Non-formal vocational education in Uganda: Practical empowerment through a workable alternative

Marit Blaak,*, George L. Openjuru, Jacques Zeelen

*Department of Lifelong Learning, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 7062, 9700 AV Groningen, Netherlands
School of Distance and Lifelong Learning, Makerere University, P.O. Box 7062 Kampala, Uganda

A R T I C L E   I N F O
Keywords:
Non-formal education
Empowerment
Vocational education
Role of education
Self-reliance
Development
Sub-Saharan Africa

A B S T R A C T
This article reflects on the potential of non-formal vocational education in Uganda to improve the quality of life of those excluded from formal education. Based on an exploration of humanizing development theorists Sen, Freire and Nyerere, together with two case studies, practical empowerment is described as a desirable outcome of education for development. Practical empowerment includes acquiring marketable skills as well as capabilities to critically give direction to one’s life. Although education leading to this outcome is desirable for all, non-formal vocational education can reach those currently excluded from formal education, thus enhancing their empowerment by equipping them with useful skills and knowledge.

1. Introduction

Education for all goals seem to have reached the point of convergence; a focus on quantity led to a narrow interpretation of delivery and the implementation has been widely criticised. Enrolment in primary education is stressed as one of the most important means to development in programs like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and education for all (United Nations, 2009; World Education Forum, 2000). While the international commitment to achieve these goals definitely directed attention to accessibility and quality of basic education (Hoppers, 2006), at the same time completion rates remain low and the focus on quantitative results in enrolment is highly criticized since it draws away attention from quality (Alexander, 2008; Lewin and Akypeampong, 2009; Minnis, 2006). It is in this context that the potential of non-formal education as a safety net for the educationally marginalized will be explored.

Worldwide, educational statistics demonstrate a substantial improvement in enrolment in primary education. Global primary enrolment rates climbed from 84% in 2000 to 90% in 2009. At a lower, but quite substantial level, Sub-Saharan Africa went through an increase from 60% in 2000 to 76% in 2009. Looking beyond the surface however, a less optimistic picture emerges. In 2005, only 68% of the children in Sub-Saharan Africa enrolled in first grade of primary school reached the last grade in primary education. The same occurs in Uganda, a country characterized by enrolment rates as high as 97% in primary education. The persistence rate however is low, only 32% of the children enrolled in the first grade finished the last grade of primary education in 2005 (Okello, 2007; Onghwen, n.d.; Openjuru, 2010; World Bank, n.d.).

Moving beyond this quantitative perspective, a qualitative analysis of education in the light of development also shows a reverse image. Due to an increase of pupils many schools in Sub-Saharan Africa have to cope with large class sizes and a lack of trained teachers and learning materials, affecting the quality of education in formal schools (Lewin, 2009; Zuze and Leibbrandt, 2011). Moreover, Minnis (2006) stresses the misfit between the education system in Sub-Saharan Africa and the reality of the informal economy in these countries. He points to poor intellectual achievements and the hardly relevant curriculum of the formal school system that does not meet the needs of economic development, for which potential mainly lies in agriculture. The current school system is focused on certificates that are perceived as private goods to achieve social mobility (Minnis, 2006). Also in the area of quality, the Ugandan education system reflects common challenges as it is criticized for being too academic and does not connect to the needs of the labour market (Kanyandago, 2010; Openjuru, 2010).

The challenge of quality makes the phenomenon of non-completion, or early school leavers more problematic. Not only do early school leavers lack certificates, those few years in school most likely do not equip them with skills useful for their future lives (Openjuru, 2010). Moreover, in countries like Uganda, where mobility in the formal school system is considered ideal, early school leavers are seen as failures (Kanyandago, 2010). Besides the...
individual consequences of educational exclusion in psychological and economical areas, society is also missing out on outcomes like a skilled workforce and social cohesion (Mwinzi and Kalemba, 2010; Kibwika et al., 2010; Openjuru, 2010). This comes on top of the challenges early school leavers already have to cope with, as early school leaving is associated with poverty, HIV/AIDS, illness, orphanhood, and family responsibilities, besides in-school factors (see Hunt, 2008; Lewin and Akyeampong, 2009; Zeelen et al., 2010).

In summary, formal primary education seems to fail to meet its development goals in Sub-Saharan countries. Education however can be offered in various ways, besides formal education, learning can take place in informal and non-formal settings. Informal education can be seen as unintentional forms of learning, a side-effect of daily experiences. Non-formal education includes all organized types of intentional education outside of the hierarchical formal school system of primary, secondary and tertiary education (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974). The organization of non-formal education is usually associated with an adaptive and flexible design, child-centeredness and a bottom-up, participatory approach while offering a locally relevant content (Mazza, n.d.; Rose, 2007).

It seems worthwhile to study the potential of this type of organized learning, non-formal education, to explore whether this type of education does reach people who never enter or leave the formal education system early, and whether it offers relevant skills and knowledge that contribute to an improved quality of life. The theoretical potential of non-formal education will be explored below, starting from Sen, Freire and Nyerere who emphasize broader empowering gains of education beyond preparing a skilled workforce. From this perspective, the role of education for development and the potential of non-formal education for the educationally excluded will be explored. Two cases of non-formal vocational education in Uganda will be used to illustrate this potential while critically assessing the desired outcomes of education for development.

