

# Exploring the Survival Strategies of Unemployed Youth in Tanzania: A Case of Ilala Municipality Dar Es Salaam

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Publication Date: 2025/12/26

**Abstract:** This qualitative phenomenological study explores the survival strategies and livelihood practices of unemployed youth in Ilala Municipality, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Drawing on the Strength-Based Approach and Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, the research examines how youth mobilize social, human, and financial capital to navigate economic exclusion. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 20 purposively selected unemployed youth. Findings reveal that youth rely heavily on peer networks for emotional and material support, engage in informal income-generating activities such as petty trade, bodaboda transport, and digital hustling, and participate in community-based groups like VICOBA for financial inclusion. Despite demonstrating significant agency and resilience, these strategies remain precarious and unsustainable due to structural barriers, limited access to formal empowerment programs, and systemic vulnerabilities. The study concludes with recommendations for policy reform, programmatic scaling of proven interventions, and community-driven initiatives to foster sustainable youth livelihoods.

**How to Cite:** Evance Enock Sanga.; Herbert Samwel Temba (2025) Exploring the Survival Strategies of Unemployed Youth in Tanzania: A Case of Ilala Municipality Dar Es Salaam. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(12), 1629-1635. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25dec966>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment remains a critical global challenge, affecting millions of young people in both developed and developing nations, with Sub-Saharan Africa particularly affected. In 2023, over 73 million young people were unemployed globally, with rates nearly three times higher than adults (ILO, 2023). This disparity stems from systemic challenges in education, skills development, and labor market inclusivity (Arias et al., 2021). Even in Europe, where economies are more developed, structural labor market issues such as skill mismatches and limited transition opportunities from education to employment persist, with Southern European countries like Spain and Greece recording some of the highest youth unemployment rates (Eurostat, 2023; ILO, 2023). In Germany and the Netherlands, marginalized youth face inequitable access to jobs due to limited vocational training and work experience (Arias et al., 2021).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the situation is more acute. Youth constitute nearly 60% of the unemployed, yet only a fraction of new labor market entrants secure formal employment, leaving most in informal, insecure jobs (Bhorat & Biedenkopf, 2022; AfDB, 2019). Structural challenges including a rapidly growing youth population, educational systems failing to align with labor market needs, and a skills mismatch exacerbate unemployment and underemployment

(Amina & Chirwa, 2019; Arimah & Akinmoladun, 2019; Maitra & Paci, 2018). Informal employment, while providing immediate income, often lacks stability and long-term prospects, trapping youth in cycles of poverty and vulnerability (Chakravarty & Ghosh, 2020; Nkurunziza, 2020). Prolonged unemployment also contributes to social exclusion, diminished self-esteem, mental health issues, and potential unrest (Njiru & Kimani, 2018; Adeniran & Okediran, 2021).

Scholars advocate multifaceted solutions, including education and training reforms, targeted investment in entrepreneurship and SMEs, and policy interventions to enhance vocational training, access to finance, and sustainable job creation (Gumede, 2020; Lugangira & Kessy, 2019; Mohammad & Bashir, 2020).

In East Africa, youth unemployment mirrors these regional trends. Despite sectoral growth in agriculture, tourism, and technology, structural barriers such as skill mismatches, limited vocational training, and insufficient support for entrepreneurship hinder young people's transition from education to employment (AfDB, 2023; ILO, 2023). Countries like Kenya report high youth unemployment rates, with a demographic dividend of 75% under 35 yet insufficient investment in skills development and employment strategies (World Bank, 2023; Macrotrends, 2024). Uganda faces similar challenges, with underemployment masking low

unemployment statistics and highlighting systemic gaps in education and training (Uganda National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Unemployment, Youth Male (%), 2025). Eastern Africa's youth unemployment averages 7.2%, contrasted with Southern Africa's 60%, underscoring the urgency of targeted interventions (Solomon Ekanem, 2024).

