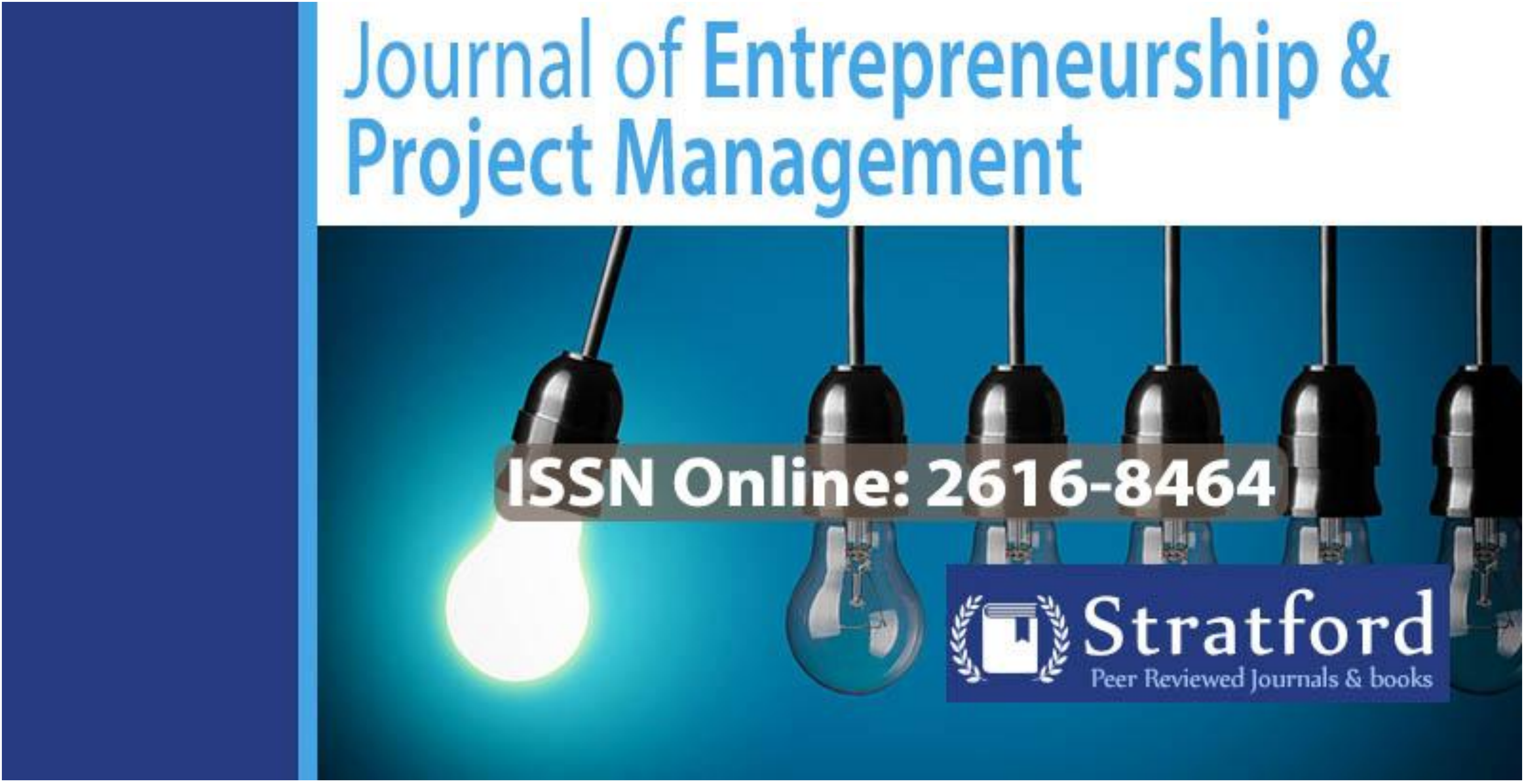

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Non-Governmental Organizations and Youth Entrepreneurship Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Systematic Review of Support Mechanisms, Outcomes and Challenges

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Abstract

Youth entrepreneurship is often presented as one response to the shortage of wage employment in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this setting, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become important providers of training, finance, mentoring, savings groups, market linkages and digital support. Even so, evidence on whether these interventions produce lasting results remains scattered. This systematic review therefore examined which NGO and related non-state support mechanisms appear to work, the conditions that shape their effectiveness and the limitations of the available evidence. Searches covered publicly accessible bibliographic platforms, publisher databases and development-agency repositories for English-language studies published between 2010 and July 2026. The search identified 41 records. After seven duplicates and twelve records excluded during screening, 22 studies were included in the synthesis. Design-sensitive appraisal rated 13 studies as high quality and nine as moderate quality. The clearest evidence favored practical, multifaceted support that combines capability-building with finance, mentoring and access to markets. Training on its own generally improved knowledge and confidence, but its effects on income, productivity and enterprise survival were less consistent. Experimental studies from Rwanda and Uganda showed that liquidity and integrated support can increase enterprise activity, assets and economic participation, although cash sometimes produced stronger results than training and some gains weakened over time. Savings groups, digital support and market linkages were promising, but the evidence was mainly moderate in quality. Overall, NGOs appear to contribute most when programs are locally grounded, responsive to gender and rural inequalities, connected to real market demand and sustained beyond the initial training period. The most important remaining gap is the shortage of independent, longitudinal evidence on enterprise survival, productivity and job creation.

Keywords: *youth entrepreneurship; non-governmental organisations; enterprise development; Sub-Saharan Africa; business support; systematic review*

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1. Introduction

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, the youth labour force is growing faster than formal wage employment. For many young people, starting a business is therefore a practical way to earn a living. For others, it also offers a route to independence, innovation and the possibility of creating work for other people. These motivations often overlap: an enterprise may begin as a survival strategy and gradually develop into a business with stronger growth ambitions (Filmer & Fox, 2014; Langevang et al., 2012; Gough & Langevang, 2016).