2. Theoretical considerations

Although hardly original or innovative, in order to explore the full potential of education for development, it is essential to move from a neo-liberal approach promoting economic liberalization and democratisation to a broader, more humane interpretation of development that, besides the wider social and economic context, takes into account the individual’s quality of life (see for example Collier, 2007; Sen, 2001; Van der Veen and Preece, 2005; Youngman, 2000). Focusing on quality of life helps to analyse desirable educational outcomes which exceed preparation for the labour market, and take into account empowerment, self-reliance and capabilities to be agents of development. These educational outcomes linked to quality of life are described below, following Sen, Freire and Nyerere.

2.1. Development and quality of life

Amartya Sen (2001), Indian economist awarded with the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 1998, is one of the main theorists influencing the move of the development paradigm towards a humane broad interpretation of development and quality of life. He stresses that development will be achieved when individuals gain five essential freedoms: economic opportunities, political freedoms, social facilities, transparency guarantees and protective security. Human capability to gain these freedoms is seen as the end as well as the means to development. This implies that development is not only implemented by governments and development agencies, but individuals become agents of developments as well (Sen, 2001).

Related to the idea of human capability, Julius Nyerere, first president of Tanzania from 1961 to 1985, uses self-reliance as a central concept in his ideology which he named Ujamaa (family hood). In the post-colonial context, Nyerere stresses the importance of the revival of traditional African values to achieve emancipation. Self-reliance is more than being able to cater for one’s basic needs: it also means the “ability to critically question the status quo; it meant originality in thought and choosing the correct action” (Mulenga, 2001, p. 453). Equipping individuals to become self-reliant is essential to create a socialist society wherein people move from their colonized identity to a socialist identity (Mulenga, 2001).

Another vital concept when talking about quality of life, personal agency and development, is empowerment. There is basically no clear definition of the concept of empowerment; it is a term which is difficult to define (Reman and Reman, 1998). However, Page and Czuba (1999, p. 3) conclusively define empowerment as a, “multi-dimensional social process that help people gain control over their own lives … fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people for use in their lives, their communities and in their society by acting on issues they define as important.” There are two concepts that define power as pointed out by Page and Czuba (1999); these are the power to change and the power to expand.

Paulo Freire (1996) a Brazilian educationalist and philosopher, incorporated these ideas of empowerment into an educational theory, criticizing the traditional educational systems which, according to him, reproduce oppressive structures. His ideas of empowerment underline that besides psychological change and opportunities, reflective action is essential for true development. Freire describes the realization that one is being oppressed as the starting point for empowerment. This realization should originate from a dialogue wherein the oppressed discover their oppression. Besides this, a person should actually sense power to change his or her situation (Freire, 1996). This is a process he termed conscientization. As Mann Hyung Hur (2006, p. 527) explains, “According to Freire, the oppressed or the disadvantaged can become empowered by learning about social inequality (i.e. conscientizing), encouraging others by making them feel confident about achieving social equality, and finally liberating them”.

2.2. Education and quality of life: theoretically speaking

The concepts of human capability, self-reliance and empowerment, give interesting insights in an interpretation of quality of life at an individual level, while emphasizing the potential of the individual to be an agent in achieving this quality of life. The same concepts explain that quality of life and development are more than skills to earn a living, but also being able to critically reflect upon one’s situation and skills and capabilities to make a change in social, political and economic areas of life. In line with this, Sen, Freire and Nyerere all underline the importance of education to attain quality of life and develop an individual’s potential.

In the light of Sen’s (2001) theory, missing out on education can be seen as a form of un-freedom. Education according to Sen has broader gains than economic development, the worth of education lies “in reading, communicating, arguing, in being able to choose in a more informed way, in being taken more seriously by others and so on, the benefits of education thus exceed its role as human capital in commodity production” (p. 294). At the same time however, Sen acknowledges that greater human capital can stimulate the achievement of other freedoms and that education does indeed stimulate the economic growth of a nation. However, this does not undermine the idea that educational outcomes
exceed the economic outcomes (Sen, 2001). Interesting in this light is the recent debate on the capabilities approach, outlined in previous editions of this journal, wherein several authors emphasize the social justice aspect of this approach on top of economic outcomes of education (see for example Tidky and Barrett, 2011; Unterhalter, 2005; Walker, 2012).

Nyerere (1978, p. 28) maintained that the purpose of education, "is the liberation of Man from the restraints and limitations of ignorance and dependency. Education has to increase men's physical and mental freedom to increase their control over themselves, their own lives." Opposed to the colonial education system, Nyerere suggests education for self-reliance wherein the effects of colonialism should be tackled. While spreading the ideas of Ujamaa through education, education can have a stabilizing role while preparing pupils to take part in the process of development. In the implementation of education for self-reliance however, Nyerere underestimated the difficulties of redirecting Tanzanians towards their traditional values as their attitudes were still greatly influenced by colonialists (Mulenga, 2001).

Paolo Freire (1996) also criticizes the traditional education system wherein students are seen as boxes to be filled with information, passing on existing oppression structures. Freire presents a pedagogy of the oppressed in order to acquire true development “this pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation” (Freire, 1996, p. 29). Central in this pedagogy is problem-posing education wherein real life situations are tested through critical thinking and dialogue (Freire, 1996).

