

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?

Education and work aspirations among the Ugandan youth

Aziz Atamanov, Frédéric Cochinard, John Ilukor, Audrey Kemigisha, Andrew Mupere, and Giulia Ponzini



Audrey Kemigisha and Andrew Mupere are with Uganda Bureau of Statistics and the remaining authors are with the World Bank. The corresponding author is Aziz Atamanov: aatamanov@worldbank.org.

The authors are thankful to Uganda Bureau of Statistics for continuous collaboration.

We also appreciate guidance and support from Keith E. Hansen, Rosemary Mukami Kariuki, Eva Liselotte Lescauwaet, Franklin Mutahakana, and Pierella Paci.

© [2024] International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank

1818 H Street NW

Washington DC 20433

Telephone: 202-473-1000

Internet: www.worldbank.org

This work is a product of the staff of The World Bank with external contributions. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this work do not necessarily reflect the views of The World Bank, its Board of Executive Directors, or the governments they represent.

The World Bank does not guarantee the accuracy, completeness, or currency of the data included in this work and does not assume responsibility for any errors, omissions, or discrepancies in the information, or liability with respect to the use of or failure to use the information, methods, processes, or conclusions set forth. The boundaries, colors, denominations, and other information shown on any map in this work do not imply any judgment on the part of The World Bank concerning the legal status of any territory or the endorsement or acceptance of such boundaries.

Nothing herein shall constitute or be construed or considered to be a limitation upon or waiver of the privileges and immunities of The World Bank, all of which are specifically reserved.

Rights and Permissions

The material in this work is subject to copyright. Because The World Bank encourages dissemination of its knowledge, this work may be reproduced, in whole or in part, for noncommercial purposes as long as full attribution to this work is given.

Any queries on rights and licenses, including subsidiary rights, should be addressed to World Bank Publications, The World Bank, 1818 H Street NW, Washington, DC 20433, USA; fax: 202-522-2625; e-mail: pubrights@worldbank.org.

Cover photo: © Rachel Mabala

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- High education and career aspirations are usually associated with higher outcomes under the right conditions and efforts. Most of the Ugandan youth aspire to achieve upper secondary or tertiary education and get high-skilled and well-paid dream jobs when they reach 30 years old.
- Despite high educational aspirations, currently, only a small share of adults in the country achieves upper secondary and tertiary education. The youth reported different constraints, with lack of money being one of the key reasons why young people dropped out of school and failed to achieve aspirational education.
- The distribution of constraints is very unequal, with the poorest youth facing more monetary constraints than the rich. Marriage, pregnancy, and family obligations are critical constraining factors for the female youth.
- The most popular dream jobs among the youth are typically high-skilled occupations such as medical workers, technicians, and teachers, which require at least secondary education. Working on the farm is not viewed as a dream job. Growing demand for good jobs is in line with growing non-farm opportunities during the last decade, but there are still many barriers to accessing them, especially for the poorest individuals.
- Helping individuals to achieve aspirations by addressing the structural constraints and providing the tools necessary to realize their goals seems to be more important than raising the aspirational bar in Uganda. Raising aspirations for the poorest and those Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) is an exception though.
- Given the current and future predominant role of agriculture, it is essential to transform agriculture into a more attractive sector with better opportunities for the rural youth. Accelerating agricultural transformation and commercialization by facilitating the usage of modern inputs, technologies, developing food agribusiness and food value chains will be crucial. This process should be complemented with developing skills in modern agricultural production, marketing, and value addition techniques.
- Providing young people with accurate information about labor market prospects and career counseling with regular monitoring are good mechanisms to share information about labor market needs and opportunities. This can help to better align aspirations with reality and raise aspirations among aspirations-poor youth (e.g., NEET, poor).
- Affordable and widespread telecommunication services will be crucial to promote technology-based empowerment among the youth and facilitate precision or digital agriculture which relies on technologies to improve yields and make management decisions. Equipped with digital skills and access to telecommunication services, the youth will have much broader and better paid labor market opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Uganda is entering the early stage of demographic transition with a growing population and substantial changes in demographic composition. For example, the working-age population (aged 15-59) is expected to expand significantly from 25 million people in 2022 to 55 million in 2050, while the youth population aged 15-24 is projected to increase from 10 to 17 million during this period. Given that majority of the working-age population in Uganda are currently employed in agriculture or self-employment activities with low productivity, there is an urgent need to help millions of young people to find decent work (World Bank 2020).

Understanding the education and career aspirations of the youth is essential to develop effective employment policies because they can drive choices in education, employment, and job-seeking efforts (Lybbert and Wydick 2018). Aspirations are idealistic values that reflect the achievement that one hopes and desires to achieve. Some studies point out that aspiration measures may be a stronger predictor of later life achievements in comparison to other established determinants, for instance, non-cognitive skills or fathers' occupational background (see, for example, Lekfuangfu and Odermatt 2022).

It is important that not all aspirations are going to materialize though. When aspirations are aligned with what people believe can be achieved based on circumstances and efforts, aspirations turn into expectations, and successful outcomes are more likely to happen. Comparing reported aspirations and reality may signal how aspirations are aligned with beliefs on what can be achieved given circumstances and efforts. Too narrow or too large a distance between aspirations and

the reality may discourage a person to aspire significant changes in life and act accordingly (Gardiner and Goedhuys 2020, Chen and Hesketh 2021).

This brief discusses results from the survey of the youth population in Uganda using results from the Uganda High-Frequency Phone Survey (UHFPS). UHFPS has been collected by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) in collaboration with the World Bank since June 2020. The fourteenth round conducted in August/September 2023 included questions to capture education and career aspirations of the youth population aged 15-25. The survey recontacts the sample of households that had phone numbers for at least one household member or a reference individual from the Uganda National Panel Survey 2019/20 and the Uganda National Household Survey 2019/20. The youth aspiration module of round 14th included randomly selected 936 individuals between aged 15-25. The sample is split equally between female and male respondents. Fifty-six percent of the respondents are between 15 to 18 years old, 28 percent are between 19-22 and the remaining 18 percent are between 23-25 years old. The data collected is nationally representative. Similar modules were administered in four other African countries including Ethiopia, Malawi, and Nigeria during COVID-19 (Costa, Contreras & Palacios-Lopez 2022). Where possible, selected results for Uganda will be compared to these countries.