Young people pursue these ambitions in demanding circumstances. Evidence points to a combination of personal, household, community and institutional constraints, including limited business skills, weak networks, inadequate finance, poor infrastructure, low digital access, restricted markets and uneven institutional support. The effects are particularly severe for rural youth, young women, informal entrepreneurs and those from low-income households (Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025; OECD, 2017).

NGOs and other non-state organisations have stepped into many of these gaps. Because they often work through local partners, they may reach young people who remain outside commercial finance and centrally administered public programmes. Their interventions range from entrepreneurship and technical training to financial literacy, savings groups, start-up grants, equipment, mentoring, incubation, cooperative development, value-chain connections, digital tools and policy advocacy. Programme evidence from Rwanda, Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia illustrates both the reach of this support and the importance of working through organisations that understand local conditions (DeJaeghere & Baxter, 2014; Education Development Center, 2016; Flynn & Sumberg, 2018; Pinet et al., 2020).

These programmes, however, do not produce equally strong results. Classroom training may increase knowledge while leaving the entrepreneur without working capital or customers. Savings groups can build discipline and mutual support without opening access to more profitable opportunities. In addition, impressive enrolment and completion figures may conceal the absence of evidence on business survival, profit or employment. A randomised study in Rwanda, for instance, found that training improved business knowledge and productive time, whereas an equivalent cash intervention generated larger gains across several economic outcomes (McIntosh & Zeitlin, 2022). Wider reviews also show that results vary with programme design, the group being supported, implementation quality and the opportunities available in the local economy (Cho & Honorati, 2014; Kluve et al., 2017; Beber et al., 2025).

Earlier studies have examined youth employment programmes, entrepreneurship training and the barriers faced by young enterprises. What remains less clear is how NGO-specific evidence fits with the wider causal and contextual literature: which forms of support are backed by the strongest evidence, where the evidence remains uncertain and why similar programmes produce different outcomes. This review responds to that gap through four questions. First, which mechanisms do NGOs and related non-state actors use to support youth entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa? Second, what outcomes have been reported? Third, which programme features and contextual conditions strengthen or weaken effectiveness? Fourth, what substantive and methodological gaps remain?

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2. Literature Context and Theoretical Framing

2.1 Youth entrepreneurship and the support problem

Most youth-owned enterprises in Sub-Saharan Africa are small, informal and started with very limited capital. Informality makes it easier to enter business, but it can also restrict access to formal credit, insurance, procurement opportunities, legal protection and larger markets. Programmes that concentrate only on attitudes or motivation may therefore overstate what young entrepreneurs can achieve when the wider opportunity environment remains weak (DeJaeghere & Baxter, 2014; Sutter et al., 2019).

A recurring tension runs through the intervention literature. Training often improves knowledge, planning and confidence, yet average effects on profit and employment are smaller and vary considerably across settings. Finance can make investment possible, but it may have little effect when markets are weak or repayment conditions do not reflect the cash flow of the business. For this reason, recent reviews increasingly favour support that combines and sequences skills, liquidity, mentoring and market access, rather than treating any single input as a complete solution (Cho & Honorati, 2014; Kluve et al., 2017; Maïga et al., 2020; Leger et al., 2025).

2.2 Human capital, social capital and COM-B

Human capital theory helps explain why training, experience and mentoring may raise productivity by strengthening knowledge and practical competence (Becker, 1964). In youth enterprise programmes, these capabilities include costing, pricing, record keeping, customer management, financial literacy and technical production skills. Their value, however, is constrained when entrepreneurs cannot obtain finance, technology, infrastructure or sufficient demand.

Social capital theory draws attention to trust, networks and the flow of information (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). NGOs may add value not only by teaching business skills, but also by connecting young people to mentors, peers, savings groups, suppliers, financial institutions and buyers. Close community ties can help entrepreneurs cope with everyday pressures, but they do not always provide access to higher-value opportunities. For growth, bridging and linking relationships are especially important.

The COM-B model holds that behaviour depends on capability, opportunity and motivation (Michie et al., 2011). This is particularly relevant to youth entrepreneurship because a young person may be highly motivated yet lack the skills, resources or external conditions needed to sustain a business. NGO programmes can strengthen capability through training, support motivation through coaching and confidence-building, and expand opportunity through finance, equipment, markets, digital access and institutional connections. The argument developed in this review is that enterprise-supportive behaviour is more likely when these three conditions reinforce one another rather than being addressed in isolation.

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3. Methodology

3.1 Review design and reporting standard

The study used a systematic literature review and critical narrative synthesis, following the PRISMA 2020 reporting principles (Page et al., 2021). A meta-analysis was not suitable because the studies differed markedly in their interventions, target populations, designs and outcome measures. Before the final screening stage, the review protocol set out the population, interventions, context, outcomes, eligibility rules, search terms, appraisal approach and synthesis procedures summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: **Review protocol and search strategy**

Review component	Specification
Review period	January 2010–3 July 2026
Population	Young entrepreneurs, youth in self-employment or youth participating in livelihood/enterprise programmes, generally aged 15–35 years.
Intervention/exposure	NGO, civil-society, donor-funded or non-state enterprise support; comparator intervention evidence was retained when it directly clarified a support mechanism relevant to NGOs.
Context	Sub-Saharan Africa; multi-country reviews were included when they contained relevant African evidence.
Outcomes	Business knowledge and behaviour, enterprise entry, income, assets, savings, survival, growth, productivity, employment, inclusion and implementation challenges.
Sources searched	AJOL; Crossref-indexed publisher platforms including ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online and Wiley Online Library; and institutional repositories of the World Bank, ILO, ODI, EDC, TechnoServe and Youth Business International.
Core search string	(youth OR young people) AND (entrepreneur* OR enterprise OR self-employ*) AND (NGO OR "non-governmental" OR civil society OR donor-funded OR non-state) AND (training OR finance OR mentoring OR incubation OR "market linkage" OR savings) AND (Africa OR named Sub-Saharan African country).
Synthesis	Design-sensitive quality appraisal, evidence weighting, descriptive frequency coding and critical narrative synthesis.

