

ENTREPRENEURIAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Nima Roshanaei

Cass Business School, City University, United Kingdom

E-mail: Nima.roshanaei@gmail.com

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Abstract

Youth can play a vital role in positively affecting the sustainable development goals and the progress of their recipient communities. Young adults make about 30 percent of the world population, and their participation in affairs of their community and its subsequent impact represents a key component for long-term success. The importance of youth engagement and empowerment has been systematically overlooked by the top decision-makers and youth have been ignored through all tiers of economic and sociopolitical spectrums. This calls for an overhaul of policymaking to give young people from all over the world the credit they deserve by allowing them to actively participate in all relevant levels of the decision-making process, considering that those decisions not only affect their present lives but their future as well. Empowered youth are responsible citizens, professionals and leaders who are positively shaping and affecting the future through navigating and managing the complexities of global challenges. In this research, the focus will be on how entrepreneurial opportunities for youth empowerment will lead to a sustainable future. In this paper, a research review has been conducted on entrepreneurial opportunities and critical factors that are specific to the context of youth engagement and empowerment. This work is based on primary sources such as policy documents, global youth-related summits and review of available evidence. Besides these sources, information from secondary sources was taken into consideration. These sources were relevant publications, reports, and academic articles. This literature analysis not only provides us with an overview of the current status of knowledge within the domain of entrepreneurial opportunities but also serves as a salient guideline for future research directions.

Research paper

Keywords: Entrepreneurial opportunities; Youth engagement and empowerment; Sustainable Future

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Introduction

The primary focus of this proposal is to understand the role of entrepreneurial opportunities for youth engagement and empowerment and more specifically, how this process will lead to a sustainable future. Growing youth unemployment threatens economic and political stability and sustainability. Countries with high youth demographic profiles are even more at risk. Entrepreneurial processes play a vital role in increasing youth-related opportunities and transforming youth employment to youth engagement and empowerment fostering an environment conducive to sustainable development. Youth engagement and empowerment through entrepreneurial opportunities can be part of the solution.

Low income and high unemployment among the youth often pose great challenges to community's welfare. Some governments have recognized that youth unemployment is an acute problem that needs immediate attention and various plans and policies aimed at creating employment and upgrading their skillset have been introduced. Governments should also make the commitment to better the quality of human capital through education, health and capacity building programs. Facilitating youth engagement and empowerment should resort to providing skills that are in demand, introducing monitoring and evaluation methods, hosting youth capacity-building programs, establishing minimum standards for skill certification, forming partnerships with civil society organizations and extending the reach of youth skill development programs to the private sector (Khan *et al.*, 2016).

Eckhardt and Shane (2003) define entrepreneurial opportunities as “*situations in which new goods, services, raw materials, markets and organizing methods can be introduced through the formation of new means, ends, or means-ends relationships*”. For the purpose of this research, we broadly define entrepreneurial opportunities as being a set of environmental conditions that lead to the introduction of one or more new products or services in the marketplace by an entrepreneur or by an entrepreneurial team through either an existing venture or a newly created one. Entrepreneurial opportunities generate a range of differentiated socio-economic and socio-political outcomes, and entrepreneurs act as engines of growth in the economy (Ketchen, 2003; Venkataraman, 1997; Deakins & North, 2013; Pandya, 2014; Singh & Ashraf, 2020).

Entrepreneurial opportunities actively contribute to transforming youth engagement and empowerment by increasing the employability of young adults. Increasing the number of employment opportunities for young people and fostering an environment conducive to the creation of opportunities for self-employment and development deem as a first step. Positive youth development programs offer youth the opportunity to gain the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors needed to overcome constraints in life and develop into fully contributing citizens of society. Positive youth development programs not only give youth the opportunity to gain needed skills but also enable them to practice these developmental attributes (Pittman & Wright, 1991; Mirghaed, 2015; Mondalizadeh, 2018; Goodarzi et al., 2018). These attributes are enhanced when youth are empowered to

fully participate in their own development and express their voice, thus leading to a higher level of engagement (Pittman, 1991). A main principle for those involved in positive youth development is that youth are or should be agents of their own development (Larson & Wood, 2006).