In Tanzania, approximately 13.7% of youth aged 15–35 are unemployed, despite overall economic growth (NBS, 2024). Structural factors including limited vocational training, inadequate entrepreneurship support, and a lack of formal job opportunities compel many youth to pursue informal and precarious employment, often without social protection or financial security (Jacques Morisset, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these vulnerabilities, leading youth to rely on informal labor, subsistence agriculture, and entrepreneurial initiatives, frequently without adequate skills or financial literacy (African Development Bank, 2024).

Programs targeting youth empowerment, including entrepreneurship training, financial literacy, and access to microfinance, show promise in fostering financial independence. However, persistent barriers such as limited education access, insufficient capital, and low financial inclusion continue to hinder sustainable livelihoods (Olivia Sakai, 2021; Admin, 2021). Civil society and government interventions focusing on vocational training and entrepreneurship support aim to bridge skill gaps while promoting adaptability and resilience among youth.

#### ➤ Statement of the Problem

Youth unemployment in Tanzania remains a persistent challenge, undermining the country's potential for economic growth and social cohesion (Mkenda & Luvanda, 2020). Despite the implementation of various initiatives, many failed to equip young people with the skills, resources, and opportunities required for financial independence (African Development Bank, 2022). Consequently, youth often adopt survival strategies that do not guarantee sustainable livelihoods.

The high rate of youth unemployment is largely driven by structural factors, including inadequate education and a mismatch between acquired skills and labor market demands. Initiatives such as vocational training, entrepreneurship grants, and youth empowerment programs often suffered from poor implementation, limited resources, and weak institutional coordination (United Nations Joint Programme on Youth Employment, 2016; World Bank, 2014). While educational attainment among youth has increased, the system frequently fails to provide practical, market-relevant skills (Kweka & Fox, 2011). Moreover, most vocational training centers lack the capacity to deliver industry-appropriate training, reducing graduates' employability (Bennell & Mukyanuzi, 2005). As a result, many young people rely on informal and insecure employment as a survival strategy (ILO, 2018).

Existing literature has primarily focused on the causes and impacts of youth unemployment, with limited attention

to the lived experiences of unemployed youth and their adaptive responses. To address this gap, this study investigates the diverse survival strategies adopted by unemployed youth in Tanzania and examines their potential for financial independence. By exploring the experiences of young individuals navigating unemployment, the study seeks to illuminate innovative responses that may guide the development of sustainable pathways to livelihoods.

#### ➤ Objectives of the Study

- To examine social activities adopted by unemployed youth in Tanzania to sustain their livelihoods.
- To examine types of income generating activities undertaken by unemployed youth in Dar es Salaam.
- To explore community-based opportunities for economic empowerment of unemployed youth in Dar es Salaam

#### ➤ Scope of the Study

This study focuses on youth unemployment in Tanzania, specifically among young people aged 15–35, examining their survival strategies and pathways to financial independence. It emphasizes the Tanzanian context, particularly [specify region/city], while considering structural barriers such as skill mismatches, limited vocational training, and insufficient entrepreneurial support. The research explores both formal and informal employment and the strategies youth use to navigate economic hardships, including informal work and entrepreneurial activities. It does not cover broader macroeconomic trends or detailed private sector policies. The study aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of existing interventions and inform policy measures to enhance youth employment and sustainable livelihoods.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars argue that youth unemployment in Dar es Salaam remains a significant socio-economic challenge, driven by rapid population growth and limited formal employment opportunities. Young people entering the labor market often face exclusion from stable jobs, compelling them to adopt a combination of social, economic, and community-based strategies to sustain livelihoods and build resilience.