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Note. The search was supplemented by backward and forward citation chaining from included systematic reviews and major programme evaluations. Source: Authors' completed review protocol, informed by PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021).

3.2 Eligibility, screening and study selection

A record was eligible when it: (a) examined youth entrepreneurship, self-employment or enterprise-oriented livelihood support; (b) included evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa; (c) assessed an NGO, civil-society, donor-funded or closely comparable support mechanism; (d) reported outcomes, implementation conditions or limitations; (e) was published in English between 2010 and July 2026; and (f) contained enough methodological detail to permit appraisal. Conceptual publications informed the theoretical discussion but were not counted among the 22 studies in the evidence corpus. Records were excluded when they lacked a youth focus, contained no Sub-Saharan African evidence, did not examine a relevant support intervention, offered no empirical or evaluative material, or duplicated a more complete report of the same study.

The completed search log contained 41 records. Thirty-six came from platform and repository searches, while five were identified through citation chaining. Removing seven duplicates left 34 titles and abstracts for screening, of which seven were excluded. The remaining 27 full texts were assessed in detail. Five did not meet the eligibility criteria: two were not youth-focused, one had no relevant NGO or non-state intervention, one contained insufficient evaluative evidence, and one fell outside Sub-Saharan Africa. The final synthesis therefore included 22 studies, as shown in Figure 1.

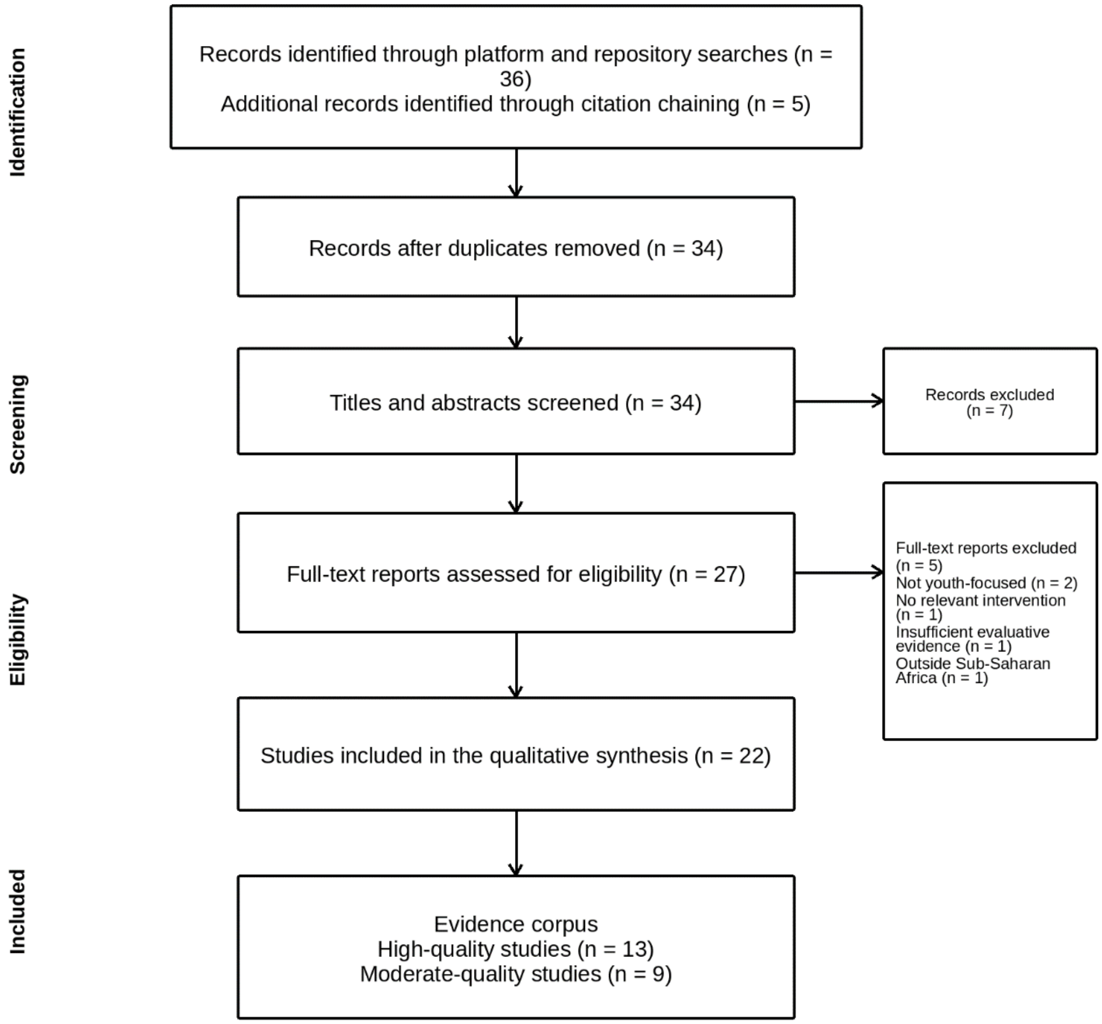

Figure 1: PRISMA flow of study identification and selection

Note. Prepared by the authors from the completed search log using the PRISMA 2020 reporting structure (Page et al., 2021).

3.3 Quality appraisal and evidence weighting

Quality was assessed with a design-sensitive tool covering ten areas: clarity of the research question, suitability of the design, transparency of sampling, description of the intervention, quality of outcome measurement, credibility of the analysis, treatment of confounding or comparison, acknowledgement of limitations, consistency between evidence and conclusions, and disclosure of funding or implementation interests. The criteria were then adapted to each design. Randomised and quasi-experimental studies were examined for allocation, attrition, baseline balance and outcome validity. Qualitative and mixed-methods studies were assessed for sampling, data collection, analytic transparency and reflexivity. Systematic reviews were assessed for reproducible searching, screening, appraisal and synthesis, while programme reports were judged on source transparency, methodological detail and independence.