The remainder of this paper develops a theoretical framework highlighting Entrepreneurial opportunities, Youth engagement and empowerment. We will then set forth by evaluating the benefit and impact of youth engagement and empowerment in ameliorating sustainable future. Conclusions are presented as the final part of this paper.

Theoretical Background

In what follows a review of the available literature has been organized by primarily setting up a framework for evaluating the pertinent literature in the areas of the entrepreneurial opportunities, youth engagement and empowerment. This process is then supported by a qualitative assessment of the role of youth in achieving a sustainable future. Towards the end, we strive to provide highlights and guidelines for a sustainable community whose members can build capacity for future development.

Entrepreneurial Opportunities

Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a solution to various economic, social and environmental challenges (Zanjani et al., 2013; Wan-namakok & Liang, 2019). It is therefore subject to research across many scientific disciplines, including business, management, economics, social

sciences and psychology. Venkataraman (1997) describes entrepreneurship as a process of opportunity recognition, the creation of goods and the exploitation of opportunities. Schaltegger and Wagner (2011), define sustainable entrepreneurship as “an innovative, market-oriented and personality-driven form of creating economic and societal value by means of breakthrough environmentally or socially beneficial market or institutional innovations”.

In the Schumpeterian’s view, opportunities emerge out of the entrepreneur’s internal disposition to initiate changes in the economy. According to Schumpeter (1934), the entrepreneur is the innovator who “shocks” and disturbs the economic equilibrium during times of uncertainty, change, and technological upheaval. In Schumpeter’s view, opportunities emerge as a process of “creative destruction.” Entrepreneurs do not discover opportunities; rather, they create them by taking advantage of technological change, of an innovation occurring in the economy (Mirzadeh *et al.*, 2017; Salamzadeh & Kesim, 2017; Tajpour *et al.*, 2020). Entrepreneurial opportunities arise in the economy as an outcome of “a self-transformation process, the driving element of which is an innovating ‘entrepreneur-hero’. Consequently, Schumpeter elaborates upon the psychology of his ‘entrepreneur-hero’ (Witt, 1995; Kumar, 2014; Jaim & Islam, 2018; Radovic Markovic & Salamzadeh, 2012). In other words, by attributing to the entrepreneur the role of a “heroic” change initiator in the economy, Schumpeter gives cognizance to the importance of the personal traits and motivation of the entrepreneur. He suggests that entrepreneurs are the rare breed of individuals

motivated intrinsically to utilize the benefits of technological, demographic, and social changes to create upheavals in the current state of equilibrium and to usher new products and services or new ways of working (Schumpeter, 1934).

Hart and Milstein (1999) emphasize the potential of the interplay between entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development (SD). They base their work on Schumpeter's (1942) concept of "creative destruction", which essentially states that long-standing business models, organizations and structures must be destroyed to open opportunities for innovation and new businesses (Salamzadeh & Kirby, 2017). Accordingly, Hart and Milstein argue that "Overall, innovators and entrepreneurs will view SD as one of the biggest business opportunities in the history of commerce". In their view, entrepreneurs have the chance to reposition themselves in their business environment by enhancing their competencies and to finally redesign their industries toward sustainability. In line with this, the UN General Assembly (2016) has identified entrepreneurship, together with innovation, as a key element for addressing SD challenges.

Kickul and Gundry (2000), having adopted a positivist view on opportunities, remark that entrepreneurial opportunity recognition is a complex, multidimensional process, incorporating within its ambit not only the search for new opportunities but also the recognition of feasible opportunities and their selection over other non-feasible ones (Salamzadeh, 2015; Radovic Markovic *et al.*, 2019). On the one hand, entrepreneurs must receive and utilize all the information that they obtain from the external envi-

ronment to create, shape, and maintain a kind of information asymmetry that allows them to notice new opportunities that are either not seen or are disregarded by the other groups of the population (Stewart *et al.*, 1999).