The brief is organized as follows. We start by discussing the current education and activity status of youth. Then, we switch to a discussion of education and work aspirations. Finally, we conclude and provide some policy recommendations.

CURRENT EDUCATION AND ACTIVITY STATUS OF THE YOUTH

The majority of the youth have primary education and below. About 50 percent of the youth have some primary education and below without substantial differences between males and females. The youth in urban areas are better educated than the youth in rural areas. The youth respondents from the poorest consumption quintile have much lower education levels than those from the richest top quintile. For example, 24 percent of those from the richest quintile reported having some upper secondary education or above, while among the poorest this level barely reached six percent (Figure 1).

Only 30 percent of the youth who finished studying surpassed the maximum education level their parents achieved.

This indicator serves as a proxy for absolute intergenerational mobility. Figure 2 also shows that those youth respondents from the

richest consumption quintile have significantly higher chances to surpass their parents' maximum level of education compared to the youth from the poorest quintile (37 versus 20 percent). High absolute mobility was also observed among the youth in the Eastern region. One potential explanation can be that education level was very low among parents of respondents in the Eastern region, creating a greater scope to surpass them by their children. Another potential reason may be related to the limited economic opportunities in the region prompting parents to consider education as a vehicle to secure the future of their children.

About ten percent of Ugandan youth were not in school or working (NEET), and this share grows to almost twenty percent among the youth aged 23-25. Over half of the youth studied in September 2023, and the

Figure 1. Education level among youth by different characteristics (%)

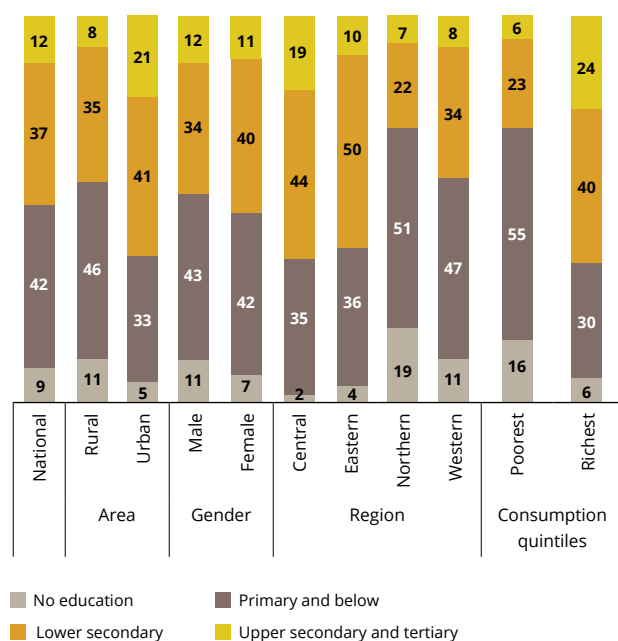
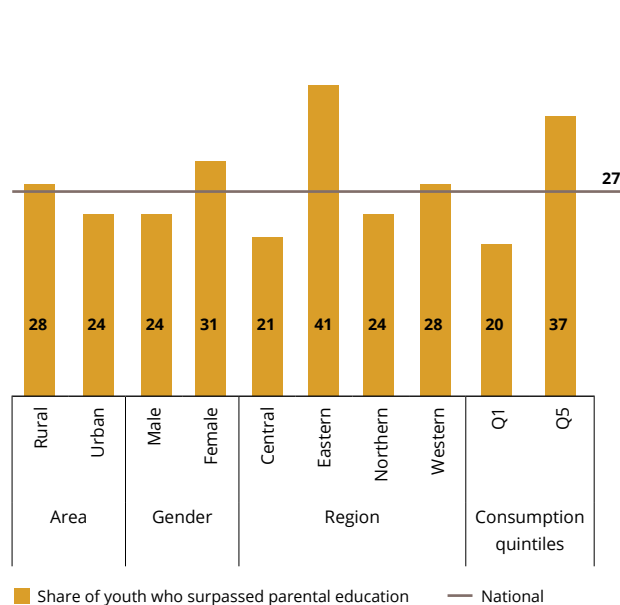


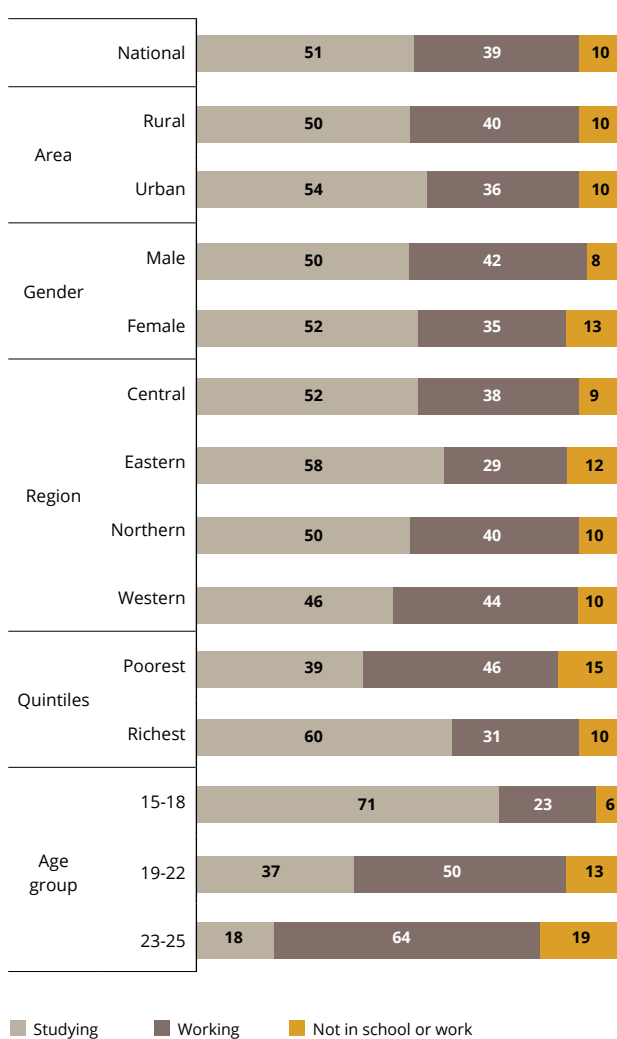
Figure 2. Share of youth who finished studying and who surpassed the highest parental education category (%)*