Social participation is widely recognized as a key coping mechanism. Involvement in religious institutions, community organizations, and peer associations provides emotional support, informal mentorship, and occasional material aid (Msigwa & Kipesha, 2013; URT, 2014). Volunteer-driven initiatives, local development projects, and environmental clean-ups promote civic engagement, social integration, and a sense of purpose, mitigating the psychosocial stress of unemployment (Kessy & Toto, 2012). Peer-based groups and savings associations such as Village Community Banks (VICOBAs) strengthen both social and economic networks, enabling youth to pool resources and pursue micro-entrepreneurial activities (Ndyali, 2016). Participation in cultural and recreational activities, including sports, music, drama, and traditional dance, enhances emotional resilience while occasionally generating modest

income, reinforcing identity and community belonging (Mwaipopo, 2016). Collectively, these social strategies support adaptive capacity and psychosocial well-being (ILO, 2018; AfDB, 2016).

Informal income-generating activities are another central strategy. Many youth engage in petty trade, food vending, agriculture, motorcycle taxi services, and digital entrepreneurship to secure income (ILO, 2023; ITU, 2022). While essential, these activities are often low-paying, unstable, and lack social protection, a trend also observed in Kenya and Nigeria (Gichuki & Lang'at, 2021; Akinyele & Agboola, 2020). Barriers such as limited capital, inadequate technical skills, and poor market access constrain growth and sustainability (Mdoe et al., 2024). International evidence, including from Brazil, suggests that combining financial support, skills training, and market integration can enhance the sustainability of youth enterprises (Pereira & Silva, 2022). Digital platforms also offer innovative pathways for engagement in global markets, expanding income opportunities for youth (Graham & Roussos, 2020).

Community-based interventions are critical for promoting economic empowerment. Microfinance schemes, SACCOS, and Youth Development Funds provide access to credit and business support, while NGOs offer training in entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and market linkages (Temu & Msuya, 2018; Lwoga, 2020; Rugemalira, 2019). Vocational training in agriculture, construction, and hospitality equips youth with technical skills aligned with labor market needs (Kajula, 2020). Community agriculture projects, collaborative initiatives, and partnerships with local businesses provide practical experience, mentorship, and workplace exposure, supporting sustainable enterprise development and employability (Sanga et al., 2017; Torres-Rahman, 2024; Mdumi, 2024).

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic and rigorous methodology to explore the survival strategies of unemployed youth in Ilala Municipality, Dar es Salaam. Guided by Creswell's (2014) definition, research methodology was understood as a set of procedures for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to ensure the validity and reliability of findings. The chapter outlines the research philosophy, approach, design, study area, population, sampling, data collection and analysis procedures, and measures to ensure rigor and ethical compliance.

The study adopted an interpretivist (constructivist) research philosophy, recognizing that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' subjective experiences (Schwandt, 2000; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). This paradigm was particularly appropriate for examining how unemployed youth make sense of socioeconomic challenges and develop adaptive strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative research approach was used to gain in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations (Creswell, 2014; Hancock et al., 2009; Williams, 2007).

A phenomenological research design served as the blueprint for the study, focusing on the lived experiences of youth navigating unemployment and informal survival strategies (Kothari, 2004). The research was conducted in Ilala Municipality, specifically in high-density wards such as Buguruni, Vingunguti, Tabata, and Ilala, where youth unemployment and informal economic activity are most concentrated. Ilala has a youth population aged 15–35 of approximately 1.2 million (NBS, 2022), with informal employment constituting over 60% of the local economy (ILO, 2020).

The study population comprised unemployed youth aged 18–35 years, aligned with national youth definitions and unemployment statistics. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants with rich insights into unemployment and survival strategies, consistent with qualitative best practices (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Kothari, 2014). The final sample size was determined by data saturation, with approximately 20 participants engaged through both in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). IDIs allowed for detailed exploration of personal experiences (Boyce & Neale, 2006), while five FGDs facilitated group-based insights across the selected wards (Creswell, 2014).