The development of entrepreneurial opportunities and entrepreneurship culture is vital for the advancement and sustainable development of enterprising behavior among youth. Having the right combination of internal motivation, skills, and opportunities will give way to a significantly greater influence in the youth choosing entrepreneurship as their trajectory to empowerment. Successful youth empowerment can only be achieved when the government, private sector, non-governmental organizations, donors and civil society all work together for the advancement of the youth agenda.

Youth Engagement and Empowerment

According to the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (2010), in many developing countries, persons with general secondary and higher education experience unemployment. Around the entire Planet, a new and massive population of young adults have been experiencing record unemployment levels as a result of an unfavorable global economic climate. Youth are being routinely disengaged throughout the economy (Salamzadeh, 2014). Without their personal engagement in the economic eco-system, the economy could soon face cataclysmic outcomes and delve into a collapse. Growing youth unemployment threatens economic and political sta-

bility, and countries with high youth demographic profiles are even more at risk.

Further negative growth means decreasing work opportunities and the need for alternative means of job creation. Youth entrepreneurship can be part of the solution. Education and training are critical in developing the entrepreneurial mindset and specific skills for business start-ups. Nevertheless, education and training cannot be disconnected from the broader entrepreneurship support system. A coordinated policy response is necessary to ensure the energy and drive of young people is best harnessed to meet the needs of 21st-century economies (Nordin et al., 2020). A rethink of the teaching methods and learning processes at schools is necessary to equip young people with the skills to manage failure and foster success which are the particular challenges of entrepreneurship. Evidence shows that the rate of students who start up their own company increases three-fold after participation in an entrepreneurship program at school. Policymakers should consider integrating the ‘entrepreneurship experience’ into the school curriculum. More attention needs to be given to entrepreneurship as a ‘key competence’ to build the entrepreneurial mindset of the next generation. The entrepreneurial mindset comprises a set of cognitive and behavioral traits. By these attributes, the youth will be adequately empowered to face the world of work and stand tall in the community of nations. Youth entrepreneurship is high on the political agenda as a means to boost competitiveness and employment. Young entrepreneurs have the potential to build a new economic dynamic, generating jobs and harnessing growth (Loughran, 2014).

Youth disengagement not only affects businesses, philanthropies, nonprofits, schools and governments, but it is also about families, neighborhoods and communities among many others. Therefore, there are local, state, national and international NGOs and nonprofits working around the world on promoting youth engagement and empowerment. Government agencies and international political agendas have been established to address youth engagement and empowerment (Fletcher, 2015).

Empowerment refers to a “process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability” (Ka-beer, 1999). In this paper, the focus is on youth empowerment, an essential yet understudied topic of relevance to researchers, practitioners and policy-makers (Berg, Coman & Schensul, 2009; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). In recent years, youth programs have gradually shifted from rehabilitation or containment (Jennings *et al.*, 2006) to facilitating healthy youth development and capacity building through active community involvement (Christens & Dolan, 2011). Nonetheless, it should be noted that youth empowerment has different meanings in diverse contexts. Many previous studies of youth empowerment have focused on vulnerable populations (Einspruch & Wunrow, 2002; Tierney *et al.*, 1993) or youth from diverse ethnic groups (Ginwright, 2007). Jennings and her colleagues (2006), examined youth empowerment model that emphasizes on engaging youth in work that would help them develop skills, build critical awareness and have opportunities to engage in creating community and societal changes. Zimmerman (2000) suggested that the ultimate goal of youth empowerment is to promote more

remarkable social changes by building the individual capacity of young people.