2.3. Education and development: moving beyond formal education

As outlined in the introduction, education is already attributed an essential role for development. In line with Sen's (2001, p. 90) statement: “the more inclusive the reach of basic education and health care, the more likely it is that even the potentially poor would have a better chance of overcoming penury”. The extent to which the current focus on primary education fulfills this role however is questionable, due to both quantitative and qualitative difficulties. A high number of people is still denied access to primary education or has to cope with consequences of early school leaving, and the quality of education systems in Southern countries remains low. As Minnis (2006) puts it:

The primary concern of most formal education in Africa involves transferring knowledge and skills to the learner. Education is teacher centred, bureaucratic, and highly regulated and controlled by governments. But the majority of adult farmers do not live in a world that is based on academic disciplines; rather, they live in contexts where they must apply what they have learned in practical situations. (Minnis, 2006, p. 130)

In light of the high numbers of educational exclusion, the World Education Forum (2000) pleads for other educational opportunities:

All young people should be given the opportunity for ongoing education. For those who drop out of school or complete school without acquiring the literacy, numeracy and life skills they need, there must be a range of options for continuing their learning. Such opportunities should be both meaningful and relevant to their environment and needs, help them become active agents in shaping their future and develop useful work-related skills. (World Education Forum, 2000)

Not necessarily in a development context, Jarvis (2007) also directs attentions to other types of learning; besides formal learning he distinguishes incidental learning and self-directed learning. Incidental learning is similar to informal learning as it is intertwined with daily experiences. Self-directed learning is considered as a learning project initiated by learners themselves. Jarvis underlines these alternative types of learning to stress that learning not only takes place as lifelong but also life-wide. Interesting in this context is Jarvis’s idea that lifelong learning should exceed employability, taking into consideration different areas and roles of life. Considering the different learning opportunities, Jarvis describes a special role for social interaction which is often a source for learning (Jarvis, 2007).

Another distinction that points towards the broadness of learning experiences is the distinction between informal, formal and non-formal education. Whether this distinction is justified or not, the distinction again underlines the broadness of learning opportunities that take place lifelong. Besides this, the distinction incites one to think about alternative and creative ways of delivery (Hoppers, 2006; Mazza, n.d.). Indeed, non-formal education activities can inspire through creative and adaptive methods or content. Features often ascribed to non-formal education are NGO provided, alternative, compensatory, accountable to civil society or the community, child-centered, heterogeneous, flexible and participatory, bottom-up, accelerated learning and locally relevant (Rose, 2007). Besides this, non-formal education in some cases is distinguished from formal education by the accreditation of the program which is either officially or unofficially granted (Mazza, n.d.; Rose, 2007).

In light of the misfit of formal education and development, these adaptive features of non-formal education seem promising for preparing individuals as agents of development, especially those who currently miss out on education. Minnis (2006) also emphasizes the importance of non-formal education for the development of Sub-Saharan Africa, as it can equip people with relevant practical skills necessary for economic development. Beyond income generating skills, Indabawu and Mpofo (2006) who use a definition of adult education interchangeable with non-formal education, explain that adult education can contribute to development by its potential of empowerment through information delivery, increased opportunities in further education and the labour market, social interaction, improved skills in negotiation, organization and a better place in society, enlighten on human rights issues, awareness and change in behaviour and attitudes. Hoppers (2006) also mentions that certain non-formal education programs explicitly aim at social change through empowerment, so-called popular education.

Introducing non-formal education in this way makes it sound like the perfect type of education, different from the unwieldy, traditional formal education. In post-colonial societies where people highly admire formal certificates which are seen as symbols of status, non-formal education still has to cope with a negative image (Minnis, 2006; Openjuru, 2010). In addition, non-formal education still excludes groups of people as participants are mostly those individuals with successful experiences in education (Hoppers, 2006; International Council for Adult Education, 2000). This is related to a formalization of non-formal education often seen in professional and skills development programs. This ‘maturing’ can have negative consequences as it “usually means the loss of many non-formal features – such as flexibility, open entry, interaction with the community – and fundamental shifts in their goals–moving backwards from the transformative goals to adaptive goals” (Hoppers, 2006, p. 86). Waniha (2008) found similar disadvantages of formalization of complementary basic education in Tanzania, which she found uses a fixed curriculum and non-flexible teaching methods and seems to exclude a great number of people.

Looking at broad educational outcomes for development, it cannot be denied that non-formal education faces similar
challenges to formal education. Hoppers (2006) describes two perspectives on non-formal education whereby the first perspective sees non-formal as adaptive like formal education. Non-formal education reproduces existing power structures and fails to stimulate social mobility. On the other hand, non-formal education can be seen as a means for social change. However, especially in Africa, the empowering potential of non-formal education is not widely spread. One reason for this could be that this function of education does not fit development strategies of donors (Hoppers, 2006; Indabawa and Mpofu (2006)) mention that the empowering aspect of non-formal education in Africa might be hindered by colonial and neo-colonial experiences inherited by leaders and policy makers themselves.

2.4. Making non-formal education work

Following previous international research, in order to be effective, non-formal education programs should meet certain standards. The content of non-formal education programs should fit the needs of the learners, while integrating issues covering the whole life-world and concerning cross-cutting issues (Nampona, 2010; Reinhold, 1993; Waniha, 2008). While keeping in mind the needs of the individual, the content should also connect to work life and the wider real world (Van der Kamp and Pot, 1998; Waniha, 2008). Some aspects often named relevant for the African context are literacy, numeracy and vocational skills plus models of life skills (Kingsbury, 2004; Minnis, 2006; Nampona, 2010; Sen, 2001; World Education Forum, 2000). Oxenham et al. (2002) found that programs teaching livelihood skills before literacy enable the participants to see relevance for their everyday livelihood. Guidance and counselling is essential on educational, mental, physical and career issues (Conen and Rutten, 2003; Waniha, 2008).