Data collection combined primary sources—IDIs and FGDs—with secondary sources, including policy documents, NGO reports, and academic literature, to provide a comprehensive understanding of youth survival strategies (Kothari, 2008; Rwegoshora, 2006). Collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, systematically identifying, coding, and interpreting emerging patterns and themes (Kothari, 2004). Triangulation of primary and secondary data enhanced the robustness of findings.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the study emphasized credibility and reflexivity. Credibility was achieved through methodological triangulation, multiple data sources, and careful facilitation of interviews and discussions (Polit & Beck, 2014; Frankel & Wallen, 2000; Patton, 2002). Reflexivity was maintained by minimizing researcher influence and allowing participants to freely express their perspectives (Ncube, 2015). Ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed.

### IV. FINDINGS

#### ➤ *Social Activities Adopted by Unemployed Youth to Sustain Their Livelihoods*

Findings reveal that informal peer networks constitute the primary mechanism through which unemployed youth in Ilala sustain livelihoods and emotional well-being. These networks provide economic, social, and psychological support, compensating for the absence of formal employment and welfare systems. Economically, peers share information on short-term opportunities such as loading goods, construction work, or event assistance—and operate as micro-financial systems offering small, interest-free loans or in-kind support. As one participant noted:

*"My friends are my office. The first thing I do in the morning is call my guys from the corner... Without that circle, you are just blind and waiting." (Male, Buguruni, 28)*

This illustrates the significance of social capital as a survival asset. Within the Strength-Based Approach (SBA), such behavior demonstrates resilience, agency, and creative problem-solving (Saleebey, 2006). Similarly, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) interprets this reciprocal support as mobilization of social and financial capital, converting trust into tangible economic value (Temu & Msuya, 2018).

Psychosocially, peer groups mitigate isolation, providing belonging and emotional stability:

*"We meet every evening, just to talk... That feeling is sometimes more important than the money." (Female, Vingunguti, 22)*

These interactions enhance self-worth and psychological endurance, echoing Mwaipopo (2016). Yet, some scholars caution that excessive reliance on peer networks can perpetuate dependency and limit upward mobility without institutional support (Njiru & Kimani, 2018). Overall, peer networks demonstrate that survival among youth is socially constructed, reflecting relational dynamics emphasized in both SBA and SLF.

Beyond peer circles, youth engage in community activities volunteering at religious festivals, weddings, funerals, or local security patrols as strategic investments to build visibility, reputation, and trust among community elders and business owners. One participant explained:

*"I always help when there is a wedding... Later, that same mama might call you to fix her fence and pay you." (Male, Ilala, 30)*

Young women often leverage church groups or savings clubs (VICOBA) to access social and financial networks:

*"In our church group... I help a woman at Tandale market, and she teaches me about the business." (Female, Buguruni, 26)*

These activities reflect bridging social capital, connecting youth to networks beyond their immediate peers (Putnam, 2000). The SLF interprets this as converting social capital into human and financial capital, enhancing skills and access to opportunities (Scoones, 1998). The SBA perspective emphasizes agency, empowerment, and proactive engagement to generate livelihood security (Saleebey, 2006).

International and regional studies corroborate that community participation improves legitimacy, reputation, and access to non-formal economic opportunities (UN-Habitat, 2021; Granovetter, 1973). However, scholars caution that such engagement may reinforce informal dependency without structural reforms (Njiru & Kimani, 2018).