Studies scoring 8–10 were rated high quality, those scoring 5–7 were rated moderate, and those scoring 0–4 were rated low. Thirteen studies fell into the high-quality category and nine into the moderate-quality category. No low-quality study was used to support a claim about effectiveness. Experimental studies and systematic reviews of high quality carried the greatest weight in interpreting outcomes. Moderate-quality programme reports and qualitative studies were used mainly to explain how interventions were delivered, why they worked differently across settings and what implementation difficulties arose. This approach avoided treating descriptive programme claims as if they carried the same evidential weight as causal findings.

3.4 Data extraction and synthesis

Information from each study was entered into a structured extraction matrix covering the author, year, country, design, implementing organisation, target group, support mechanism, outcomes, implementation conditions, limitations and quality rating. The analysis used deductive codes for training, technical skills, finance, mentoring, market linkage, digital support and network-based support, while allowing additional themes to emerge from the studies. Frequency counts show how widely a theme appeared across the 22 records; they are not pooled effect estimates. Where findings conflicted, the disagreement was retained and examined in relation to study design and evidence quality rather than being averaged away.

4. Results

4.1 Characteristics and geographic coverage

The 22 included records were methodologically diverse. Six were experimental studies or impact evaluations, five were qualitative or mixed-method programme studies, seven were systematic reviews or other evidence syntheses, and four were contextual empirical analyses. Thirteen studies were rated high quality and nine moderate quality. Country-specific and multi-country evidence covered Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, while seven syntheses drew on broader Sub-Saharan African or low- and middle-income country evidence. Rwanda and Uganda appeared most often. By contrast, Central Africa and Lusophone Africa were scarcely represented. Table 2 summarises the design, setting, support mechanism, principal finding and quality rating of each included study.

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Table 2: Included studies, findings and quality assessment

Study	Country/setting	Design	Support mechanism	Main finding relevant to the review	Quality
Alcid, 2014	Rwanda	Randomised controlled trial report	Akazi Kanoze work-readiness and financial-management training	Higher employment probability among rural graduates; improved work-readiness and financial-management skills.	High
Education Development Center, 2016	Rwanda	Programme final report	Training, local civil-society delivery, work exposure and institutional partnerships	Reached 21,039 youth through 63 local partners; demonstrates scale and partnership reach, but causal attribution is limited.	Moderate
McIntosh & Zeitlin, 2022	Rwanda	Randomised controlled trial	USAID/EDC workforce training benchmarked against cash grants	Training improved business knowledge and productive time; cost-equivalent cash generated larger gains in income, consumption and wealth.	High
McIntosh & Zeitlin, 2026	Rwanda	Medium-term randomised follow-up	Skills training and cash-transfer arms	Entrepreneurship, assets and savings effects persisted in part, but business returns remained low and many early impacts faded.	High
DeJaeghere & Baxter, 2014	Uganda and Tanzania	Qualitative NGO programme case	Entrepreneurship education and livelihood support	Skills were useful only when social, material and institutional conditions allowed youth to convert them into viable choices.	Moderate
Flynn & Sumberg, 2018	Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia	Multi-country qualitative study	Youth savings groups and income-generating activities	Savings groups supported discipline and coping, but rarely overcame low-return markets or produced transformative livelihood change.	Moderate
Pinet et al., 2020	Ghana	Impact evaluation	MASO integrated cocoa-sector training, mentoring and enterprise support	Improved skills and some economic outcomes; effects depended on market access, implementation quality and continued support.	High
Njambi-Szlapka et al., 2021	Uganda	Mixed-methods research report	Youth Forward agribusiness support, finance and digital linkages	Diversification, mobile-phone access and digital platforms supported resilience; gendered digital access constrained benefits.	Moderate
TechnoServe, 2020	Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda	Multi-country programme evaluation	STRYDE rural enterprise training, mentoring and market-oriented support	Integrated rural delivery showed promise at scale, while local market conditions and post-training support affected sustainability.	Moderate
Bandiera et al., 2020	Uganda	Cluster-randomised controlled trial	BRAC Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents programme	Multifaceted vocational and life-skills support increased economic activity and improved social outcomes over four years.	High
Blattman et al., 2014	Uganda	Randomised controlled trial	Group-based business plans, vocational training and cash grants	Raised assets, skilled work and earnings, illustrating the value of liquidity plus capability, although it was not an NGO-only intervention.	High
Cho & Honorati, 2014	Multiple developing-country settings	Meta-regression	Entrepreneurship training and finance programmes	Average effects were heterogeneous; combined packages and careful targeting performed better than stand-alone training.	High

Study	Country/setting	Design	Support mechanism	Main finding relevant to the review	Quality
Kluve et al., 2017	Multiple countries, including SSA	Systematic review	Training, entrepreneurship promotion, employment services and subsidies	Effects varied by intervention type, target group and implementation; entrepreneurship support was not uniformly successful.	High
Maïga et al., 2020	Low- and middle-income countries, including SSA	Systematic review	Youth skills training in agriculture	Outcomes improved when training matched real livelihood pathways and was connected to complementary inputs and markets.	High
Apunyo et al., 2022	Low- and middle-income countries, including SSA	Evidence and gap map	Youth employment and enterprise interventions	Evidence was concentrated on training and employment outcomes, with important gaps in long-term enterprise survival and job quality.	High
Leger et al., 2025	Sub-Saharan Africa	Systematic literature review	Non-formal entrepreneurship training	Promising but inconsistent results; effectiveness depended on programme design, evaluation quality and application conditions.	High
Beber et al., 2025	Sub-Saharan Africa	Systematic review of randomised trials	Skills training	Training effects were generally modest and context-dependent; rigorous studies cautioned against assuming automatic income gains.	High
Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025	Sub-Saharan Africa	Systematic review	Barriers to youth entrepreneurship	Finance, skills, networks, markets and institutional conditions jointly constrained youth enterprise performance.	High
De Gobbi, 2014	Sub-Saharan Africa	Comparative secondary analysis	Success factors in youth entrepreneurship	Education, social capital and favourable entrepreneurial environments were associated with better prospects.	Moderate
Koloma, 2021	Mali	Econometric survey study	Financial inclusion and entrepreneurship willingness	Access to financial services was associated with stronger willingness to undertake entrepreneurship, but willingness is not equivalent to sustained performance.	Moderate
Omeje et al., 2020	Nigeria	Empirical policy study	Youth empowerment and entrepreneurship programmes	Training and finance were relevant, but programme fragmentation and implementation weaknesses reduced economic-diversification effects.	Moderate
Langevang et al., 2012	Uganda	Qualitative study	Youth entrepreneurial motivations and aspirations	Necessity and opportunity motivations overlapped; aspirations remained shaped by finance, household pressures and local markets.	Moderate

