

Empowering Rural Youth for Development From the Ground Up

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Rural youth in Namibia face significant participation challenges in decision-making processes and accessing opportunities for economic and social advancement. According to the Namibia Statistics Agency, rural youth aged 15–34 make up 29.8% of the rural population, compared to 38.4% in urban areas. Despite their significant demographic presence, rural youth remain underrepresented in governance and policy formulation due to inadequate infrastructure, a lack of access to information, and entrenched adult-centric policymaking (Trivelli, C, & Morel, J, 2019). This exclusion perpetuates socio-economic disparities and drives rural-to-urban migration, further straining urban resources (Namibia Vision 2030).

The absence of rural youth participation in decision-making and their limited access to socio-economic advancement opportunities pose significant challenges to Namibia's development. It leads to underutilized human capital, worsens socio-economic inequalities, accelerates rural-to-urban migration, and results in policies that fail to address youth-specific needs (Ministry of Sport, Youth and National Service, 2020-2030). Without meaningful engagement, rural youth remain disconnected from resources and opportunities, further marginalizing them and weakening rural economies.

The National Youth Policy III (NYP III) emphasizes inclusive youth participation and economic empowerment, targeting marginalized and vulnerable youth (Ministry of Sport, Youth and National Service, 2020-2030). The policy advocates equal opportunity, integrated youth development strategies, and increased access to representation in government and decision-making.

This policy brief highlights the urgent need for inclusive and participatory frameworks that empower rural youth as active contributors to national development. It proposes targeted interventions, including the establishment of Rural Youth Networks (RYNs), investment in digital infrastructure, enhancement of youth leadership programs, and the strengthening of local institutions to facilitate meaningful engagement. These initiatives align with Namibia's Vision 2030, which recognizes youth as key agents of social transformation and economic growth (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 2004).

By leveraging Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), fostering intergenerational dialogue, and ensuring context-specific strategies tailored to the unique needs of rural communities, Namibia can unlock the full potential of its youth.

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Note: This policy brief is developed on the basis of the community dialogues and advocacy workshops held by RuralRise in the Utuseb, Uis and Okombahe communities between 30 August and 28 September 2024, as part of the "From the Ground Up" Empowering Rural Youth for Development" Policy Sprint, that has been funded by the European Union Under the New Voices, New Narratives" Project

This policy brief provides actionable recommendations to shift from tokenistic youth participation to genuine inclusion, ensuring that rural youth have a voice in shaping policies that impact their lives. Investing in youth-led initiatives and participatory governance structures will not only enhance social cohesion but also drive sustainable rural development.

Limited access to education, employment, digital infrastructure, and decision-making platforms has marginalized rural youth, hindering their ability to contribute to national progress (Trivelli, C, & Morel, J, 2019)

The National Youth Policy III (2020–2030) highlights the need for youth empowerment across four key pillars: Education and Skills Development, Health and Well-being, Employment and Economic Empowerment, and Civic and Political Participation (Ministry of Sport, Youth and National Service, 2020-2030). Through its Equity and Access guiding principle, it acknowledges that rural youth as a marginalized group are often excluded from representation in government and decision-making structures due to systemic inequalities,

thus reinforcing their socio-economic vulnerabilities. The lack of youth representation in policy making further exacerbates inequalities, leading to increased rural-to-urban migration and underdevelopment in rural areas (Namibia Vision 2030). This underdevelopment forces rural youth to return to their communities, where limited resources and opportunities hinder their personal growth and prevent them from becoming active contributors to the local economy.

Empowering rural youth requires targeted policies that promote inclusive governance, capacity building, and economic empowerment. Namibia's Vision 2030 recognizes the importance of youth in driving national development and calls for strategies that integrate them into key decision-making processes (Namibia Vision 2030). By addressing structural barriers and fostering youth-led initiatives, Namibia can create a more equitable society where rural youth actively shape policies affecting their lives. This policy brief examines the challenges faced by rural youth and proposes evidence-based recommendations to enhance their participation and socio-economic well-being.

