

IMPACT OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME ON POVERTY REDUCTION IN KOGI STATE

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of the Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) on youth economic empowerment and poverty reduction in Kogi State, Nigeria. The programme, established as a state-level social investment initiative, aims to reduce unemployment and poverty through vocational skills acquisition, entrepreneurship development, and job creation among youths. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design using structured questionnaires and secondary data obtained from relevant government reports, policy documents, and development literature. Descriptive and inferential statistical tools, particularly the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC), were used to analyze the data and assess the effectiveness of the programme. Findings revealed that KO-YEP has a significant positive effect on youth economic empowerment in Kogi State ($r = 0.701$, $p = 0.000$), as well as a significant contribution to poverty reduction among beneficiaries ($r = 0.683$, $p = 0.000$). The results indicate that the programme has improved beneficiaries' access to vocational skills, entrepreneurship opportunities, and income-generating activities, thereby enhancing their economic self-reliance and reducing poverty levels. The study concluded that KO-YEP has played an important role in promoting youth empowerment and poverty reduction in Kogi State. However, for its impact to be fully sustained and equitably distributed, there is a need for improved institutional support, expanded rural coverage and strengthened monitoring and evaluation systems,

Keywords: Youth Development, Economic Empowerment, Social Protection, Vocational Training, Entrepreneurial Development, Poverty Alleviation.

1.0 Introduction

Poverty remains a pervasive and multidimensional challenge affecting millions of people across the world. The World Bank (2020) defines poverty as the inability to attain a minimum standard of living, including access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, healthcare, education, and clean water. Globally, about 736 million people continue to live in extreme poverty on less than \$1.90 per day, underscoring the severity of the problem and the urgent need for sustained international intervention and policy action. The majority of the world's poor are concentrated in South Asia and

Sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty remains deeply entrenched due to persistent socio-economic inequalities, unemployment, and inadequate access to essential services. According to the United Nations (2020), poverty reduction remains central to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1, which seeks to end poverty in all its forms by 2030.

In Nigeria, poverty remains a major socio-economic challenge despite various policy interventions and the country's abundant human and natural resources. National statistics indicate that a significant proportion of the population lives below the poverty line, with widespread deprivation especially in rural communities where access to employment, healthcare, education, and infrastructure is limited (NBS, 2020). In response to these challenges, successive governments have implemented several poverty alleviation and social investment programmes aimed at improving livelihoods and reducing unemployment. Earlier initiatives such as the Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) introduced in 1986, the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) also established in 1986, the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) launched in 2000, the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) introduced in 2001, and the Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) established in 2012 were all designed to address unemployment and enhance citizens' welfare. However, despite these efforts, many of these programmes achieved limited success due to challenges such as poor implementation, corruption, inadequate funding, political interference, weak monitoring and evaluation systems, and lack of sustainability, which ultimately led to their decline or discontinuation.

At the state level, particularly in Kogi State, poverty remains widespread, with an estimated 35.4% of the population living below the poverty line (NBS, 2020). Many households continue to experience unemployment, limited access to healthcare and education, and insufficient economic opportunities. In response, the Kogi State Government introduced several social investment initiatives between 2016 and 2018, including the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Programme, the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP), and the Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP). Among these, KO-YEP, launched in 2016, was specifically designed to equip youths with vocational skills, entrepreneurship training, and employment opportunities in order to promote self-reliance, job creation, and poverty reduction across the state.

However, despite the strategic importance of KO-YEP as a key youth-focused social investment intervention, there remains limited empirical evidence on its actual effectiveness in achieving meaningful youth economic empowerment and poverty reduction outcomes in Kogi State. This raises critical questions regarding its effectiveness, sustainability, institutional capacity, and overall contribution to improving the socio-economic conditions of beneficiaries. Consequently, this study is motivated by the need to critically assess KO-YEP as a social investment safety net for poverty reduction in Kogi State. This study is designed to assess the Kogi State Youth Empowerment

Programme (KO-YEP) as a social investment safety net for poverty reduction in Kogi State, Nigeria. The study specifically focuses on;

- a. Examining the extent to which KO-YEP has contributed to youth economic empowerment in the state.
- b. assessing the impact of the programme on poverty reduction among youths in Kogi State.

Hypotheses

H₀₁: The Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) has no significant effect on youth economic empowerment in Kogi State.

H₀₂: The Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) does not significantly contribute to poverty reduction among youths in Kogi State.