The learning environment should allow possibilities to practice what is learnt (Den Boer, 1995; Indabawa and Mpofu, 2006). Workplace learning and practicing income generating activities can be part of this (Hoppers and Komba, 1995; Indabawa and Mpofu, 2006). The teacher should act as a coach giving systematic feedback and picking teaching methods that fit the learners, stimulating the learner’s responsibility (Indabawa and Mpofu, 2006; Van der Kamp and Pot, 1999). Structured monitoring however is vital to prevent absenteeism and dropping out. Intensive intake, exit and follow up counselling are recommended (Nampona, 2010; Van der Kamp and Pot, 1999). Assessment should be continuous (Indabawa and Mpofu, 2006). Use of mother tongue is especially preferable in basic levels of education (World Education Forum, 2000).

The organization of non-formal education should keep in mind a flexible schedule adapted to the needs of participants, for example keeping in mind seasonal related work (Indabawa and Mpofu, 2006). Facilities as well as facilitators should be close to the community (Reinhold, 1993). Costs to participate should be as low as possible (Indabawa and Mpofu, 2006). In line with this is shared ownership: in Malawi it was found that government ownership contributed to the effectiveness of non-formal education, especially since existing structures of monitoring were used (Nampona, 2010). Indabawa and Mpofu (2006) underline that the target group, government agencies, civil society, NGOs and organized youth and adult groups should be involved in the planning of a program in order to be empowering. Not only the organization, also the wide spectrum of demands of participants after completing the program requires a broad multi-disciplinary approach (Nampona, 2010).

3. Non-formal education in Uganda

The above features, although emerging from different contexts, give direction for the study of non-formal vocational education in Uganda. In this section, perceptions of participants of two cases of non-formal vocational education in Uganda will be presented.

3.1. Setting the context

Uganda offers an interesting context to study the potential of alternative types of education, as the country is characterized by high intake, but low completion rates in formal primary education. Since the introduction of the Universal Primary Education program (UPE) in 1996, enrolment rates have climbed up to a striking 97% in 2009 (Openjuru, 2010; World Bank, n.d.). As already mentioned the persistence to last grade (Primary Seven) however is as low as 32% in 2005 (World Bank, n.d.). Looking at secondary education, inclusion is low, only 23.5% of the children in Uganda had access to secondary education in 2008; of these, only few make it to the last level of secondary school (Senior four and/or Six) (MoES, 2008). Factors causing early school leaving mentioned by the government are: lack of interest, pregnancy, marriage, lack of school fees, work, family responsibilities, disobedience and suspension (MoES, 2008). Lack of school fees might be considered remarkable since primary education in Uganda is officially free, other expenses however, like school uniforms, exercise books and pens make it hard for people in rural areas to meet school expenses for their children (Ngabirano, 2010; Openjuru, 2010; Zuze and Leibrandt, 2011).

Kanyandago (2010) warns that the focus on school fees distracts from the real problem of early school leaving; the barely relevant curriculum of formal education. Pupils in Uganda describe their school experiences to be ‘uninteresting and boring’ and other stakeholders like government and CSO officials describe the curriculum to be ‘overloaded, overlapping and in some cases not relevant’ (Alubisia, 2005, p. 65). In this context, Kanyandago (2010) emphasizes the need of endogenization and community involvement for the improvement of education in Uganda. Other quality issues are related to the difficulties of schools to cope with high increases in enrolment after the introduction of the UPE (Ngabirano, 2010). Despite the recognition of poor quality and relevance of formal education, the mobility in the formal education system from Primary to University education seems to be idealized in Uganda and vocational education is considered inferior (Zeelen et al., 2010). In line with this, Openjuru (2010) emphasizes that the problematic nature of early school leaving is caused by lack of attention to vocational and employable skills within the curriculum of primary and secondary education, and the negative image of vocational schools as an appealing alternative.

Besides the formal education system, Uganda has a broad practice of non-formal education programs targeting awareness raising, delivery of several practical and life skills, psychosocial development, alternative primary education and integration at mainstream education and capacity building (Blaak, 2010). Since this article offers limited space; it will focus on non-formal vocational skills training, since this type is stressed promising for early school leavers in the literature described above. After introducing the method and the two cases shortly, experiences of participants will be organized around the themes: early school leaving, practice of non-formal vocational skills training, and impact.

3.2. Method

After a general exploration of non-formal education in Uganda and several orientation visits, two non-formal vocational education programs were chosen as cases to illustrate the contribution of non-formal education to the quality of life of early school leavers.

---

1. The research is conducted as part of the Early School Leaving in Africa project wherein universities from Uganda, Tanzania and the Netherlands cooperate to combat social exclusion of early school leavers in Africa.
The two non-formal vocational education programs were selected based on a nonprobability sampling method known as purposive sampling (Battaglia, 2008). Both programs targeted out-of-school youth and used a non-formal education approach. Criteria set to represent the population of non-formal vocational education in Uganda, on which both cases differ, are: rural or urban setting, content, duration, and fees structures.

In 2009, data were collected at both cases through document analysis, overt non-participatory observations and field notes and 17 in-depth quasi-structured interviews with participants, former participants and practitioners. These in-depth interviews were aiming at gaining insight in the perceptions of early school leavers on effective features of non-formal vocational education and its impact. This information was analysed using Atlas Ti and presented to and validated with stakeholders during a feedback meeting in June 2009.

3.3. Introduction of the cases

The two cases reflect different approaches in delivering vocational skills training to those excluded from the formal school system; an overview of the main differences in characteristics is given in Table 1. Besides these characteristics, differences exist in the knowledge and skills offered at both cases. At program I all participants are taught handicrafts, basics in English language, householding, public health, business calculations, agriculture, music, dance and drama, religion and Luganda. In the second year participants have six months of field work and specialize in either catering or tailoring. The last half year participants are taught extra business skills while they are working in a project simulating a small business. At program II participants choose to follow a course in either hairdressing, carpentry, tailoring, catering, plumbing, motorbike mechanics, electronics or welding. After this course participants do industrial training. Besides skills training, opportunities are offered to acquire literacy or life skills through different guidance and counseling programs. Moreover, participants practice music, dance and drama and sports which they use to reach out to communities to raise awareness.