RATIONALE FOR ACTION

According to the 2023 Namibia Population and Housing Census, the country's population stands at 3,022,401 as of September 24, 2023 (Namibia Statistics Agency., 2024). This population is distributed almost equally between urban and rural areas, with 1,512,685 individuals (50.1%) residing in urban centers and 1,509,716 individuals (49.9%) in rural communities (Namibia Statistics Agency., 2024).

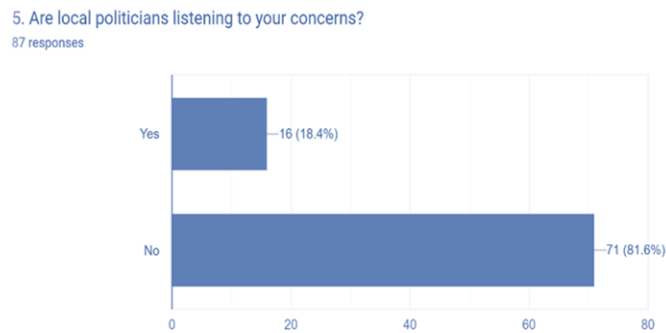
The youth demographic, defined as individuals aged 15 to 34, comprises a significant portion of the population. In rural areas, this age group represents 29.8% of the population, while in urban areas, it accounts for 38.4% (Namibia Statistics Agency., 2024).

The relatively lower percentage of youth in rural areas underscores the challenges these areas face in retaining young people.

For the purposes of the brief, the focus is on rural youth defined as individuals aged 15–34. This aligns with the National Youth Policy III (2020–2030), which also uses this age range to identify youth, emphasizing their role in driving economic, social, and political transformation (Ministry of Sport, Youth and National Service, 2020-2030). According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (Trivelli, C, & Morel, J, 2019) rural youth in developing countries are among the least engaged in governance and policy formulation. This disengagement is often due to structural inequalities

embedded in policy frameworks that favor urban areas, thereby neglecting the specific needs and vulnerabilities of rural youth. Additionally, an adult-centric approach to policymaking persists, viewing youth as passive beneficiaries rather than active contributors to policy design and implementation (Trivelli, C, & Morel, J, 2019).

Figure 1: Rural Youth Perspectives on Being Heard in Decision-Making



Source: From the Ground Up (FTGU): Empowering Rural Youth for Development Survey 2024

In communities such as Okombahe, Utuseb and Uis, where RuralRise conducted community dialogues and advocacy workshops, as well as collected qualitative data on rural youth engagement with decision makers and decision making platforms, when asked if local politicians listen to their concerns 81.6% of respondents said they do not feel listened to. When asked why, they listed the following reasons: They are not part of stakeholder consultation meetings, lack of platforms, or they simply do not know how to engage local decision making platforms.

The marginalization of rural youth is further intensified by limited institutional mechanisms for engagement. Often, youth involvement in governance is a low priority, either enclosed within broader policies addressing employment, education, and health or

confined to civic education initiatives led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Trivelli, C, & Morel, J, 2019). Even when participatory mechanisms exist, they are frequently undermined by tokenism, patronage systems, or instrumentalization – where governments claim to promote inclusion while maintaining control over decision-making processes (Trivelli, C, & Morel, J, 2019).