Notes: Quintiles are based on using consumption per adult equivalent spatially adjusted by regional poverty lines from UNPS 2019/20 and UNHS 2019/20. Quintiles are constructed by using phone survey sample. Values may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

remaining 39 percent were working (Figure 3). As expected, the share of youth working is increasing across age groups, while the share of studying youth is declining as they finish or drop out of school. The rural youth were slightly more likely to work than the urban ones (40 versus 36 percent respectively). The poorest youth were less likely to study than the richest ones: 39 versus 59 percent, respectively. The share of NEETs among those aged 23-25 (19 percent) was comparable to the one in Malawi (21 percent), slightly higher than in Nigeria (14 percent), but much lower than in Ethiopia (39 percent).

Figure 3. Activity status among youth by different characteristics (%)

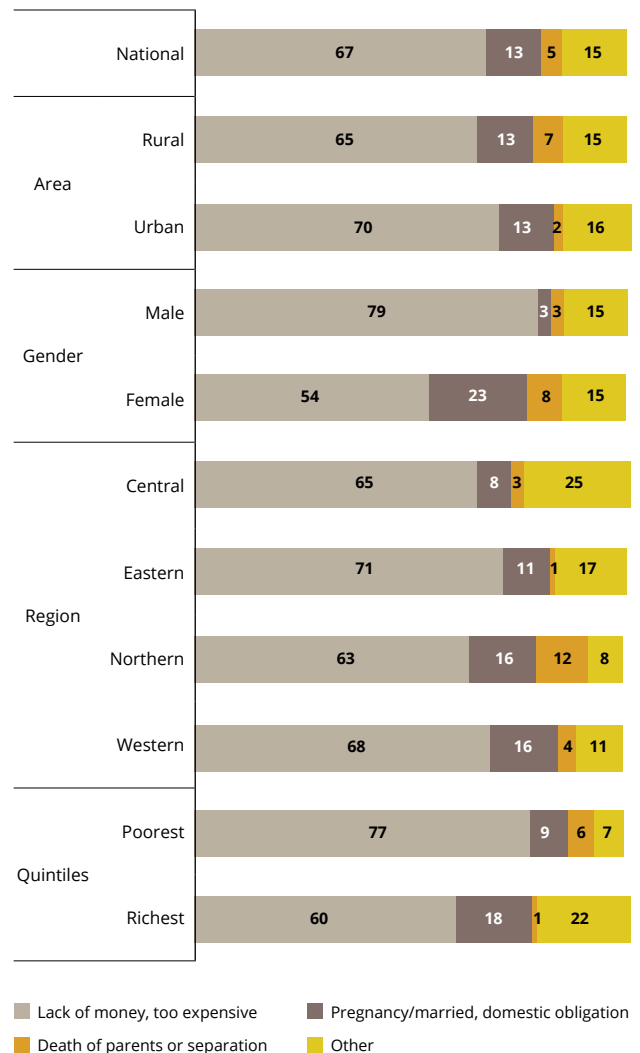


Note: Values may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

The majority of those who left school did this because of a lack of money or the overall expensiveness of school or university.

The youth respondents from the poorest quintile (78 percent) were more likely to mention this reason than the youth respondents from the richest quintile (60 percent). Every fifth female youth stopped studying because of marriage, domestic obligations, or pregnancy (Figure 4). Death of parents and separation were not negligible reasons for not studying for female respondents, respondents in rural areas and those living in the Northern region accounting for more than eight, seven, and 12 percent of all cases accordingly.

Figure 4. Main reasons for not studying among youth (%)



Note: Values may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

EDUCATION AND WORK ASPIRATIONS

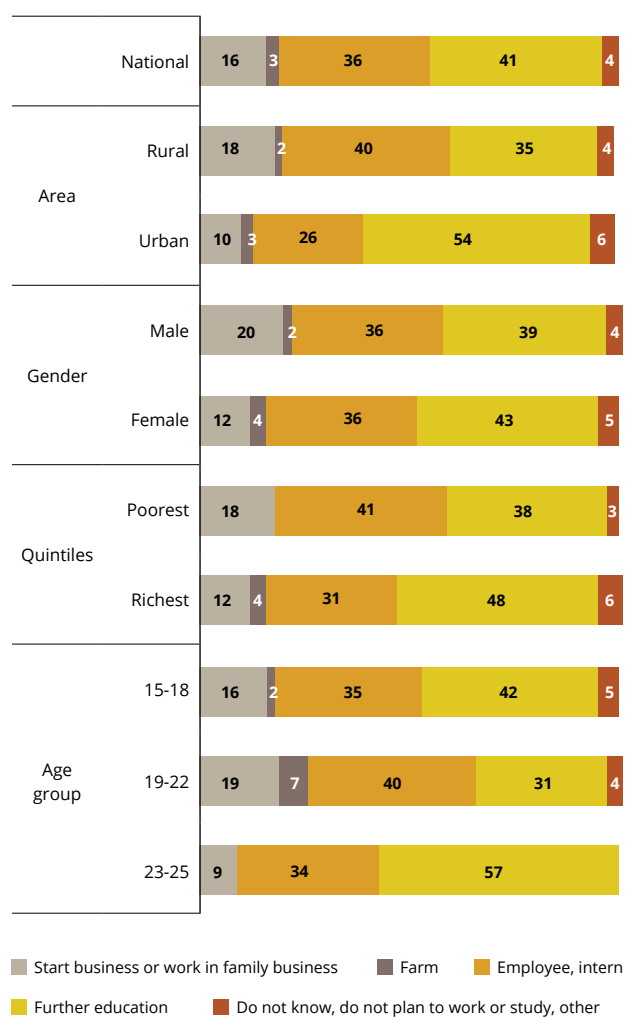
The aspirational education level is remarkably high, with more than half of the youth listing a university degree to be achieved if there were no constraints, and they could study as long as they wanted. A much higher share of youth respondents from the richest consumption quintiles wanted to achieve tertiary education than the those from the poorest quintile: 77 versus 45 percent accordingly. Such a high aspirational level may be related to the highest expected returns to tertiary education. Indeed, according to the World Bank (2023), the highest consumption returns to education are among the households where the head has a university degree. Consumption among these households was more than 95 percent higher than consumption of households with an uneducated head. However, completed secondary and completed primary education generate significant gains as well- 57 and 31 percent, respectively.