Note. High-quality evidence received greater interpretive weight than moderate-quality evidence, and programme reports were not used alone to make causal claims. Source: Authors' extraction and appraisal of the studies cited in the first column; full bibliographic details are provided in the reference list.

4.2 NGO and non-state support mechanisms

Business and entrepreneurship training was the most frequently studied form of support, appearing in 18 of the 22 records. Typical content included planning, costing, pricing, financial literacy, record keeping, customer care and opportunity identification. High-quality syntheses consistently showed improvements in knowledge and work readiness, although effects on earnings and wider enterprise performance varied (Cho & Honorati, 2014; Kluve et al., 2017; Leger et al., 2025; Beber et al., 2025). The more convincing training models were practical, relevant to the participant's sector and designed to give young people opportunities to apply what they had learned, rather than relying on brief, generic workshops.

Technical and vocational support featured in 13 studies, especially in agriculture, food processing and the trades. Its usefulness depended on whether the new skill could be connected to inputs, recognised standards and actual buyers. Maïga et al. (2020) found stronger evidence where agricultural training led into realistic livelihood pathways. Evaluations of MASO and STRYDE reached a similar conclusion, emphasising sector-specific delivery and the importance of local market conditions (Pinet et al., 2020; TechnoServe, 2020).

Finance, grants or savings were examined in 16 studies. Experimental evidence showed that easing liquidity constraints can increase assets, skilled work, savings and enterprise activity, but the design and timing of the financial support were important. In Rwanda, a cost-equivalent cash transfer generated larger improvements in several welfare and economic outcomes than workforce training, while training had its clearest effect on business knowledge (McIntosh & Zeitlin, 2022). In Uganda, grants delivered alongside group planning and training increased assets and earnings (Blattman et al., 2014). Savings groups, by comparison, offered discipline and mutual support but rarely transformed businesses operating in low-return markets (Flynn & Sumberg, 2018).

Mentoring and follow-up were discussed in 13 studies, as were market and value-chain linkages. Across the literature, these mechanisms were often described as the connection between learning a skill and applying it in day-to-day business decisions. Direct causal evidence, however, was less developed than it was for training or cash. Digital support appeared in only 6 studies. Evidence from Uganda suggested that mobile-phone access and digital platforms could help enterprises diversify and remain active, but unequal device ownership and limited platform use, particularly among women, reduced these benefits (Njambi-Szlapka et al., 2021). A consolidated comparison of the frequency and strength of evidence across these support mechanisms is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency and strength of evidence by support mechanism

Support mechanism	Studies addressing theme (n = 22)	Overall evidence strength	Critical interpretation
Entrepreneurship/business training	18	High-to-moderate	The evidence consistently shows gains in knowledge and confidence, but stand-alone training produces less dependable income effects.
Technical and vocational skills	13	Moderate	These skills are most useful when participants can obtain inputs, meet standards and sell into a real market;

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			training is less effective when it creates supply without buyers.
Finance, grants and savings	16	High-to-moderate	Liquidity can ease start-up and investment constraints, but cash or credit alone does not ensure productive or high-return growth.
Mentoring and follow-up	13	Moderate	Ongoing guidance can help participants apply what they have learned, although long-term effects are rarely evaluated and follow-up is often underfunded.
Market and value-chain linkage	13	Moderate	Buyer access, standards and sector connections can turn production into sales, but there are still few rigorous evaluations of this component on its own.
Digital tools and platforms	6	Low-to-moderate	Digital support can improve access to information and customers, but evidence remains limited and benefits are constrained by devices, connectivity, cost and gender gaps.
Networks, savings groups and cooperatives	11	Moderate	These arrangements strengthen trust, discipline and resilience, but they do not always connect young entrepreneurs to larger or more profitable markets.

Note. Counts reflect thematic coding of the 22 included records and do not represent pooled effect sizes. Source: Authors' synthesis, drawing especially on Cho and Honorati (2014), Kluve et al. (2017), Maïga et al. (2020), Apunyo et al. (2022), Leger et al. (2025), Beber et al. (2025), and Ofosu-Appiah et al. (2025).

4.3 Reported outcomes

Knowledge, confidence and work readiness were the outcomes reported most consistently, appearing in 17 studies. Thirteen studies also reported enterprise entry or participation in self-employment. These near-term outcomes were more responsive than profit, survival or job creation because they were closely related to the content of training and could be measured soon after a programme ended.

Twelve studies reported changes in income, assets or savings, although the findings were mixed. In Uganda, BRAC's multifaceted programme for adolescent girls increased economic activity and improved social outcomes over four years (Bandiera et al., 2020). Akazi Kanoze evaluations recorded gains in work readiness and employment, while a later Rwanda trial found that cash produced larger income and wealth effects than the training package (Alcid, 2014; McIntosh &

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Zeitlin, 2022). Medium-term follow-up still found entrepreneurship and asset gains in some intervention arms, but low business returns and the fading of several early effects made broad claims of transformation difficult to sustain (McIntosh & Zeitlin, 2026).