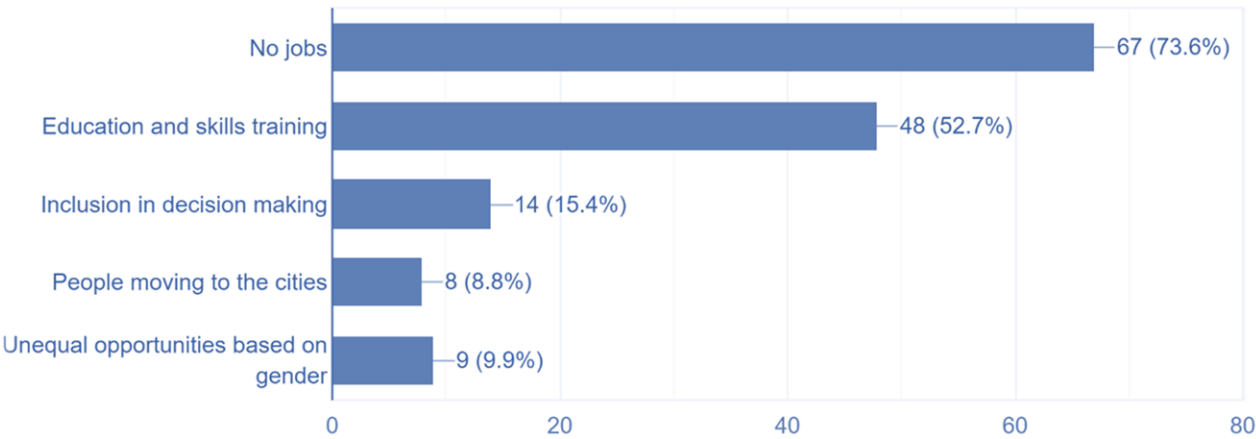
The remoteness of rural communities presents unique challenges, including limited infrastructure, restricted access to information, and inadequate engagement platforms. These conditions further alienate rural youth from decision-making processes (Ministry of Regional and Local Government, Housing and Rural Development, 2012). To bridge this gap, the Namibian government has emphasized the importance of capacity-building initiatives that empower rural communities to articulate their needs and aspirations effectively (Ministry of Regional and Local Government, Housing and Rural Development, 2012). However, the persistent lack of robust engagement platforms prevents rural youth from actively participating in shaping the policies that affect their lives.

SOCIOECONOMIC AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Traditional authority structures in Namibia continue to exclude youth, particularly young women, from decision-making processes. While the **National Youth Council and National Youth Forums provide platforms for youth representation at the national and regional levels, these structures often fail to effectively address the specific needs of rural youth** (Namibia Vision 2030). Existing participatory mechanisms also do not fully account for the diverse realities of rural transformation, including shifting rural-urban linkages and varying levels of market integration (Namibia Statistics Agency., 2024)

Figure 1: Challenges Facing Rural Youth in their Communities.

3. What are the main challenges facing rural youth in your community? (Please select all that apply)
91 responses



Source: From the Ground Up (FTGU): Empowering Rural Youth for Development Survey 2024

Youth in rural Namibia face a host of socioeconomic challenges, including poverty, food insecurity, substance abuse, crime, violence, school dropouts, and limited access to entrepreneurial opportunities (Namibia Vision 2030). From the FTGU Survey 73.6 percent of respondents indicated that a lack of job opportunities is the main challenge they face, followed by a lack of education and skills training at 52.7 percent. The absence of targeted interventions addressing these challenges further drives youth migration to urban centers, where they often struggle to secure stable employment.

The government's sub-vision on migration, urbanization, and population distribution calls for the development of rural areas through economic diversification, improved transport and communication infrastructure, enhanced social services (e.g., quality education and healthcare), and increased employment opportunities (Namibia Vision 2030). However, the

implementation of these strategies has been slow, and youth participation in their design and execution remains minimal.

To foster inclusive rural development, Namibia must prioritize youth participation in governance and economic planning. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, investing in decentralized economic development, and enhancing rural infrastructure are critical steps toward ensuring that rural youth are actively engaged in shaping their futures. Policymakers must also recognize that youth participation is not merely about representation but about creating opportunities for young people to contribute meaningfully to the country's development agenda. By integrating youth into rural development strategies, Namibia can build a more equitable and prosperous society where rural youth are empowered as key drivers of change.