3.4. Early school leaving in Uganda

I grew up with my father, my father died when I was in primary 3. We have a sister who stays in Masaka; she decided to take care of some sisters and brother … She paid for my school fees from p3 to p7. Then after she was sent away from work and she never had any money to support me to secondary. There was a madam who was called Katharina, who approached my sister … and asked her how that your sister never goes to school, she directed her to this school and that was the time that I was brought here in "Name program".

- Participant F Program I-

All participants interviewed had to leave formal school early, either at primary or at secondary school level, which all of them described as a negative event in life causing their life to be challenging. Early school leaving affected their initial plans of becoming a nurse, practitioner or doctor and above all to complete secondary school. Participants described their background as problematic, characterized by family problems like orphanhood, illness, or unsupportive step-parents. Practitioners add problems like illiteracy, sexual abuse, parental attitudes, street life and early pregnancies. Because a problematic background in many cases led to financial deprivation, participants explained they did not have money for school fees. These factors are similar to findings from previous research into early school leaving (see for example Hunt, 2008; Lewin and Akyeampong, 2009; Zeelen et al., 2010). After leaving school, the youth were engaged in housework, sports, and little jobs like street vending, while some participants were already involved in other learning activities. Friends, relatives, community members and priests pointed to the non-formal education programs as an alternative. Participants explain they decided to join since this was an interesting and affordable option to learn, while the alternatives were being idle or becoming a house help of a housewife.

3.5. The practice of non-formal vocational skills training

Approximately 20 girls dressed in uniforms or parts of uniforms are seated in the tailoring class. Thread and fabrics are scattered around the classroom filling tables and parts of the floor. Half of the girls practice their tailoring skills, making skirts with zippers using some left over fabrics and Singer sewing machines which are operated by foot. Other girls are busy working on their embroidery works of a coloured flower. The class is filled with joyful sounds of girls chatting and laughing. In the meanwhile the tailoring teacher walks around the classroom and instructs girls on their work. Other girls start ironing fabric. More laughing is evoked by the teacher making jokes, a girl who discovered how to make music with her machine and two girls putting chalk on each other’s face. When the bell rings girls start cleaning, detach the machines, store the machines and leave the classroom.

- From observations 16th of April 2009 Program I-

Both non-formal programs seem to create an attractive learning environment, implementing adaptive teaching methods as mentioned in the literature above (see for example Waniha, 2008; Nampota, 2010; Indahawa and Mpofu, 2006). Practitioners of both cases explain that the adaptive features of non-formal education are vital in teaching the heterogeneous group of early school leavers. In selecting their teaching methods all practitioners explained that they adjust to the participants in a particular class choosing different instruction languages, practical-theory ratio, and examination.

Considering the instruction language, which is found to be challenging in other programs as well, most practitioners explained that they adapt the language according to the pupils, which in some cases is hard because of the variety of local languages in Uganda. Whereas English is the official language in Uganda, one of the practitioners of Program I somehow force the participants to speak English, leading to reluctance of the latter. Although she stresses the importance of English for writing official

Table 1
Case characteristics matrix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Size (approx. student nr. in total, per year)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Fee structure per term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program I</td>
<td>15–20 years</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>40–65K. UGX*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program II</td>
<td>12–24 years</td>
<td>3/6 months</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>Boys &amp; girls</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Free</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Approximately 14–23 Euros.
documents, looking at a test in English the same practitioner used, the difficulties participants have using English are illustrated, as questions were not understood and answers were not appropriate though surprisingly properly formulated.

Another challenge is balancing theory and practice, in this balance several aspects are at stake. Besides the differences in participants’ capability to grasp theoretical concepts, the struggle to deliver theory also reflects an inherent urge to include theory. This fits in the wider discussion and trend to formalize non-formal education (see Hoppers, 2006), a development appreciated by one of the participants of Program II as he considers non-formal education as a stepping stone to formal education. On the other hand, practical exercise is one of the aspects of the non-formal education programs praised by most participants. While both cases intend to use practical exercise, it remains challenging to implement practical exercise due to lack of materials. Other methods used are the grouping of weak and stronger students or songs to raise attention. In program II, where some of the participants are street youth, a practitioner explains that these youth are lacking concentration and he is struggling to keep them in class.

"Name program* let you choose the method you want to use... First, I write on a flipchart, I write on the wall. They have their own books they can write. I go through them, then I know this one can’t write, this one can’t read. And when we are going through them in English this one can’t understand this, ah at least this one can understand. But at least put them on the same level is better, if at least two among the ten, if the two know the theory I can’t go in to, big theory, because I isolate most of them, so I try to balance.

- Practitioner B Program II-

While practitioners have to cope with these challenges of lacking facilities and a heterogeneous group of participants on a day-to-day basis, generally participants appreciate the ways practitioners manage to do this. Fieldtrips organised at both cases to expose the participants to different workplaces and materials are highly appreciated by the participants. Also the fact that Program I invites practitioners from outside to teach skills is appreciated. Besides the educational support, personal support is identified as a valuable feature of a practitioner; practitioners in both cases were described with words such as ‘caring’ and demonstrating ‘respect’ for the participants. Conflicting remarks were made as well, in Program I one of the practitioners is described as abusive; confronting participants with their background in Program II one of the participants mentioned some practitioners are absent or show up late for class.