The distance between aspirational and actual education is high, with lack of money being the key constraint. Indeed, only 12 percent of youth respondents have achieved upper secondary or tertiary education so far. At the national level, only eight percent of the adult population achieved post-secondary education in 2019/20 (UBOS 2021a). This signals about significant barriers toward achieving aspirational tertiary education levels among the youth. When asked about the main constraints for achieving aspirational education, the majority mention lack of money (66 percent), followed by domestic obligation or pregnancy (10 percent), death of parents (5.5 percent), and other reasons. Female youth were significantly more likely to mention domestic obligation/ pregnancy and death of parents as the

main reasons for not reaching aspirational education compared to male youth.

Looking at the career plans of the youth attending school, most would like to continue their education or work as employees, with almost nobody planning to work on the farm. Figure 5 shows career aspirations among the youth who are currently studying. About 41 percent of them want to study further, 36 percent prefer to work as employees in private or public firms, while

Figure 5. Career aspiration after completing education for those who are still studying (%)



Note: Values may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

16 percent want to open a business or work in the existing family business. Notably, almost nobody plans to work on a farm. This contrasts with the reality where about 61 percent of Ugandans work in agriculture according to UBOS (2021b). Even though the share of employment in agriculture was declining during the last decade (World Bank 2023), non-farm opportunities are not widespread and often are not accessible to those with low levels of education or those living in depressed agricultural areas. This may constrain non-farm career aspirations, especially those who are poor.

Notable differences in career plans are also observed among the youth living in rural and urban areas. About 60 percent of the rural youth plan to work after completing education, while among the urban youth, this share was much lower – about 40 percent. This can be related to differences in labor

markets, well-being, and returns to education across rural and urban areas. Compared to other countries, 42 percent of youth aiming to study further at age 15-18 in Uganda is higher than in Ethiopia (30 percent), but lower than in Malawi (68 percent) and Nigeria (76 percent).

The most popular jobs among the youth are typically high-skilled occupations such as medical workers, technicians, and teachers and require at least secondary education.

Besides career plans, the youth respondents answered a question about dream job they want to reach by 30 years old. Figure 6 shows the distribution of dream jobs, and the most popular occupations are medical workers (27.2), technicians/engineers (15.6 percent), teachers (12.1), sales/business (7.5 percent), economists/lawyers (6.2 percent), tailors (5.4) with other occupations accounting for less than five percent including agriculture. There is a clear gender bias in selected occupations (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Distribution of dream jobs

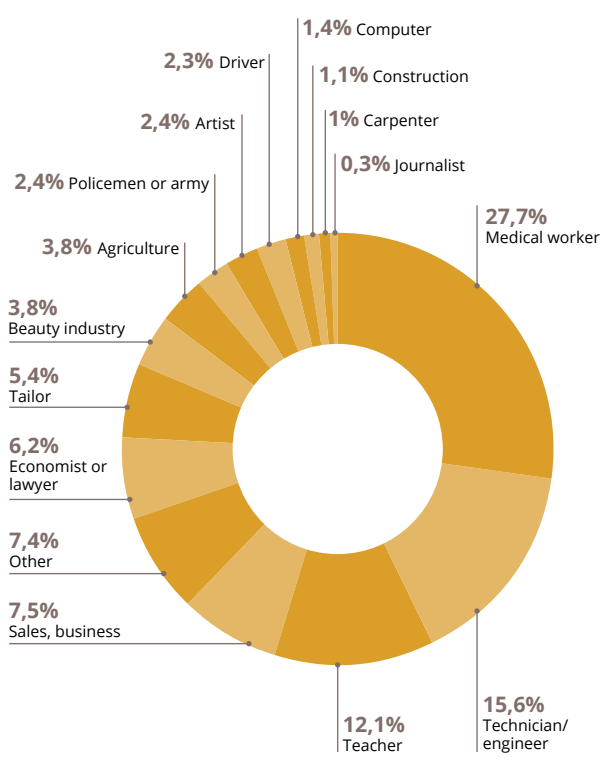
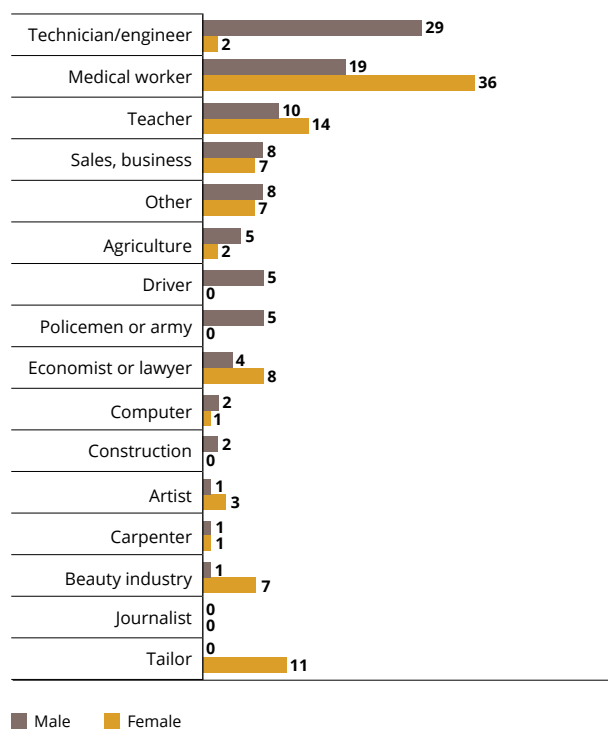