#### ➤ *Income-Generating Activities Undertaken by Unemployed Youth for Survival*

Economic survival among unemployed youth in Ilala Municipality was mediated through a diverse portfolio of informal activities, each presenting distinct risks and rewards. A notable segment of youth, particularly younger and more educated individuals, leveraged digital technologies to generate income. These participants operated social media boutiques, provided freelance services such as graphic design and video editing, acted as mobile money agents, and increasingly engaged in content creation on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Through digital content creation, youth produced videos showcasing skills, entertainment, or product promotions, monetizing their audience through sponsorships, product advertisements, or online tips. As one participant noted, "I make short TikTok videos showing tutorials and funny skits. Sometimes I get small sponsorships or gifts from followers. It's not much, but it helps me survive." (Male Participant, Buguruni, Age 25). This reflects an adaptive mobilization of human capital digital literacy, creativity, and performance skills alongside physical capital, such as smartphones and reliable internet access. While these ventures offer low-barrier entry and flexible work, they are inherently unstable, often yielding irregular income, consistent with what the International Labour Organization (2020) terms "visible underemployment." Nevertheless, such activities demonstrate resilience, innovation, and entrepreneurial agency, consistent with the Strength-Based Approach (SBA), where youth actively transform existing strengths into viable economic strategies.

Petty trade and street vending (*machinga*) remained the most common survival strategy, involving the sale of second-hand clothes (*mitumba*), fruits, and mobile phone accessories. Although these activities provided daily cash flow, they were characterized by volatility, narrow profit margins, and frequent harassment from municipal authorities. One *machinga* vendor (26, Buguruni) explained his constant fear of losing stock to city officers, highlighting how exposure to shocks is a routine element of informal economic life. From the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) perspective, these enterprises illustrate the strategic use of physical and financial capital to maintain survival despite chronic vulnerability.

Bodaboda driving was another major source of income, particularly for male youth, prized for its daily cash earnings. Participants described it as a "dangerous" occupation due to frequent accidents, absence of insurance, and routine police extortion. This represents an SLF trade-off, where youth sacrifice physical capital health and personal safety to secure financial capital, consistent with Devereux's (2001) "negative survival strategy." Despite the risks, drivers employed adaptive strategies such as wearing protective gear, selecting safer routes, and rotating work hours, demonstrating resilience, strategic decision-making, and agency.

Skill-based services, acquired through informal apprenticeships in trades such as tailoring, motorcycle repair, and hairdressing, offered more stable income and social recognition. One female tailor (28, Vingunguti) reported that her apprenticeship allowed her to purchase her own sewing machine and specialize in school uniforms, generating significant seasonal income. This pathway illustrates the long-term benefits of investing in human capital, allowing youth to move from survivalist activities to sustainable, generative livelihoods. It embodies SLF principles through the strategic mobilization of multiple assets financial, human, and social capital and SBA principles by reinforcing self-efficacy, autonomy, and social respect.

➤ *Community-Based Opportunities for Economic Empowerment of Unemployed Youth*

Village Community Banks (VICOBAs) emerged as a financial mechanism accessed by a subset of unemployed youth in Ilala Municipality. Participants who were able to join these groups reported that regular contributions fostered personal discipline and provided access to low-interest loans, which were invested in small businesses or tools. One female participant (32, Tabata) explained that through her weekly contributions and a small loan from VICOBAs, she was able to purchase a sewing machine, enhancing her capacity to earn income. However, access to these groups was not universal. Many participants indicated that structural and social barriers, such as minimum weekly contributions, the need for a trusted guarantor, and invitation-based membership, excluded the most economically vulnerable. A male participant (22, Buguruni) highlighted this limitation, noting that youth who sometimes lack even basic food could not meet the weekly savings requirement. These findings reveal that while VICOBAs can serve as a source of financial capital for some youth, its benefits are unevenly distributed, favoring those already relatively stable.

In contrast, government-led youth empowerment initiatives, including the Youth Development Fund (YDF), were widely perceived as inaccessible, politically biased, and disconnected from the realities of informal sector livelihoods. Participants reported that opportunities were often restricted to those with political connections, while grassroots implementation was inconsistent or absent. A male participant (29, Ilala) described how program promises were frequent during election periods but rarely materialized afterward. NGO-led programs were generally viewed more positively, particularly when they involved practical skills training, but their impact was constrained by limited follow-up support and the absence of start-up capital. A female participant (24, Vingunguti) expressed that short-term training without tangible resources offered limited benefits, highlighting a gap between skill acquisition and economic application. These findings indicate that macro-level interventions, while present in form, were largely ineffective in enhancing the key livelihood assets needed by youth for sustainable economic engagement.