Only eight studies measured business survival, growth or productivity, and just six examined employment creation beyond the owner. The evidence was therefore much firmer for participation, knowledge and entry into enterprise than for lasting growth or the creation of decent jobs. Eight studies addressed social inclusion. The most credible positive findings came from programmes deliberately designed around gender or vulnerability, rather than from programmes that simply reported how many women had enrolled (Bandiera et al., 2020; Orser et al., 2025). Table 4 summarises the frequency of the reported outcomes and the corresponding confidence in the evidence.

Table 4: Reported outcomes and confidence in the evidence

Outcome	Studies reporting outcome (n = 22)	Interpretation
Knowledge, confidence or work readiness	17	Strong evidence of improvement, although these are immediate outcomes and do not by themselves demonstrate business growth.
Enterprise entry or self-employment	13	Generally positive, particularly where training is combined with grants, equipment or a clear sector pathway.
Income, assets or savings	12	Mixed evidence: several experimental studies found gains, but cash sometimes outperformed training and some effects declined over time.
Business survival, growth or productivity	8	The evidence is limited and inconsistent because few studies follow enterprises long enough to establish durable growth.
Employment creation beyond the owner	6	The evidence base is weak; most studies concentrate on self-employment rather than the creation of decent jobs for others.
Gender or social inclusion	8	Results are positive where programmes are deliberately designed for excluded groups, although important barriers to access remain.

Note. Source: Authors' synthesis of the included evidence, particularly Alcid (2014), Blattman et al. (2014), Bandiera et al. (2020), Pinet et al. (2020), McIntosh and Zeitlin (2022, 2026), and Orser et al. (2025).

4.4 Challenges and limitations reported across studies

Limited or unsuitable finance was the most common constraint, reported in 16 studies. The problem often remained after training, while conventional loan products could place considerable repayment pressure on businesses with seasonal or uncertain income. Weak access to markets appeared in 13 studies and frequently explained why improved production skills did not lead to higher sales. Together, these findings show why finance and markets should be treated as opportunity conditions rather than assuming that motivation and capability can carry an enterprise on their own (Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025).

Twelve studies identified short programme duration and inadequate follow-up as important weaknesses. Many interventions assessed participants shortly after training, providing little insight into how businesses fared when they encountered competition, household shocks or the need to reinvest. Weak monitoring and evaluation appeared in 13 studies. Programme reports often documented enrolment and completion, but far fewer followed profit, survival, productivity, formalisation or employment over several years (Apunyo et al., 2022; Leger et al., 2025).

Nine studies described fragmented coordination. NGOs, public agencies, finance providers and training organisations often worked without shared referral systems, common monitoring indicators or clear arrangements for continued support. Eight studies also highlighted rural and digital exclusion through transport costs, limited institutional presence, weak connectivity, unequal device ownership and high data prices. These disadvantages were not evenly shared. Young women and rural entrepreneurs generally faced greater constraints on mobility, assets, time and digital access (Njambi-Szlapka et al., 2021; Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025). The main implementation constraints and their implications are synthesised in Table 5.

Table 5:Implementation challenges identified in the included evidence

Challenge	Studies reporting challenge (n = 22)	How the challenge limits effectiveness
Limited finance or unsuitable finance	16	Collateral requirements, poorly timed repayments and small grants restrict both start-up and reinvestment.
Weak market access and value-chain integration	13	New production skills are difficult to convert into sales when demand, standards, transport and buyer connections remain weak.
Short duration and insufficient follow-up	12	Support often ends before young enterprises face the cash-flow pressures and competition that arise after start-up.
Weak evaluation and outcome tracking	13	Many programmes count attendance and completion rather than following profit, survival, formalisation or employment over time.
Fragmented coordination	9	NGOs, government agencies, finance providers and training organisations frequently work

		without clear referral routes or shared information.
Rural and digital exclusion	8	Distance, transport costs, device ownership, data prices and weak connectivity reduce both participation and programme benefits.

Note. Source: Authors' synthesis, particularly Apunyo et al. (2022), Njambi-Szlapka et al. (2021), Leger et al. (2025), and Ofosu-Appiah et al. (2025).

5. Discussion

5.1 Which interventions work best, and under what conditions?

No single intervention emerged as universally superior. Instead, the evidence supports a more conditional conclusion: support works best when it addresses the participant's most binding constraint. Training is useful where capability is the main problem. Finance is more likely to help when a viable entrepreneur lacks liquidity. Mentoring matters when new knowledge must be translated into a series of practical decisions, while market linkage becomes critical when productive capacity exists but customers remain out of reach. The most promising NGO approach is therefore not a standard package for everyone, but a combination of services selected after local needs and enterprise conditions have been diagnosed.

The strongest causal studies also show that integration should not mean adding activities for their own sake. In Rwanda, cash produced stronger results than training on several economic outcomes, suggesting that a complicated programme may add little when the central problem is simply lack of liquidity (McIntosh & Zeitlin, 2022). In Uganda, grants combined with group planning and skills support increased assets and earnings (Blattman et al., 2014). BRAC's multifaceted programme likewise improved both economic and social outcomes among adolescent girls (Bandiera et al., 2020). Taken together, these studies point towards support that is deliberately targeted and carefully sequenced, rather than support that is merely broad.

Adaptation to place and population is just as important. Rural programmes need delivery arrangements that lower transport and connectivity costs, connect participants to nearby value chains and take account of seasonal livelihoods. Gender-responsive programmes must also consider care responsibilities, safety, mobility, asset ownership and access to digital technology. Sector-based initiatives are more likely to succeed when they begin with demand, quality standards and buyer requirements instead of teaching production skills in isolation (Pinet et al., 2020; TechnoServe, 2020; Orser et al., 2025).