PROPOSED POLICY OPTION REFORMS

To ensure meaningful rural youth participation in decision-making and socio-economic advancement, the Namibian government must transition from tokenistic and instrumentalized participation to a more active and inclusive engagement model. This shift will empower young people, strengthen their voices, and enhance the responsiveness of development interventions to

RuralRise observes a tension within Namibia's sub-vision on migration, urbanization, and population distribution, which aims for 75% of the population to reside in designated urban areas. We believe that this vision encourages citizens to abandon rural economies for urban economies leaving the country to continue to face rural-to-urban migration. If the overall objective is to achieve integrated rural and urban development in which living conditions and social and economic opportunities are adequate for all.

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their needs (Ministry of Regional and Local Government, Housing and Rural Development, 2012).

1. Understanding Rural Contexts for Tailored Interventions

Effective youth participation requires a nuanced understanding of different rural contexts, which can be categorized as traditional, transformed, or in transition. A "one-size-fits-all" approach is ineffective as rural communities face distinct challenges based on their level of integration into the national economy and governance structures. Tailored approaches to youth engagement must

consider these varying contexts to ensure that policies are responsive to the unique socio-economic realities of each rural area.

Strengthening Digital Infrastructure:

As Namibia expands its **ICT infrastructure** (Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT, 2023) digital platforms can bridge geographical divides and enhance youth engagement. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) can facilitate youth participation through various mechanisms, including:

- **Information dissemination:** Providing rural youth with access to policy updates, development initiatives, and economic opportunities.
- **Consultations:** Enabling structured dialogue between youth, policymakers, and stakeholders through virtual town halls and digital forums.
- **Collaboration:** Strengthening partnerships between youth, local governments, NGOs, and private sector actors to co-design policies and programs.
- **Empowerment initiatives:** Establishing youth-run institutions that promote leadership, entrepreneurship, and community engagement.
- **Establishing Rural Youth Networks (RYNs) and Rural Youth Resource Centres (RYC's)**
- RuralRise proposes the creation of Rural Youth Networks (RYNs) across rural communities, providing a formalized platform that supports existing structures initiated by **The Ministry of Sport, Youth and National Service (MSYNS)** thereby increasing youth participation for rural youth to actively engage in local governance and contribute to decision-making processes. These networks will

serve as advisory bodies that directly inform regional economic and development strategies, ensuring rural youth have a voice in shaping policies that affect their communities.

The networks will be tasked with engaging in policy discussions, offering recommendations on economic development projects, and collaborating with local governments, NGOs, and private sector stakeholders to improve access to opportunities. They will also facilitate the establishment of youth resource centers that provide training, skills development, and mentorship programs, preparing rural youth for leadership roles and entrepreneurship and work with local authorities to ensure that youth-led micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) have access to public procurement opportunities, funding, and business development support (MURD, 2024). By leveraging Namibia's expanding ICT infrastructure, RYNs will create **digital engagement platforms** to ensure that youth in remote areas can participate in governance discussions and access real-time information on policy initiatives.

Alignment with Government Priorities and National Development Goals

The **Ministry of Sport, Youth, and National Service (MSYNS)** has made significant strides in youth empowerment through initiatives such as **YouthConnekt Namibia** and rural youth enterprise programs (Nawatises, 2022). These initiatives focus on entrepreneurial skills development, financial support, and mentorship. The proposed **Rural Youth Networks** complement and expand on these efforts by providing a **formalized structure for rural youth engagement**, ensuring that their voices are heard at both local and regional governance levels.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING RURAL YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The following recommendations provide a structured framework to enhance rural youth participation and development in Namibia.

1. Develop Context-Specific Strategies for Youth Engagement

KEY ACTIONS:

- ✚ Conduct comprehensive assessments of rural youth challenges and opportunities to inform policy interventions.
- ✚ Strengthen long-term consultative mechanisms such as youth assemblies with rural youth representation, community workshops, and advisory panels to capture youth perspectives (Trivelli, C, & Morel, J, 2019).
- ✚ Facilitate access to economic opportunities through targeted skills development, entrepreneurship training, and SME financing strategies.
- ✚ Emphasize training in high-growth sectors such as technology, digital entrepreneurship, renewable energy, and creative industries.
- ✚ Strengthen partnerships with youth organizations and education institutions to deliver targeted training that incorporates soft skills such as leadership, teamwork, and adaptability.