2.0 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Social policy and Social Investment

Social policy refers to deliberate government actions designed to enhance citizens' welfare and address social inequalities (Midgley, 2013). It encompasses programs and interventions targeting poverty alleviation, education, healthcare, and employment (Alcock, 2016). Within this framework, social investment represents a proactive form of policy that builds human capital through empowerment and skills development rather than mere welfare distribution (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012). The Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) aligns with this perspective by emphasizing employability, entrepreneurship, and economic inclusion among young people. As a social investment initiative, KO-YEP seeks to reduce long-term dependency by equipping youths with sustainable income-generating capacities, thereby contributing to poverty reduction in Kogi State.

Types and Principles of Social Policy

Social policy can be broadly categorized into social welfare, social protection, social development, and social justice policies (Klein & Marmor, 2006; Midgley, 2013).

- I. Social welfare policy focuses on direct assistance such as income support and education.
- II. Social protection policy provides safety nets against unemployment and vulnerability.
- III. Social development policy promotes skills acquisition, job creation, and human capital formation.
- IV. Social justice policy ensures equity and fair access to opportunities.

These policies are guided by principles of social justice, human rights, participation, and empowerment (United Nations, 1948; Alcock, 2016). KO-YEP embodies these principles by engaging youths in participatory training, promoting self-reliance, and advancing inclusive development goals.

Social Policy and Poverty Reduction

Poverty reduction is a central goal of social policy, as it addresses structural inequalities and promotes human well-being. Effective social policies target root causes such as unemployment, low education, and lack of productive opportunities (World Bank, 2020). By combining welfare support with empowerment strategies, social investment approaches like KO-YEP help shift the focus from relief to capacity-building (Midgley, 2013). In Kogi State, poverty persists despite national interventions such as N-Power and Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) schemes. KO-YEP represents a localized approach aimed at integrating social policy with grassroots empowerment by training youths in entrepreneurship, vocational skills, and access to microcredit facilities.

Social policy theory provides a lens for evaluating KO-YEP as both a welfare intervention and a social investment mechanism. It explains how empowering marginalized groups through structured training and economic inclusion can reduce intergenerational poverty. KO-YEP's success, therefore, depends on its ability to align with the principles of social justice, participation, and empowerment to produce measurable socio-economic outcomes.

Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) and the Economic Empowerment of Youths

The Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) is a state-led social investment initiative launched in 2016 to combat rising youth unemployment and poverty through skills training, entrepreneurship support, and access to start-up capital (Kogi State Government, KO-YEP Implementation Report, 2020, p. 12). The program targets unemployed youths aged 18–35 years, providing vocational skills, mentorship, and micro-grants to facilitate self-reliance.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) Labour Force Survey (2020, p. 45), Kogi State's youth unemployment rate declined from 65% in 2015 to 45% in 2020, partly attributed to KO-YEP and related social investment programs. The KO-YEP Annual Performance Review (2020, p. 33) further reported that 52% of beneficiaries established small businesses within a year of completing the program. These outcomes suggest measurable progress toward youth economic inclusion and poverty reduction.

Mechanisms of Impact: How KO-YEP Promotes Youth Empowerment

KO-YEP's effectiveness stems from its skills-based and entrepreneurial model, which integrates three main mechanisms:

Skills Acquisition and Capacity Building:

The program provides hands-on vocational training in trades such as ICT, agriculture, fashion, and crafts. This builds technical and managerial capacity among youths, enhancing employability and business readiness.

Access to Finance and Mentorship:

Participants receive start-up grants and business advisory services, reducing entry barriers to entrepreneurship. Regular mentorship from local entrepreneurs fosters innovation, business sustainability, and social capital formation (World Bank, Youth Employment Diagnostic Report, 2021).

Community Linkages and Local Value Chains:

By promoting locally relevant skills, KO-YEP strengthens community economies, encourages local sourcing, and aligns with Kogi State's development priorities in agriculture and small-scale enterprise (Kogi State Government, 2020).

Challenges and Strategic Responses

Despite its achievements, KO-YEP faces systemic challenges that constrain its reach and long-term impact:

Inadequate Funding and Institutional Weakness:

The program relies heavily on annual budget allocations, which are often inconsistent. This affects training quality, beneficiary coverage, and post-training support (World Bank, 2021).

Limited Rural Outreach:

Many rural youths remain excluded due to infrastructural deficits and the program's urban-centric implementation structure (NBS, 2020).

Post-Training Sustainability:

A lack of follow-up mechanisms, market linkages, and business continuity support has led to a decline in long-term business survival rates beyond the first year (KO-YEP Monitoring Report, 2021).

