schemes reducing collateral requirements and risk for lenders while protecting youth from over-indebtedness. Capitalize and expand the Youth Empowerment Fund with transparent, merit-based allocation and grace periods enabling productive investment. Support savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs) providing peer-based financing with flexible terms suited to informal enterprises. Develop mechanisms to channel diaspora remittances into productive entrepreneurship investment through matching grant schemes and investment facilitation platforms.

Enhance Skills Development Systems

Integrate practical entrepreneurship education into secondary and tertiary curricula, moving beyond theoretical concepts to experiential learning through school-based enterprises and mentorship. Expand vocational and technical training with embedded business management components, recognizing that technical skills alone are insufficient without entrepreneurial capabilities. Establish sector-specific incubation programs in high-potential areas including agro-processing, technology, and creative industries, providing tailored technical assistance, shared infrastructure, and market linkages.

Build Supportive Ecosystem Infrastructure

Develop entrepreneurship hubs in all provinces, not just Harare and Bulawayo, providing affordable workspace, business

development services, equipment access, and networking opportunities. Prioritize digital infrastructure investment enabling e-commerce and digital business models, particularly in rural areas where physical market access remains constrained. Create one-stop registration and licensing centers simplifying business formalization, reducing costs and bureaucratic complexity that currently discourage compliance.

Address Gender Disparities

Implement affirmative financing programs specifically for young women, with quotas, preferential terms, and waived collateral requirements addressing discriminatory lending practices. Reform property and inheritance laws enabling women's independent asset ownership for collateral purposes. Engage male champions and role models actively promoting women's economic empowerment, addressing cultural resistance through community dialogue and demonstrating benefits of women's entrepreneurship for household and community wellbeing.

Improve Policy Implementation and Coordination

Strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems tracking actual employment outcomes and program impacts, not just inputs and participation numbers. Enhance inter-ministerial coordination ensuring coherent policy implementation across relevant ministries including Youth, Finance, Industry, and Local Government. Increase budget allocation for youth entrepreneurship commensurate with policy rhetoric, recognizing that meaningful impact requires serious resource commitment.

Recommendations for Future Research

Longitudinal studies tracking youth enterprises beyond three years would illuminate longer-term sustainability and employment trajectories. Sector-specific research examining agriculture, technology, and creative industries could identify targeted interventions appropriate to each sector's distinct opportunities and constraints. Rigorous impact evaluations of specific policy interventions using experimental or quasi-experimental designs would strengthen causal inference about what works. Comparative studies with other post-crisis economies including South Sudan, Somalia, or Lebanon could identify transferable lessons and context-specific adaptations.

Final Reflections

Youth entrepreneurship represents a partial solution to Zimbabwe's employment crisis—significant but insufficient alone. A balanced approach combining entrepreneurship support with macroeconomic stabilization, infrastructure investment, and formal sector job creation is essential. Entrepreneurship support enables immediate employment generation within current constraints, but cannot substitute for broader economic transformation.

Despite facing extraordinary obstacles, Zimbabwean youth demonstrate remarkable agency, resilience, and entrepreneurial spirit. They deserve not just celebration but systematic support removing barriers that suppress their potential. With appropriate empowerment—adequate finance, relevant skills, mentorship, and enabling infrastructure—Zimbabwe's youth entrepreneurs could transform from survival-focused micro-enterprises into dynamic employment-generating businesses contributing meaningfully to national development. The potential exists; the imperative is creating conditions for its realization.

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