In both cases, practitioners explain that besides practical skills, they also teach the participants life skills like hygiene and decision-making skills to protect them from exploitation. This is related to the challenging backgrounds of early school leavers. In Program I, participants explicitly mentioned that guidance and counselling was not sufficient as it is limited to informal personal support by practitioners. In program II guidance and counselling is a structural component of the program, where practitioners and social workers use several methods like Street Smart for sexually abused youth and peer education on topics like drug and alcohol use. The focus on life skills in program II can be explained by the history of the training centre which evolved from a psychosocial support program and practical skills training is considered a means towards psychosocial empowerment. Participants of program II mentioned that they appreciate the guidance and counselling and more than participants of Program I learning outcomes related to life skills like self-esteem, assertiveness, self-expression but also sports and drama.

Then I also acquired some, I also be in my talent of being in drama. It was before I came here in UYDEL, I was shy, I could fear to speak in the public, or to act, anything, even to think. But now, I shine more. Yeah but before I came here, it was difficult for me to speak, even to call a person who is in that kitchen, I could fear to speak out. But now I can act as drunkard, I can act as policeman, any character you give me, I could act.

-Participant D Program II-

Concerning practical skills, participants are generally pleased with learning the vocational skill of their choice. They do however have suggestions on skills that could be integrated, in program I these are computer skills, card-making skills, hairdressing and sweater-making. Besides this one of the participants mentioned more effort could be put into agriculture. Remarkably however, several participants of program I complained about the high amount of manual labour went into maintaining the gardens. A former participant, however, mentioned that this prepares you to grow your own food which she highly appreciated. At program II participants mentioned the courses were too short, basic and incomplete. Suggestions were made to integrate a Wildlife club, extra games and sports and other skills like nursery school teaching, computer lessons, construction work and motor vehicle mechanics.

That one, like nursery teaching can help. Nursery teaching is missing here, and it can help students. ... Computer lessons, those ones they can help us. For now when you want a nice job, you have to know how to use a computer. And when it comes to nursery teaching, I can go for nursery teaching and when I finish I can join any school even my certificate.

- Participant E Program II-

As mentioned in the theoretical exploration of non-formal vocational education, it becomes clear that non-formal education is often stigmatized in comparison to formal education. This is also reflected in both cases as participants are especially bullied by secondary school students. Participants do however feel they are better off then those who did not join non-formal education.

There are so many haters, like some of my friends who are drop outs as well, but when you tell them, when you try to tell them to come, to join us here in the program they don’t. They keep saying: ‘This is for people who didn’t study, who are illiterate’. But later when they see that you have skills, that are better than them, they start demoralizing you saying bad things about you, yeah.

- Participant E Program II-

3.6. The impact of non-formal education

So, all these years I have been working as a house girl, yet was getting few money. I couldn’t go back to school, but that programme of non-formal education has helped me a lot. I now have hope; I’m expecting a good future because I’m in catering class. I know how to do many things, like making cake, I’ve been to town, how to communicate with people or hotel management. I know how to do many things; I now have hope for my future. I can do things, yet I couldn’t do anything. Even when I finished p7 I couldn’t do anything. But now I have hope for the future, because of that programme.

- Participant G Program II (feedback meeting) -
Although the instrument of quasi-structured in-depth interviews cannot measure the quantifiable impact of the program in terms of percentages and extent of success, the interviews do give an impression of the perceived impact at an individual level. Not surprisingly, participants and practitioners are optimistic about the impact of the program and are generally happy with the chance to learn again after leaving formal education early.

Perceived relevance stems from learning income-generating skills, and also life skills enabling them to live responsible and healthy lives and make decisions in their relational sphere. Due to the short, basic, practical skills training, participants of program II see it more as a platform to build further upon and life skills are appreciated to a greater extent. Participants of Program I appreciate the skills they learn because of their income-generating potential. Moreover, practitioners emphasize that besides the income-generating skills, life skills will help participants to stay away from exploitation and risky behaviour.

Before looking at the impact after finishing non-formal vocational education programs, it is vital to look at the diligence of participants during the program. Practitioners described differences between participants associated with literacy, educational background and attitude. At program I, one of the practitioners expresses negative valuation of the participants’ intellectual capabilities. Motivation and attitude is affected by the perception of participants and the reasons they joined. Perhaps they see it as a second-best alternative and others have problems adjusting to the classroom-setting as they used to live on the streets. Personal progress is not only described in terms of skills acquired but also in appearance and proper hygiene. As touched upon before, examination is used adaptively by practitioner B of Program II while practitioner A of program I adheres to a theoretical approach in English. In both cases internal certificates are provided to the participants, as evidence of skills acquired for the labour market.

Okay some progress, because some coming they have bad behaviour, they have very dirty language. But at the end of the day when do counselling when the social workers provide the counselling and within the class we put in some counselling. With six months you can see when a person is completely changed, transformed.

- Practitioner A Program II-

Despite the ambitions of the early school leavers diminish after leaving school, through participation in the two programs and the learning environment herein; their ambitions seem to be restored, together with some concrete ideas of how to achieve them. Participants described future plans of finding a job within or outside the trade learnt or continue their education either at secondary school, university, vocational schools or in a workplace. Others are planning to start up their own business: rearing animals, starting a plumbing workshop or selling snacks. Related to these economic outcomes, participants expect to be able to financially support relatives, construct a house or own a car. A social outcome mentioned was to share skills with the community. I can also go to the village, as we got agriculture. I can also go to the village and educate people in the village how to dig; I can share my experience with other people.