Figure 7. Distribution of dream jobs by gender

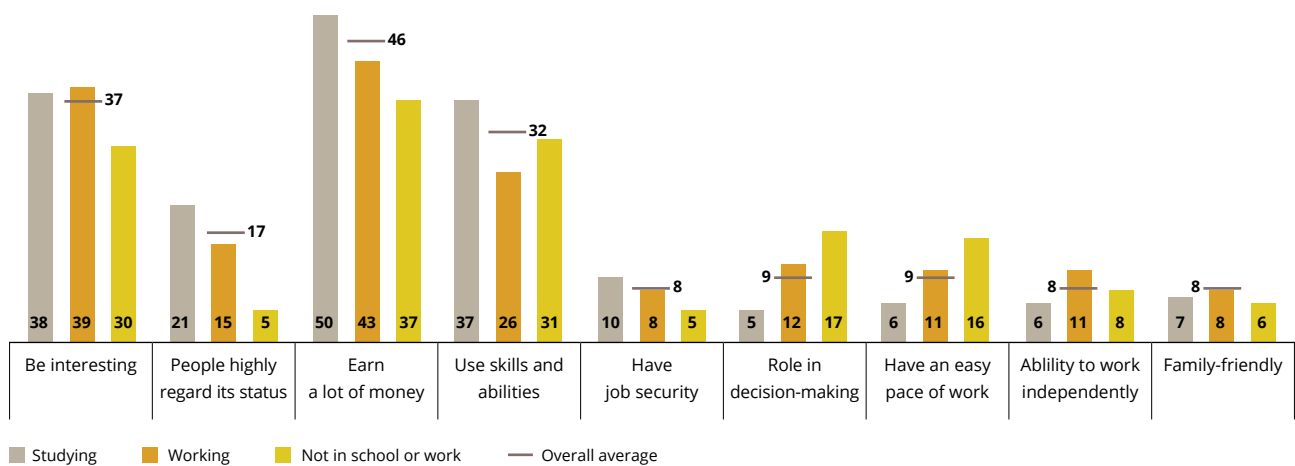


Thus, male youth are more likely than female youth to dream about being technicians or engineer (29 versus 2 percent), working in the police or army (five versus zero percent), or being a driver (five versus zero percent). In contrast, female youth are more likely to dream about working in the beauty industry, being medical workers or tailors than males. There are not large rural/urban differences with regards to dream jobs, but the rural youth are more likely to dream about working as a teacher than the urban youth (14 versus 7.4 percent accordingly) and medical workers (28.4 versus 24.2 percent accordingly). While the urban youth are slightly more likely to dream about working as a driver, police officers, technicians/engineers, and in computer industry.

“Earning a lot of money” is the most relevant feature of the dream job followed by using skills and abilities and having an interesting job. Figure 8 shows multiple responses to the question about characteristics of a dream job. About 46 percent of the youth selected “earning a lot

of money” with a much higher share among those who are currently studying. About 36 percent of respondents selected using skills and ability, while 37 percent think that being interesting is an important characteristic of a dream job. Interestingly, only 29 percent of the rural youth selected using skills and ability as an important characteristic of a dream job compared to 40 percent among the urban youth. Status of the work is important for 17 percent of the youth, but with a much smaller share among those who are not studying or working (five percent only). “Earning a lot of money” is the most important characteristic for respondents in Uganda and is comparable to Malawi (50 percent), but it is lower than in Nigeria (60 percent). While in Ethiopia, “being interesting” was more important characteristic of dream work for the youth than earning a lot of money. Having high salary/income as the top characteristic of a dream job in developing countries is not surprising given the hierarchy of needs: once financial needs are met, other interests and needs can begin to emerge (Gardiner and Goedhuys 2020).

Figure 8. Characteristics of dream jobs by activity status* (%)



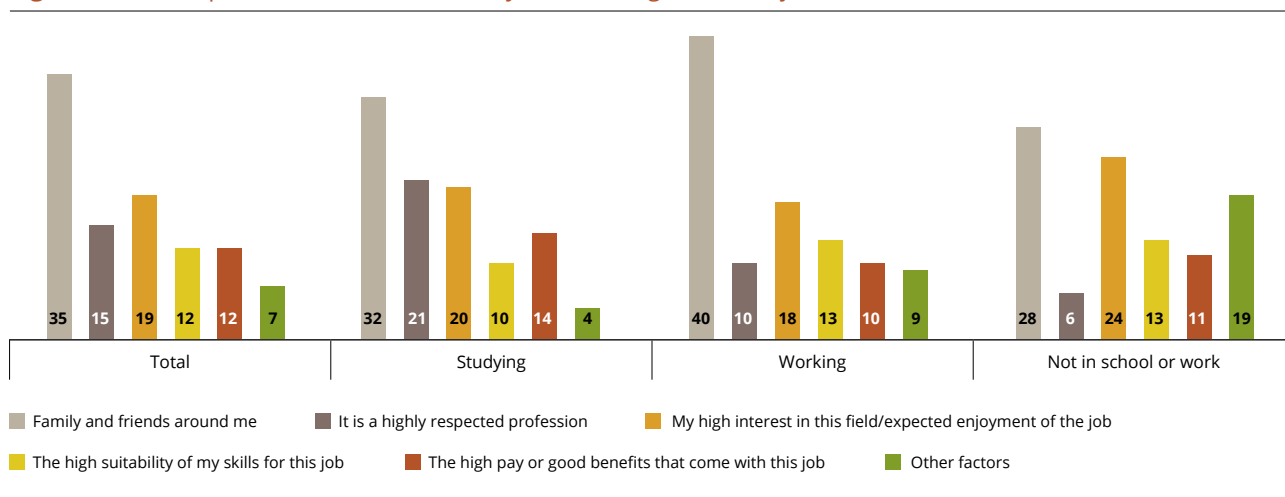
Note: Multiple answers were allowed.