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach. KO-YEP should adopt a public-private partnership (PPP) funding model to stabilize financing and integrate microfinance institutions to support beneficiaries' access to credit. Strengthening rural inclusion through community-based training centers and digital learning platforms would expand reach, while establishing an alumni entrepreneurship network could enhance peer mentorship and accountability.

Sustainability and Policy Recommendations

For the Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) to remain a viable social investment mechanism, sustainability must be embedded within its institutional design. The sustainability of KO-YEP requires the integration of key policy and operational strategies aimed at ensuring continuity, efficiency, and long-term impact.

Firstly, the institutionalization of KO-YEP under a statutory agency with legal and financial autonomy is essential to guarantee its continuity across different political administrations. This would help insulate the program from political transitions and ensure consistent implementation.

Secondly, the establishment of diversified funding models, such as a Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF), supported by state resources, donor agencies, and private sector partnerships, would enhance financial stability and scalability.

Thirdly, the implementation of a data-driven Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework is necessary to assess beneficiaries' long-term outcomes, monitor program effectiveness, and guide adaptive management practices.

Finally, policy integration is vital for coherence and synergy. Aligning KO-YEP with the National Social Investment Program (NSIP) and the National Youth Policy (2021-2026) would ensure consistency in youth development objectives and optimize the use of available resources.

By adopting these measures, KO-YEP can evolve from a short-term intervention into a sustainable and institutionalized framework for youth economic empowerment, thereby reinforcing the broader social policy objectives of poverty reduction and inclusive growth in Kogi State.

Theoretical Framework

This study is principally guided by Amartya Sen's Social Investment Theory (Sen, 1999), which treats social interventions education, health, training, and social protection as investments that expand people's capabilities and freedoms, producing both social justice and sustained economic dividends. Rather than re-stating definitions already covered in the conceptual framework, the value of Sen's approach for this research lies in its normative and instrumental claim: social programmes should be designed both to protect vulnerable groups and to actively build their productive capacities.

To demonstrate theoretical depth, it is useful to situate Sen's perspective alongside two frequently used alternatives:

Human Capital Theory by (Becker, 1964).

Human capital theory emphasizes investment in education and skills because they raise individual productivity and earnings. It aligns with Sen on the importance of skills and training, but differs in emphasis: Becker treats investments primarily as instruments for market productivity and individual returns, whereas Sen situates skills-building within a broader normative frame of capabilities and freedoms (i.e., what people are actually able to do and be). For KO-YEP, a human-capital lens highlights measurable outcomes such as income and employment rates; Sen's lens pushes further to ask whether beneficiaries gain substantive agency, social inclusion, and resilience.

Social Protection / Safety-Net Theory (Midgley, 2013).

Social protection frameworks foreground buffering households against shocks (cash transfers, insurance, food programs). These approaches prioritize poverty reduction through risk mitigation and immediate consumption smoothing. In contrast, Sen's social investment perspective calls for combining protection with capacity-building so that short-term relief is linked to long-term capability enhancement. Applied to KO-YEP, social protection explains the immediate poverty-reducing effect of grants or stipends, while Sen's approach justifies coupling those with vocational training, credit access and participation mechanisms that produce durable empowerment.

Sen's theory is particularly well-suited to evaluate KO-YEP because the programme explicitly mixes training (human capital) with supportive measures (safety-net features) a hybrid Sen advocates. Using Sen as the principal framework allows the study to assess not only whether KO-YEP increases employment or business start-ups (human capital indicators), or temporarily raises incomes (social protection indicators), but also whether it expands youths' substantive freedoms: sustained economic autonomy, civic participation, and reduced vulnerability to shocks.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design, which is suitable for collecting data from a large population to analyze attitudes, perceptions, and impacts systematically. Both primary and secondary data sources were utilized. The primary data were obtained through the administration of structured questionnaires and oral interviews with selected participants, while the secondary data were gathered from textbooks, journal articles, government reports, policy documents, and other relevant publications related to youth empowerment and social investment programmes.

Population of the Study

The study population comprised beneficiaries and stakeholders of the Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) drawn from three (3) Local Government Areas (LGAs) representing the three senatorial districts of Kogi State: Dekina (Kogi East), Okene (Kogi Central), and Lokoja (Kogi West). These LGAs were purposively selected to reflect geographical, socio-economic, and demographic diversity across the state.

SN	LGA	Senatorial District	Population
1	Dekina	Kogi East	378
2	Okene	Kogi Central	376
3	Lokoja	Kogi West	372
	Total		1,126

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Sample Size Determination

To determine the sample size for the study, Taro Yamane (1970) formula was used. The formula is given below.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N (e)^2}$$

Where N = Sampling Size

I = Constant Factor

e^2 = Level of Significance = 5%

Substituting into the formular

$$n = \frac{1126}{1 + 1126 (0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{1126}{1 + 1126 \times (0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{1126}{1 + 2.815}$$

$$n = \frac{1126}{3.815}$$

$$n = 295$$

Sampling Size = 259.