Youth empowerment is an attitudinal, structural and cultural process whereby young people gain the ability, authority and agency to make decisions and implement change in their own lives and the lives of other people, including youths and adults. Youth empowerment is often addressed as a gateway to intergenerational equity, civic engagement and democracy building. Empowering young people means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others. Common Wealth of Nations spoke of those young people who are empowered when they acknowledge that they have or can create choices in life; and are aware of the implications of those choices to make an informed decision freely, and take action based on that decision and accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions (Wikipedia, 2013). Youth empowerment could be said to mean, the ability of the youth to eat when they are hungry, to meet their basic needs, to have a shelter over their heads, to speak out on things of concern in their society, and to cater for their health whenever necessary not being deprived in any ramification in life. In fact, entrepreneurship development reduces unemployment and poverty to the barest minimum especially to those who embrace the knowledge and skills inherent in it (Okoli, 2013).

The American Heritage Dictionary (2006) defines empowerment as “to equip or supply with ability; enable.” Youth are empowered when adults

equip them with knowledge and skills. When a young person is taught a skill they no longer are dependent upon others. Since often adults are more likely than youth to have particular skills, by default they will be the ones with the power. As adults teach young people skills, youth become less dependent on them, and the youth are enabled to share power with adults. Thus, Weisberg (1999) has noted that the learning process itself is a strong form of empowerment. Encarta Dictionary (2007) defines empowerment as “to give somebody a greater sense of confidence or self-esteem.” Gibson (1995) agrees with the Encarta’s definition and has identified four components that aided the process of empowerment: discovering reality, developing the necessary knowledge, fostering competence, and employing confidence to make voices heard.

In 2002, Pancer, Rose-Krasnor and Loiselle provided a conceptual framework and developmental outcomes related to youth engagement. According to these researchers, youth engagement was viewed as “the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity that has a focus outside himself or herself”. Youth engagement is a young person’s level of enjoyment in an activity-based upon social (individual) and program design (systematic) characteristics. Degrees of engagement are the theoretical combinations that can occur when youth are given an opportunity in voice, empowerment, and participation. As youth are enabled to be involved in programs with greater levels of voice, empowerment, and participation, youth are more likely to become engaged in the

program. Youth who are engaged at a higher level of factors will be exposed to more opportunities to benefit developmentally.

Youth engagement is anytime a young person forms a sustainable connection to the world within or around themselves. From that understanding, it becomes obvious why youth are important to the economy. They are important because they are consumers, innovators, workers, entrepreneurs, recyclers, producers and leaders right now - and in the future (Fletcher, 2015). Youth engagement means becoming actively involved in recognizing their skills, ability and strength and participating in solving social problems.

Sustainable Future and the Role of Youth

Today's imperative is to nourish a sustainable future through sustainable development goals. New Global Sustainable Development Agenda aims to stop poverty, encourage prosperity and advocate people's welfare while engaged in preserving the environment by 2030. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) deliver a vision, at the same time comprising positive and viable agenda for protecting both people and the Planet we live on. It is a promise of a brighter future for our generation and those generations that are yet to come. All the participants will get to walk the path of value creation by acknowledging that the benefits of SDGs must be combined with new partnerships and alliances. The truth is that the SDGs are in a position to deliver value to a wide range of stakeholders: they bring positive transformational power to communities; governments experience a fast-paced advancement; corporations accomplish even higher levels of efficiency and

sustainability; both individuals and society enjoy the increase in the quality of life (Kuckertz & Wagners, 2010).

Young women and men are already contributing substantially towards the SDGs in the following ways:

(i) Helping deliver programs which are responsive and attuned to real needs and often in ways that benefit in terms of economy, efficiency, effectiveness, equity and sustainability. Nevertheless, much more needs to be done to track and design comparative studies.

(ii) The ability of young women and men to seek out partnerships, network and build alliances, both within and between generations. They identify with and act as connectors or “mobilizers” in person, online and in public and private spheres. There is an untapped role that young people may identify within terms of communicating the message of the SDGs, contributing towards their monitoring and holding governments to account, as well as mobilizing others to contribute as active citizens. This has a big implication for the “Leave no one behind” agenda.

(iii) Young people do not just want to be peer educators—they can be highly effective educators, advisors, and managers across generations.