Localized skill-building workshops implemented by smaller NGOs were reported as particularly effective in supporting youth livelihoods. Programs focusing on market-

relevant skills such as mobile phone repair, soap making, and digital literacy provided participants with practical knowledge, starter kits, and mentorship. A male participant (26, Kariakoo) described how participation in a six-month smartphone repair training, combined with a basic toolkit, enabled him to establish a small market stand and begin earning income. Similarly, a female participant (27, Buguruni) emphasized the practical nature of training that included guidance on managing mobile money accounts, which improved her business management skills. These interventions not only enhanced human capital through skill acquisition but also contributed to social capital via mentorship and peer networks. Participants were able to immediately apply their skills to income-generating activities, demonstrating a direct link between training and livelihood improvement.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth exploration of the survival strategies employed by unemployed youth in Ilala Municipality, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. By applying the dual lenses of the Strength-Based Approach and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, the research moves beyond cataloging deficits to illuminate the significant agency, resilience, and resourcefulness inherent in the daily lives of young people navigating structural unemployment. However, it also starkly reveals the systemic constraints that trap this agency within cycles of precarity, preventing it from translating into sustainable economic advancement.

The findings conclusively demonstrate that survival for unemployed urban youth is a profoundly social and relational endeavor. Peer networks are not merely support systems; they are the foundational infrastructure of the informal economy, functioning as real-time job centers, informal credit unions, and critical buffers against psychological distress. This reliance on *bonding social capital* highlights an immense, organic strength within communities. Furthermore, the strategic deployment of *bridging social capital* through community participation shows how youth actively build reputation and visibility to unlock scarce opportunities. These strategies affirm the core tenet of the SBA: that individuals possess and mobilize inherent strengths to navigate adversity.

Economically, the findings paint a picture of adaptive hustle constrained by structural vulnerability. Youth are not idle; they are active participants in a bustling, diverse, and often innovative informal economy. They engage in digital hustling, leveraging global platforms; they undertake petty trade with remarkable persistence; they navigate the high-risk *bodaboda* sector for immediate cash; and they invest in skill-based apprenticeships for longer-term stability. This portfolio approach to livelihoods reflects a sophisticated understanding of risk diversification, a key element of the SLF. Yet, each of these pathways is fundamentally precarious, characterized by instability, a lack of social protection, physical danger, and harassment from authorities. The choice to engage in such high-risk, low-security work is not one of preference but of constrained necessity, underscoring a critical failure of the formal economy and social safety nets.

Finally, the research uncovers a significant disconnect between formal empowerment structures and grassroots realities. While community-based microfinance (VICOBRA) and localized NGO workshops offer tangible benefits, their reach is limited and often excludes the most vulnerable. In stark contrast, government-led programs are perceived as largely inaccessible, politically co-opted, and irrelevant to the lived experiences of informal sector youth, leading to a crisis of legitimacy. This "implementation deficit" means that the very policies designed to support youth often fail to engage with or enhance the actual capital social, financial, human that youth are already mobilizing.

In essence, this study concludes that unemployed youth in urban Tanzania are active architects of survival within a landscape of systemic exclusion. They exhibit remarkable resilience and ingenuity, constructing complex livelihood strategies from limited resources. However, their potential is being wasted. Their survival mechanisms, while robust in the short term, are not sustainable pathways out of poverty. Without intentional, inclusive, and structurally sensitive interventions that formalize, safeguard, and build upon the informal economy and existing social capital, this vast reservoir of youth energy and innovation will continue to be channeled into mere survival rather than transformative growth. The challenge for policymakers, practitioners, and communities is not to create resilience for these youth, but to partner with them to transform their demonstrated resilience into sustainable prosperity.

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