Respondents reported the key factors influencing their image of a dream job.

Family and friends play the most crucial role in imagining a dream job (Figure 9). Having a respected profession/occupation is an important factor in determining the dream job

or career aspirations for those still studying. Even though not strictly comparable, family and friends played less significant role in Malawi, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. In these countries, high interest and expected enjoyment from the work were more important than in Uganda.

Figure 9. Most important factors influenced youth to imagine dream job (%)



Only one out of five currently working youth workers has a dream work.

The lowest share of workers who are doing a dream work is observed in the Eastern region (seven percent only). Despite such a low level of having a dream job, many youth respondents expect that they will have their dream job someday – 58 percent.

Those who are still studying, those from the richest quintile and those who personally know someone in the community having a dream job are more likely to think positively about achieving dream job at some point. NEET youth respondents have notably lower expectations about achieving dream job one day.

Figure 10. Share of working individuals doing dream job (%)

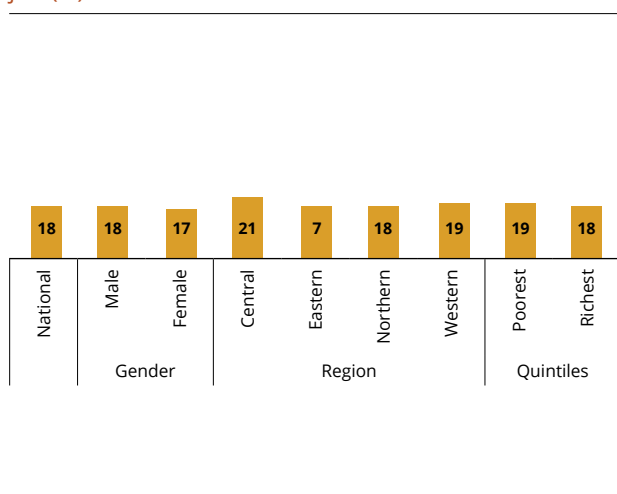
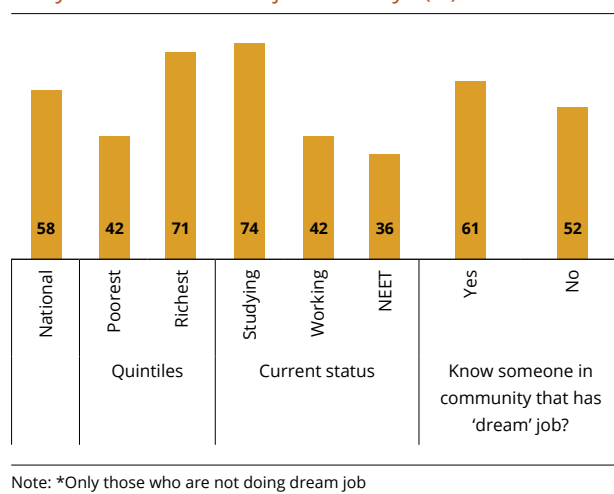


Figure 11. Share of youth who believe that they are likely to achieve dream job one day* (%)



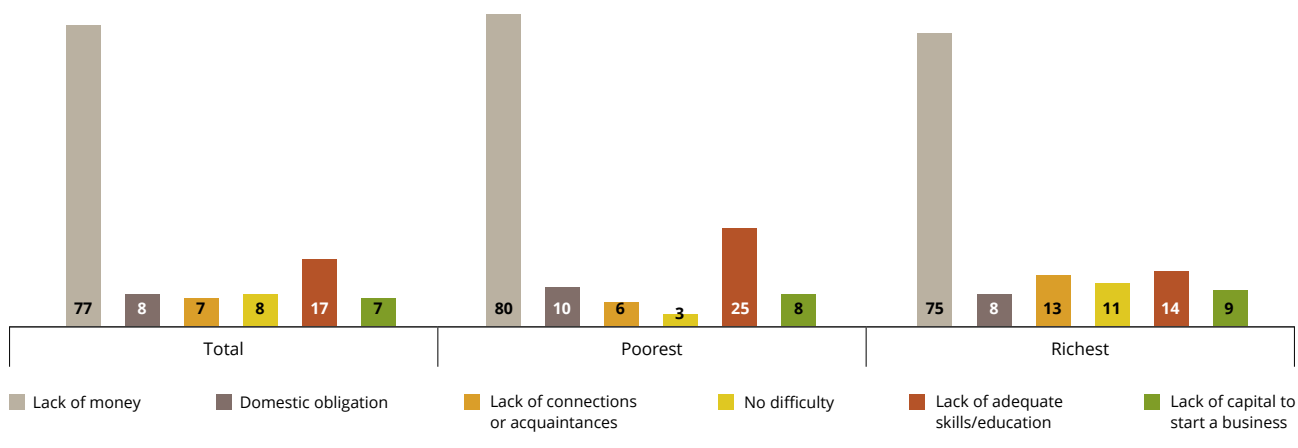
Note: *Only those who are not doing dream job

Lack of money is viewed as the most important constraining factor towards a dream job. Respondents were asked about the two most important constraining factors to achieve a dream job (Figure 12).