5.2 Agreements, contradictions and evidence limitations

The studies broadly agree that training improves immediate outcomes such as knowledge, confidence and work readiness. They are far less consistent on whether these gains lead to higher profit, better survival or additional employment. Part of this difference is methodological. Programme reports often emphasise participation and positive individual accounts, whereas randomised studies compare outcomes with a counterfactual and sometimes find smaller or short-lived effects. Once the evidence is weighted by design and quality, the conclusion becomes more precise: training reliably builds capability, but improved enterprise performance still depends on complementary opportunities.

Evidence on finance is similarly mixed. Grants and cash can enable investment, increase assets and stimulate business activity, but they do not automatically move recipients into high-return sectors. Where local demand is weak, the returns to enterprise may remain unattractive. Savings groups can strengthen financial discipline and resilience, yet the small sums circulating within already constrained communities may not support substantial growth. The implication is not that finance fails, but that its form and timing must fit the entrepreneur's potential, cash-flow cycle, market access and level of risk (Flynn & Sumberg, 2018; McIntosh & Zeitlin, 2026).

This review has four main limitations. It included only English-language material, which may have excluded relevant evidence from Francophone and Lusophone Africa. NGO evaluations are also published unevenly, and successful programmes may be easier to locate than unsuccessful ones. In addition, Rwanda and Uganda were represented more heavily than other settings, limiting the extent to which the findings can be generalised across the region. Finally, the diversity of study designs and outcome measures made statistical pooling inappropriate. These limitations were addressed as far as possible through transparent screening, design-sensitive appraisal, explicit evidence weighting and a clear distinction between causal findings and implementation insights.

5.3 Theoretical interpretation and contribution

Human capital theory helps explain the fairly consistent gains in business knowledge and work readiness, but it does not fully account for the continued variation in profit and survival. Social capital highlights the value of mentors, peer groups and institutional relationships, while also reminding us that close networks may help people cope without connecting them to more valuable opportunities. COM-B brings these insights together. Training develops capability, coaching can sustain motivation, and finance, markets, infrastructure and institutions shape opportunity. From this perspective, enterprise growth is an alignment problem. Motivation and training cannot indefinitely compensate for the absence of opportunity, just as finance is unlikely to produce lasting results where capability and market understanding are weak.

The review therefore offers a graded view of the evidence for NGO support. Capability-building has the clearest and most consistent support for immediate outcomes. Opportunity-building through finance is backed by strong causal evidence, but its effects depend heavily on context. Mentoring, market linkage and digital support are repeatedly valued and theoretically plausible, yet they have been evaluated less independently and less rigorously. Distinguishing between these levels of evidence can help practitioners avoid presenting every component as equally proven, while recognising that a thin evidence base may reflect limited evaluation rather than limited practical importance.

6. Conclusion

NGOs and related non-state actors make an important contribution to youth entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa. They often reach groups that formal systems overlook, build practical skills, connect young people to networks and, in some programmes, provide finance, equipment and access to markets. The evidence is strongest for improvements in knowledge, confidence, work readiness and participation in enterprise. It is less consistent when the focus shifts to long-term profit, survival, productivity and job creation.

The main conclusion is therefore conditional. NGO support is most likely to be effective when it identifies the participant's binding constraint, combines complementary inputs, connects training to genuine market demand, adapts delivery to gender and rural realities, and continues after the first workshop. NGOs matter, but they cannot create sustainable enterprises on their own. Lasting growth also depends on functioning markets, affordable finance, reliable infrastructure, digital access and coordinated public institutions.

7. Recommendations

Drawing on the reviewed evidence and the implementation gaps identified above, Table 6 presents practical recommendations for strengthening NGO-led youth entrepreneurship support.

Table 6: Evidence-based recommendations for NGO-led youth entrepreneurship support

Recommendation	Practical action	Evidence rationale
Diagnose constraints before enrolment	Assess each participant's enterprise stage, sector, capabilities, financial needs and market prospects so that the programme responds to the real constraint rather than offering the same package to everyone.	Higher-quality studies show that effects differ across groups and settings, which argues against one-size-fits-all delivery.
Bundle and sequence complementary support	Combine practical training with finance, mentoring and market linkage, but provide each component at the point when the entrepreneur is ready to use it.	Integrated and liquidity-focused approaches perform better when their components are matched to a clearly identified need.
Budget for post-training follow-up	Continue coaching visits, peer problem-solving, digital check-ins and referral support for at least 12 months after the initial training.	Insufficient follow-up is one of the most frequently reported weaknesses across the included studies.
Use youth-friendly finance	Offer grants, savings-linked finance, guarantees, equipment or flexible credit that reflects seasonal and irregular cash flows, and avoid providing debt without coaching and market assessment.	Finance can unlock investment, but outcomes depend on product design, repayment conditions and the returns available in the local market.

Begin with the market, not only production	Assess demand, clarify quality standards and connect participants to buyers, cooperatives, procurement opportunities and digital channels before expanding production.	Across the studies, weak market access repeatedly prevented improved skills from translating into stronger sales.
Design for rural and gender inclusion	Use decentralised or mobile delivery, local-language and radio options, transport support, childcare-sensitive schedules, safe venues and practical measures to narrow the gender digital divide.	Rural location and gender shape who can participate, use programme resources and sustain the benefits.
Coordinate delivery and referrals	Establish district-level referral pathways linking NGOs, public agencies, finance providers, training institutions and private buyers, supported by a small set of shared monitoring indicators.	Poor coordination interrupts support, duplicates activities and leaves young entrepreneurs without a clear next point of assistance.
Measure durable outcomes	Track survival, sales, profit, productivity, formalisation, reinvestment and employment at 6, 12, 24 and 36 months, and report null or negative findings as well as positive ones.	The most serious evidence gap concerns the quality and durability of enterprises and the jobs they create.

Note. Source: Authors' recommendations derived from Cho and Honorati (2014), Kluve et al. (2017), Pinet et al. (2020), Maïga et al. (2020), McIntosh and Zeitlin (2022, 2026), Leger et al. (2025), and Ofosu-Appiah et al. (2025).