2. Leverage Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Digital Inclusion

ICT infrastructure must be strategically utilized to bridge the digital divide and enable rural youth participation in decision-making and economic activities. Namibia has made strides in expanding network coverage (Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, 2023) and leveraging this progress will enhance youth engagement.

3. Promote Inclusive Participation of Marginalized Youth Groups

Ensuring that rural youth participation is inclusive requires deliberate strategies to address barriers faced by marginalized groups, including young women, indigenous youth, and youth from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

KEY ACTIONS:

- ✚ Implement policies that challenge gender norms and other socio-cultural barriers that prevent marginalized youth from participating in decision-making (Trivelli, C, & Morel, J, 2019).
- ✚ Establish collaborative mechanisms such as youth councils, advisory boards, and intergenerational platforms to enhance youth representation.
- ✚ Expand the Rural Youth Network (RYN) model, initiated by RuralRise, as a formalized platform that ensures rural youth participation in governance and socio-economic development.

4. Strengthen Local Institutions for Youth Participation

Local governance structures play a crucial role in youth engagement and must be empowered to effectively integrate youth into decision-making.

KEY ACTIONS:

- ✚ Encourage the institutionalization of youth representation in local governance bodies such as Constituency Development Committees (CDCs) and Regional Development Coordination Committees (Ministry of Regional and Local Government, Housing and Rural Development, 2012), **as well as** Settlement Development Committees (SDCs), which are the immediate decentralized level for local government.
- ✚ Support community-based youth-led organizations to serve as mechanisms for mobilizing youth participation in policy discussions and local economic initiatives.
- ✚ Expand the From the Ground Up Initiative, which focuses on integrating rural youth into the national development agenda by empowering them as agents of change.

5. Invest in Youth Leadership Development

Developing strong leadership skills among rural youth is crucial for ensuring sustainable participation in decision-making processes. Leadership training empowers youth to take on active roles in governance, business, and community development. Integrate internships and apprenticeships into workforce development strategies to provide rural youth with practical exposure to various industries (MURD, 2024).

6. Foster Intergenerational Dialogue

Creating platforms for intergenerational dialogue will facilitate better communication and understanding between rural youth and older generations. Traditional leadership structures and community elders play a

crucial role in rural governance and must be engaged in youth empowerment initiatives.

7. Support Youth-Led Initiatives and Entrepreneurship

Empowering rural youth to lead their own initiatives fosters self-reliance, innovation, and sustainable development. Providing financial and technical support to rural youth-led organizations will enhance their ability to implement impactful projects and advocate for their communities. Ensure that youth-led MSMEs are financing and business incubation support (MURD, 2024). given priority in government procurement and receive access to

8. Establish Robust Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

A data-driven approach is necessary to assess the impact of youth participation programs and ensure accountability. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks should be integrated into all youth-focused policies. Conduct regular youth focused surveys in collaboration with the Namibia Statistics Agency to generate reliable data for policy improvement.

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Author's Note

This policy brief was developed by **RuralRise Community Empowerment Foundation**, a Namibian non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering sustainable rural development through youth empowerment, community-led initiatives, and strategic partnerships. The brief forms part of the *From the Ground Up* initiative, which aims to amplify rural youth voices, integrate them into national development strategies, and address the socio-economic barriers they face.

The content draws on key national frameworks, including Namibia's *Vision 2030* and the *National Youth Policy III (2020–2030)*, as well as the latest data from the *2023 Population and Housing Census* by the Namibia Statistics Agency. It reflects RuralRise's commitment to advancing inclusive policies that bridge the rural-urban divide and unlock the potential of young people as catalysts for local and national progress.

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New Voices, New Narratives in Public Policy Discourse



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