More than 75 percent of them mentioned a lack of money, with a slightly higher share

among the respondents from the poorest consumption quintile. Lack of money was much more important than lack of adequate skills and education, selected by only 17 percent of respondents. These views may discourage education efforts even though many respondents selected tertiary education as an aspirational goal.

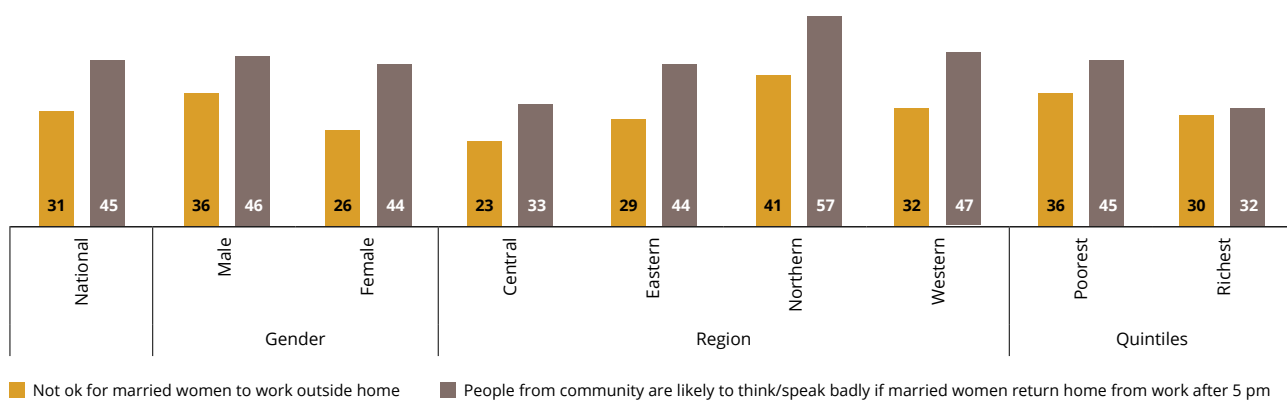
Figure 12. The two most important constraints to realizing your dream job (%)



Gender norms may constrain work opportunities for women, especially the poorest ones. For example, about 30 percent of the youth think that it is not ok for women to work outside home. Men are significantly more likely to think so than women: 36 versus 26 percent. Even the larger share of the youth

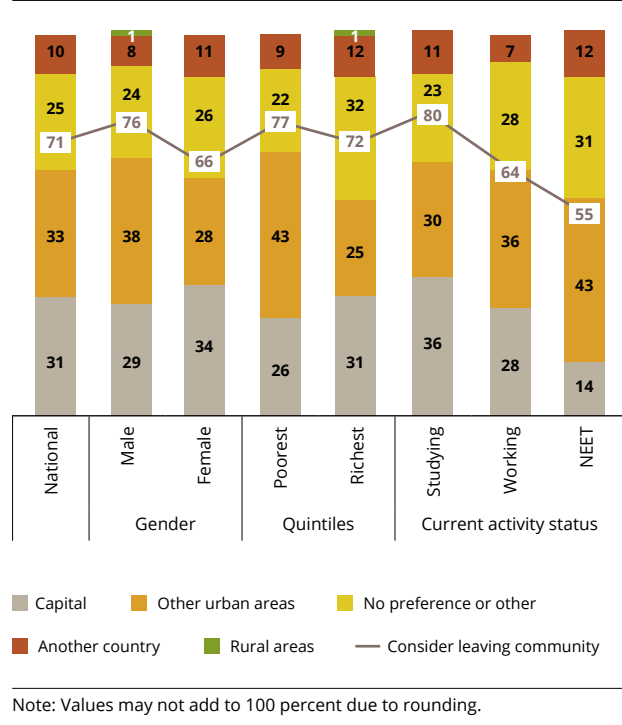
believes that people from their community are likely to think/speak badly if married women return home from work after 5 pm – 45 percent. There is no difference across genders, but the youth from the poorest consumption quintile are more likely to support this claim than the youth from the richest quintile (44 versus 32 percent).

Figure 13. It is not ok for married women to work outside home and share of respondents who think that people from the community they live are likely to think/speak badly if married women return home from work after 5 pm in the evening



Over two-thirds of the youth respondents consider leaving their community to look for better job opportunities. Males are more likely to consider leaving the community than female youth: 76 versus 66 percent. The willingness to migrate is also significantly higher among the youth studying compared to those working or NEET: 80 versus 64 and 55 percent (Figure 14). About 33 percent of those who think about leaving the community consider other urban areas as potential destinations, about 31 percent consider the capital, 25 percent do not have any preference, and 11 percent want to migrate to another country or to any other destination. The youth who are currently studying are more likely to consider Kampala as a potential destination compared to those working or in NEET: 36 versus 26 and 14 percent respectively.

Figure 14. Willingness to migrate and the distribution of preferred destinations (%)



CONCLUSIONS

The aspirations of young people are essential to their human capital investment, educational choices, and labor market outcomes. This is particularly important for Uganda with growing working age population and the labor market dominated by low productive jobs. This brief explored education and work aspiration of the youth aged 15-25 in Uganda using results from the high-frequency phone survey conducted in August/September 2023.

More than half of the youth have only achieved primary education or below. Secondary education is more accessible to those from the richer consumption quintiles. The youth from the wealthier quintiles also had a higher likelihood of overpassing the education of their parents, which may limit intergenerational mobility. Most of the young people, who were not studying, mentioned expensiveness and lack of money as one of the key reasons for being out of school. Family obligations, marriage, and pregnancy were crucial factors for female youth as well.