(iv) Their capabilities to contribute towards development policies or legislation that support the achievement of all 17 SDGs with particular regard to imagining what might happen in the future and envisioning how national policy development, implementation and tracking might be done differently.

(v) The role should not be compromised as co-designers of the initiatives across all 17 SDGs, but more specifically for those directly impacting the course of education, gender and employment. By engaging youth in these under-acknowledged and hidden roles much more directly, visibly and respectfully, the SDGs could receive a much-needed and robust pulse of youthful energy (Asian development bank, 2018).

In 2015, the United Nations General assembly adopted “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) identified employment as a critical link between growth and poverty reduction. Inclusive employment policies, programs and projects mainly aim to get the marginalized and vulnerable segments of the population into work. While investing in skill development is essential, equally essential is reforming goods and labor markets to create new jobs so that economic expansion can absorb both existing unemployment and incremental increases in the labor force (Ahmed, 2012). The Sustainable Development Goals recognize the importance of inclusive employment, which aims to ‘promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. Such growth should be broad-based and help boost both wage and self-employment. Governments are expected to carry out market and competition reforms so that creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship can be embraced (Mehta, 2015).

Conclusion

Young people can play an active role in creating and improving a sustainable future. Engaged and empowered youth not only create a direct impact on changing youth behaviors and attitudes but possibly influence their parents, communities and the environment in the best possible ways. Empowered youth actively participate in campaigns to protect sustainable development goals. All levels of youth engagement and empowerment lead nations to be transformed technologically, economically, industrially and socio-politically.

Entrepreneurial opportunities have the potential to build a new mean to boost youth competitiveness, job creation, employment and growth. Education and training are critical to developing the entrepreneurial mindset and specific skills for youth engagement and empowerment. A coordinated youth empowerment policy is necessary to ensure the energy and drive of young people is best harnessed to meet the needs of a 21st-century economy for a sustainable future. The global economy today places a premium consideration on the ability of nation-states to update skills and knowledge continually. Entrepreneurial opportunities and development inspire individuals who can explore and exploit available resources and initiate economically rewarding business projects that could be a catalyst for reducing the unemployment problem within economies. Besides, entrepreneurship education has been identified across the globe as a tool for generating sustainable economic development. No country can move forward without strongly developing enterprising skills that translate into a reduction in unemployment.

Another vital component which has been explored is the investment in entrepreneurship education, primarily from an early age. Secondary and vocational institutions must also be equipped to respond to the various needs of this new wave of entrepreneurial thinkers. Ultimately, pedagogy and facilities must be upgraded to deliver the quality education and training necessary for the youth to prepare for their entrepreneurial explorations properly. Fostering an entrepreneurship mindset, competences, leadership and management skills, and the accompanying attitudes are essential to advance entrepreneurship in a strategic way. The cooperation of the various ministries, universities and research institutions should undertake the lead role in enriching the entrepreneurship educational experience.

Addressing entrepreneurial opportunities create the potential for a ‘domino effect’ throughout the economic, social and institutional environment. All young people must become engaged and empowered to make informed choices and active participation in their own sustainable future. All level youth empowerment presents a critical opportunity for the next generation. Youth empowerment and engagement will open windows of opportunity for youth to become part of a greater community and share aspects of their character to achieve a far greater understanding of meaningful collaboration in advancing a sustainable future for all involved. Youth engagement in the development processes and their responsible participation can lead us to act appropriately in solving social and economic challenges and reach sustainable changes. Empowered youth of today are responsible citizens of tomorrow.

Finally, as with every other study, this paper has its limitations. Although being comprehensive in its kind, the literature review does not encompass all related approaches to the subjects raised. The related youth engagement and empowerment policies are different in various countries. For instance, the EU has its own general policy toward youth engagement. As to continue research, it is suggested to conduct a specialized study based on government-specific and their development agencies' best practices that are directly attributed to building entrepreneurial opportunities and youth empowerment capacities. Youth engagement and empowerment should therefore be in every country's development outlook and policy effort to generate growth and trajectory towards a sustainable future.

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