Declarations

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Consent for publication. Not applicable.

Data availability. The manuscript contains the study-selection figure, evidence tables and appraisal categories, while Table 7 in Appendix A provides the complete study-level extraction and evidence-weighting matrix used in the review. The corresponding author can provide the working search log on reasonable request.

Use of artificial intelligence tools. Artificial intelligence tools assisted with language refinement, organisation and formatting only. The authors verified the sources, interpreted the evidence and take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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Appendix A. Completed Extraction and Evidence-Weighting Matrix

For transparency and reproducibility, Table 7 presents the completed extraction and evidence-weighting matrix for all 22 studies included in the narrative synthesis.

Table 7: Completed study-level extraction and evidence-weighting matrix

Study	Country	Design	Intervention/support	Key result/limitation	Appraisal
Alcid, 2014	Rwanda	Randomised controlled trial report	Akazi Kanoze work-readiness and financial-management training	Higher employment probability among rural graduates; improved work-readiness and financial-management skills.	High
Education Development Center, 2016	Rwanda	Programme final report	Training, local civil-society delivery, work exposure and institutional partnerships	Reached 21,039 youth through 63 local partners; demonstrates scale and partnership reach, but causal attribution is limited.	Moderate
McIntosh & Zeitlin, 2022	Rwanda	Randomised controlled trial	USAID/EDC workforce training benchmarked against cash grants	Training improved business knowledge and productive time; cost-equivalent cash generated larger gains in income, consumption and wealth.	High
McIntosh & Zeitlin, 2026	Rwanda	Medium-term randomised follow-up	Skills training and cash-transfer arms	Entrepreneurship, assets and savings effects persisted in part, but business returns remained low and many early impacts faded.	High
DeJaeghere & Baxter, 2014	Uganda and Tanzania	Qualitative NGO programme case	Entrepreneurship education and livelihood support	Skills were useful only when social, material and institutional conditions allowed youth to convert them into viable choices.	Moderate
Flynn & Sumberg, 2018	Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia	Multi-country qualitative study	Youth savings groups and income-generating activities	Savings groups supported discipline and coping, but rarely overcame low-return markets or produced transformative livelihood change.	Moderate
Pinet et al., 2020	Ghana	Impact evaluation	MASO integrated cocoa-sector training, mentoring and enterprise support	Improved skills and some economic outcomes; effects depended on market access, implementation quality and continued support.	High
Njambi-Szlapka et al., 2021	Uganda	Mixed-methods research report	Youth Forward agribusiness support, finance and digital linkages	Diversification, mobile-phone access and digital platforms supported resilience; gendered digital access constrained benefits.	Moderate
TechnoServe, 2020	Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda	Multi-country programme evaluation	STRYDE rural enterprise training, mentoring and market-oriented support	Integrated rural delivery showed promise at scale, while local market conditions and post-training support affected sustainability.	Moderate
Bandiera et al., 2020	Uganda	Cluster-randomised controlled trial	BRAC Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents programme	Multifaceted vocational and life-skills support increased economic activity and improved social outcomes over four years.	High
Blattman et al., 2014	Uganda	Randomised controlled trial	Group-based business plans, vocational training and cash grants	Raised assets, skilled work and earnings, illustrating the value of liquidity plus capability, although it was not an NGO-only intervention.	High

Study	Country	Design	Intervention/support	Key result/limitation	Appraisal
Cho & Honorati, 2014	Multiple developing-country settings	Meta-regression	Entrepreneurship training and finance programmes	Average effects were heterogeneous; combined packages and careful targeting performed better than stand-alone training.	High
Kluve et al., 2017	Multiple countries, including SSA	Systematic review	Training, entrepreneurship promotion, employment services and subsidies	Effects varied by intervention type, target group and implementation; entrepreneurship support was not uniformly successful.	High
Maïga et al., 2020	Low- and middle-income countries, including SSA	Systematic review	Youth skills training in agriculture	Outcomes improved when training matched real livelihood pathways and was connected to complementary inputs and markets.	High
Apunyo et al., 2022	Low- and middle-income countries, including SSA	Evidence and gap map	Youth employment and enterprise interventions	Evidence was concentrated on training and employment outcomes, with important gaps in long-term enterprise survival and job quality.	High
Leger et al., 2025	Sub-Saharan Africa	Systematic literature review	Non-formal entrepreneurship training	Promising but inconsistent results; effectiveness depended on programme design, evaluation quality and application conditions.	High
Beber et al., 2025	Sub-Saharan Africa	Systematic review of randomised trials	Skills training	Training effects were generally modest and context-dependent; rigorous studies cautioned against assuming automatic income gains.	High
Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025	Sub-Saharan Africa	Systematic review	Barriers to youth entrepreneurship	Finance, skills, networks, markets and institutional conditions jointly constrained youth enterprise performance.	High
De Gobbi, 2014	Sub-Saharan Africa	Comparative secondary analysis	Success factors in youth entrepreneurship	Education, social capital and favourable entrepreneurial environments were associated with better prospects.	Moderate
Koloma, 2021	Mali	Econometric survey study	Financial inclusion and entrepreneurship willingness	Access to financial services was associated with stronger willingness to undertake entrepreneurship, but willingness is not equivalent to sustained performance.	Moderate
Omeje et al., 2020	Nigeria	Empirical policy study	Youth empowerment and entrepreneurship programmes	Training and finance were relevant, but programme fragmentation and implementation weaknesses reduced economic-diversification effects.	Moderate
Langevang et al., 2012	Uganda	Qualitative study	Youth entrepreneurial motivations and aspirations	Necessity and opportunity motivations overlapped; aspirations remained shaped by finance, household pressures and local markets.	Moderate

Note. This matrix is the completed study-level extraction sheet used for the narrative synthesis. "High" and "Moderate" refer to the predefined 10-criterion quality appraisal described in Section 3.3. Source: Authors' extraction and appraisal of the studies cited in the first column; full bibliographic details are provided in the reference list.