- Participant A Program I-

While participants have optimistic ideas about their future plans and the contribution of the programs, their strategies are not always very clear. One thing that is ever clear, however, was the need for money, either for capital to start a business or to pay school fees to continue education. Participants expect to get this financial support from relatives, while others have more pro-active ideas on how to earn money, looking for markets or jobs to save up some capital. Participants stress they cannot be independent right after finishing the program and this underlines the importance of family and program support after the program. In both programs, practitioners try to support participants by looking for jobs or sponsors for further education. In the case of program II, through follow up, participants receive continuous encouragement. Program II in some cases also reconnects participants with their relatives to enable reintegration and stimulates family support in general.

Practitioners confirm the participants’ optimistic expectations by explaining that a great portion of participants are able to be self-reliant after finishing the program. Employers and other outsiders are also positive about the participants according to them. Income-generating activities are similar for both cases as those who have jobs work in workshops, supermarkets, or hotels. Other participants continued their education and others started their own business, workshop or small take-away. Practitioner A in program II gives a rough estimation of 60% successful participants in her trade of catering. Considering the increasing emphasis on the stimulation of job-creation among young people in Uganda, practitioner B of program II recommends participants first gain experience under a boss, before starting their own business. Former participants of program I confirm to be making a living, however one of them explains that she will still be dependent on her husband.

Okay, those I know about, at least a percentage, although we passed out now a 108 since 2007, but at least a percentage of 60 percent is successful. Because you find them in the class, you find them in the streets. You go to Capital Shoppers, you find them there in the teller machines, they are the ones who are receiving the people’s money. You go to Uchumi; you find them where when they are the supermarket attendants. At least they are successful and happy. Because, also that involves customer care, front office management.

- Practitioner A Program II-

Although the 60% mentioned by the practitioner of program II is a rough estimate in her own trade of catering, it does show that a substantial group of participants does not manage to find employment. In line with this, both practitioners of program I and II, participants and former participants of both cases identify several challenges early school leavers have to cope with after finishing the non-formal education program. In program I these are young age, lacking capital, materials and land, seasonal dependence, abilities to cope with changes, hard work, pregnancy and lack of ability to prepare food. Moreover a practitioner mentioned that some girls are mistreated and underpaid. This was confirmed by one of the former participants who had undergone several underpaid jobs before she found decent pay in a supermarket. Moreover a practitioner mentioned that some girls are mistreated and underpaid. This was confirmed by one of the former participants who had undergone several underpaid jobs before she found decent pay in a supermarket. Another former participant stressed that there is no market for the skills she learnt in the program. In program II again it was mentioned that the skills taught are basic and success depends on advancement, hard work and capital.

Now from the *name Program I* I went direct to the *name* Hotel, but we were staying at the bosses place, in his residence. I didn’t find the job bad, the job was good, but the work at his home was tiresome. . . . They were giving me a salary of fifty thousand2. I decided to change . . . I went to work

2 Around 18 Euros.
at "name" parish, which is a bit in the village and life there was not good. First of all, we were working for priests, but I was the only one in the parish working for them. And the work was so hectic, it was too much work. … They were giving me a salary of forty thousand which was not worthy for my work, for the work done. So I decided to work for only one month and I changed. I came here to this "name" supermarket, they are my relatives. … And they give us a salary of eighty thousand. So in general this job has given me some freedom, I'm free at work, at heart so I'm having a good live now.

- Former participant B Program 1-

3.7. Recapitulation

Evaluating the impact of non-formal vocational skills education, data presented above might not be convincing in numbers, but it does give insight in the impact at an individual level. Non-formal education is a delicate venture, especially for the target group of early school leavers. Moreover, the actual income-generating activities participants are involved in after finishing the program might not be of a high standard. However, the stories of the early school leavers illustrate that the Ugandan formal education seems to fail to include vulnerable youth coping with a problematic background characterized by family problems and poverty. The two cases of non-formal vocational skills training illustrate programs like this can be an alternative through low fees, adaptive teaching methods and appealing content.

The target group of early school leavers is very heterogeneous leading to day-to-day challenges for practitioners concerning practical exercise vs. theory, language of instruction, and lack of proper facilities. Participants mentioned that they miss certain skills and also that they have to cope with negatively valued manual labour in the program. Moreover, despite the perceived relevance of the program by participants and practitioners, participants do need to cope with several challenges after finishing the program. Overall however, the future plans once reduced by early school leaving seem to be restored and redirected through participation in the non-formal vocational education program. Early school leavers are eager to learn and appreciate learning practical skills which could support them in earning an income. As economic independence seems to be the main concern of participants and practitioners, the concept of practical empowerment will be reflected upon in the conclusion.

4. Conclusion and discussion

From the theoretical considerations a broad interpretation of development emerges, which points to desirable outcomes of education beyond human capital. While education is already recognized as an important means to development, current focus of development programs on formal education does not seem to have the desired results, neither quantitative nor qualitative. Especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, great numbers of people are excluded from quality education. Uganda herein is no exception, although enrolment rates are strikingly high, completion rates remain low as many leave school before completing it. While the formal education system faces the enormous challenge to improve its quality to enhance completion rates, non-formal education offers an alternative for those currently excluded from formal education. Despite the present negative image of non-formal education in Uganda, the two cases described in this article illustrate the great potential of non-formal education to contribute to early school leavers' quality of life.