The youth have high educational aspirations, as more than half of them selected tertiary education as a hypothetical level they wanted to achieve if there were no constraints and they could study as long as they wanted. Almost nobody from the youth respondents viewed primary education as an aspirational target and the majority aspired to reach secondary or tertiary education. In reality though, only eight percent of the overall population in Uganda above 15 years old achieved post-secondary education in 2019/20 (UBOS 2021a). This makes the distance between aspirational education and current achievements high. The main constraining factor in achieving an aspirational level of

education was lack of money, followed by less important frequent illnesses, lack of motivation, family obligations, domestic obligations and pregnancy.

In line with high education aspirations, most of the youth view as dream jobs being medical workers, technicians/engineers, or teachers. All these dream jobs are either medium or high-skill occupations requiring at least complete secondary education. Almost nobody viewed agriculture as a dream job even though more than 60 percent of adult Ugandans were employed in this sector in 2021 (UBOS 2021b). Aspiring to high-paid jobs outside of agriculture is an important finding. Non-farm sector has been growing in Uganda during the last decade, but its ability to absorb growing labor force is still limited. Many people cannot access non-farm jobs due to various constraints including inadequate education level and limited access to basic infrastructure (World Bank 2023).

Only 20 percent of the currently employed youth respondents think that they have a dream work, but many, especially those who are still studying, and those from the richest consumption quintile, optimistically think they are likely to achieve it. NEET youth and those from the poorest consumption quintile have the lowest expectations to achieve a dream job.

Earning a lot of money, being interesting and using skills are the most important characteristics of a dream job for Ugandans. At the same time, family and friends were the most key factors affecting the choice of a dream job, while lack of money and not lack of education was selected by the most respondents as a constraint to achieve it.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Empirical analysis demonstrated Ugandan youth aspire to achieve better education and better jobs. However, the current gap between aspirations and reality is large. Therefore, helping individuals to achieve aspirations, by addressing the structural constraints and providing the tools necessary to realizing the goals, seems to be more important than raising the aspirational bar (raising aspirations for the poorest and those in NEET can still be useful though). Realigning some aspirations to more realistic alternatives can be useful too.
- Given substantial improvement in access to primary schooling in Uganda, there is a need to focus on the quality of learning and skills building which will allow to sustain the gains in early childhood education, improve participation in upper levels of education, and facilitate a strong transition to work.
- Dropping out from school and inability to reach aspirational education level among female youth due to non-monetary factors can be addressed by providing incentives for girls to remain in school or go back to school if they dropped out. Providing adequate transportation to schools, ensuring separate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities for girls and reducing the risk of violence and sexual harassment may be helpful as well (World Bank, 2020).
- There is a need for policies which will accelerate economic transformations to create more formal wage jobs in productive sectors. The agriculture sector has a capacity to create more jobs for the youth, but these jobs need to be attractive and generate better incomes. This can be achieved through accelerated agricultural transformation and commercialization, facilitated by the usage of modern inputs and technologies, developing agribusiness and food value chains (Lorenceau, Rim and Savitki 2021).
- Many youth respondents aspire to be technicians, while the farmers nationwide face a shortage of agricultural technicians. Agricultural technicians are responsible for running the farms and have a wide range of responsibilities, from crop monitoring to servicing equipment. Attracting the youth to become agricultural technicians will require changing their mindset, developing practical skills and knowledge, and making agriculture more attractive and profitable as discussed above. Overall, there is a need to invest more in skills-based education to reduce the mismatch between the knowledge acquired by students and the knowledge and skills required by the labor market.
- Providing young people with accurate information about labor market prospects, and effective career guidance on the best way to get closer to their goals can be helpful. Career counselling with monitoring may be a good mechanism for relaying information about the types of jobs available in the labor market, helping to raise aspirations among aspirations-poor youth (e.g., NEET, poor) and re-align aspirations that are unlikely to be achieved to more realistic alternatives (Gardiner and Goedhuys 2020).
- Even though a lot of young people aspire to be medical workers or teachers, high payment was a crucial factor behind selection of a dream work for most of the respondents. There are other types of jobs that can provide adequate payment, especially in the growing IT industry.

Affordable and widespread telecommunication services will be crucial to promote technology-based empowerment among the youth. Digital technology and capabilities are also

essential to create a more resilient education system as COVID-19 pandemic showed. Digital technologies helped to keep educational system afloat and facilitated home-based learning.

REFERENCES

Chen X, and Hesketh T. (2021). Educational Aspirations and Expectations of Adolescents in Rural China: Determinants, Mental Health, and Academic Outcomes. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. November 2;18(21):11524. doi: 10.3390/ijerph182111524.

Costa, V., Contreras Gonzalez, I. & Palacios-Lopez, A., (2022). What Do You Want to Be: Youth Aspirations in the Time of the COVID-19 Crisis - Evidence from Three Sub-Saharan Countries, World Bank, Washington, DC.

Gardiner, Drew. & Goedhuys, Micheline., (2020). "Youth aspirations and the future of work a review of the literature and evidence," ILO Working Papers 995096093502676, International Labour Organization.

Lekfuangfu, W. and Odermatt,R. (2022). All I have to do is dream? The role of aspirations in intergenerational mobility and well-being, *European Economic Review*, Volume 148.

Lorenceau, A., J. Rim and T. Savitki (2021). "Youth aspirations and the reality of jobs in Africa", OECD Development Policy Papers, No. 38, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/2d089001-en>.

Lybbert, Travis & Wydick, Bruce. (2018). Poverty, Aspirations, and the Economics of Hope. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*. 66. 10.1086/696968.

UBOS (2021a). The Uganda National Household Survey. National Survey report 2019/20.

UBOS (2021b). National Labour Force Survey 2021. Main report.

World Bank. (2020). Tackling the Demographic Challenge in Uganda, No 34676, World Bank Publications - Reports, The World Bank Group.

World Bank. (2023). Uganda Poverty Assessment. Strengthening Resilience to Accelerate Poverty Reduction. The World Bank Group.



WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?

EDUCATION AND WORK ASPIRATIONS AMONG THE UGANDAN YOUTH

MARCH 2024