Non-formal education manages to reach out to educationally marginalized people through low school fees, adaptive teaching methods and appealing contents. Besides this, through its adaptive organization, non-formal education seems to meet quality standards needed to contribute to development. However, the two cases also direct to weaknesses in implementation of non-formal education, like lack of facilities for practical exercise and no optimal fit between content and market requirements. Also multi-disciplinary aspects like guidance and counselling are not always structurally implemented. Overall, participants and practitioners describe that participation in non-formal vocational education can prepare someone to become financially independent, and through this stand strong against exploitation and being able to support relatives or the community. However, whether non-formal education currently contributes to outcomes beyond human capital is questionable. Where empowerment, human capability and self-reliance came out of the theoretical exploration as potential outcomes of education, the reality of non-formal vocational education in Uganda seems to reflect a narrower outcome: self-reliance through economic independence. It should be stated however, that even in this narrow perspective, participants do not feel completely equipped by the program to become self-reliant; personal strategies are not always clear and conditions like capital or job opportunities are not always within reach.

These and other ideas and experiences of participants and practitioners of both cases incite to think that non-formal education programs and perhaps education in general, in the development context should contribute to a more practical idea of empowerment. This does not imply that a program should focus solely on vocational and marketable skills. Like the participants already mention, guidance and counselling and acquiring life skills are essential as well. Besides this, more guidance on career strategies might prepare participants better to truly achieve successful careers enabling social mobility. The role of non-formal education could be interpreted as a means to offer practical empowerment. Practical empowerment would include acquiring marketable skills and business skills, but also decision-making skills, knowledge to make informed decisions, social skills to manage social support, awareness of one's position and rights in society but also strong self-esteem and assertiveness.

In light of empowerment, non-formal education should not be dominated by a struggle to combat oppressive structures and making people aware of greater post-colonial influences with the risk of frustration and passivity. Obviously, it would not be justified to completely ignore these structures, but in order to contribute to personal quality of life one needs to be equipped with skills, knowledge and attitudes directly enabling him or her to take control over his or her life. Non-formal education seems to have potential to equip people with these knowledge, skills and attitudes. In order to do so non-formal education should combine practical marketable skills with life skills, while providing guidance and counselling to make people aware of themselves and their potential to contribute to their society and economy, while reaching their dreams. This kind of empowerment is manifested through individual or collective agency in which a group or the individual is able, at their own volition, to take action on the issues that are important to them. Programs hereupon should not lose touch with the wider context; national and global economic, social and political structures.

The point needs to be made however, that all education ideally offers skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant for an individual's and a nation's development. The distinction between formal and

---

3 Around 14 Euros.
4 Around 28 Euros.
non-formal education would not exist in an ideal world, a world where all education is designed adaptively meeting individual learning needs. Early school leaving would not exist and people pursue either academic, vocational or mixed tracks based on their personal interests, intellectual abilities and motivation, instead of social and economic backgrounds. Obviously, this ideal situation is still far out of reach and current development programs unjustly invest in a system of primary education which is not inclusive and fails to equip pupils with relevant skills. Therefore, at this moment, non-formal education could be seen as a first aid kit for early school leavers in Uganda and other Sub-Saharan African countries by supporting them in achieving practical empowerment.

That is not to say that non-formal (vocational) education should not be considered a serious and relevant option for all Ugandans, thus not necessarily an alternative for those who did not make it in the formal system exclusively. Adequate assessment and certification could contribute to an uplifting of the image and recognition of abilities of participants of non-formal education programs. This way, connectivity with the formal education system could be enhanced as well. Although the connection between formal and non-formal education should be strengthened to enhance social mobility, program developers should be cautious of potential negative effects of maturation of non-formal education, as mentioned by Hoppers (2006).

It should be acknowledged that this article is mainly based on practices of two cases of non-formal vocational education in one single country and limited theoretical considerations. Other practices might show different pictures and point to other challenges in the implementation and outcomes of non-formal education programs. Also, the type of non-formal education that is presented as a means to achieve practical empowerment in the conclusion is a holistic type of education covering many types of non-formal education, like raising awareness or literacy programs together with vocational skills training (Oxenham et al., 2002). Due to budgetary or time limitations it might be necessary to focus on one or more priorities for certain target groups. Another note that should be made is the fact that education is only one aspect of preparing someone for life, someone’s behaviour and decisions are also influenced by one’s personality, talents, circumstances and opportunities. Herein also informal learning experiences play an important role.

Following Sen (2001), other freedoms than purely personal abilities that could be directly targeted by education programs, should not be lost out of sight: political freedom, security and transparency are examples of enabling conditions that cannot be influenced directly by education. Through practical empowerment however, people might be empowered to influence policy makers, thereby influencing higher levels of social change (Sen, 2001). While keeping in mind this aspect of social change, non-formal education programs should not lose focus on direct local needs of participants. On a similar note, Nordveit (2010) stresses the need for a holistic review and implementation of development strategies, keeping in mind the needs of local communities. He warns that the MDGs compartmentalize development, while individual aspects like education should constantly be questioned and linked to other aspects if necessary. This underlines the need of a holistic approach to non-formal education keeping in mind all areas of life, while trying to connect and support the need for structures outside the reach of the education program.

References


Den Boer, P.R., 1995. Scholing van Laagopgeleide Volwassenen. GION, Groningen.


Mazza, G., n.d. The Interaction Between Formal and Non-Formal Education—The Objective of Making the Employability of Young People. Available athttp://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Source/Resources/Forum21/Issue_No10/110/Interaction_FE_NE_n.pdf#exml=html+http://www.search.coe.int/texis/search/pdfxx?query=Gabriele+Mazza+non+formal+education&pqf=Internet_DBU+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+NOT+N...