Sampling Procedure

A proportionate sampling technique was used to allocate the 295 respondents across the three LGAs based on their population sizes. Within each LGA, convenience sampling was applied to select beneficiaries who were accessible and willing to participate in the study. This approach ensured representativeness while accommodating logistical constraints in fieldwork.

Instrumentation

The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire, designed in alignment with the research objectives and hypotheses. The questionnaire consisted primarily of close-ended questions structured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). Additionally, oral interviews were conducted with selected respondents to gather qualitative insights into their experiences with KO-YEP.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

To ensure content and face validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in development studies and social research methodology. A pilot study involving 30 respondents outside the main sample was conducted to test the clarity, relevance, and consistency of the items. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.82, indicating a high level of internal consistency and reliability.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and standard deviations) summarized demographic and perception data, while inferential analyses tested relationships among variables. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) assessed the relationship between the Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) and youth economic empowerment in Kogi State and Simple Linear Regression measured the relationship between the Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) and poverty reduction among youths in Kogi State

All hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance, ensuring statistical objectivity and reliability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Respondents' informed consent was obtained before data collection, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. All data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One

H₀₁: The Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) has no significant effect on youth economic empowerment in Kogi State.

H₁₁: The Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) has a significant effect on youth economic empowerment in Kogi State.

Using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC), the result revealed a strong positive relationship between KO-YEP participation and youth economic empowerment ($r = 0.701$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 278$). Since the p-value is less than 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that participation in KO-YEP significantly enhances youth economic empowerment in Kogi State through improved access to vocational skills, entrepreneurial development, and self-reliance opportunities. This finding aligns with Becker's (1964) Human Capital Theory, which emphasizes that investment in skills and training improves productivity and economic outcomes. It also supports Sen's (1999) capability approach, which argues that development programmes are effective when they expand individuals' substantive freedoms and economic opportunities.

Hypothesis Two

H₀₂: The Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) does not significantly contribute to poverty reduction among youths in Kogi State.

H₁₂: The Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) significantly contributes to poverty reduction among youths in Kogi State.

Using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC), the result revealed a strong positive relationship between KO-YEP participation and poverty reduction among youths ($r = 0.683$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 278$). Since the p-value is less than 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that KO-YEP significantly contributes to poverty reduction in Kogi State through improved income generation, increased employment opportunities, and enhanced economic self-reliance among beneficiaries.

This finding is consistent with Midgley's (2013) social development theory, which posits that empowerment-oriented interventions reduce poverty by improving human capacity and access to productive opportunities. It also supports the World Bank (2020) position that skills development and entrepreneurship programmes are critical instruments for sustainable poverty reduction.

Summary of Test Result

Hypothesis	Statistical Test	r / R ²	P-value	Decision	Interpretation
H ₀₁	Pearson Correlation (PPMC)	r = 0.701	0.000	Rejected	Strong positive relationship between KO-YEP participation and youth economic empowerment
H ₀₂	Pearson Correlation (PPMC)	r = 0.683	0.000	Rejected	Strong positive relationship between KO-YEP participation and poverty reduction among youths

4.0 Analysis and Discussion of Findings

This section presents and discusses the major findings of the study based on data collected from the three selected Local Government Areas (Dekina, Okene, and Lokoja). A total of 295 questionnaires were administered, out of which 278 were duly completed and returned, representing a 94.6% response rate. The data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Contribution of KO-YEP to Youth Economic Empowerment

Findings from the study revealed that the Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) has made a strong positive contribution to youth economic empowerment in Kogi State. The Pearson correlation analysis showed a strong positive relationship between participation in KO-YEP and youth economic empowerment ($r = 0.701$, $p = 0.000$). Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates that KO-YEP significantly enhances youth economic empowerment in the study area.

This implies that beneficiaries who participated in KO-YEP experienced improved access to vocational skills, entrepreneurship training, and self-employment opportunities. These outcomes demonstrate that the programme has strengthened human capital development among youths, enabling many to establish small businesses and become economically self-reliant. This finding is consistent with Sen's (1999) capability approach, which emphasizes that development interventions should expand individuals' freedoms and productive capacities.

KO-YEP and Poverty Reduction

The study also revealed a strong positive relationship between KO-YEP participation and poverty reduction among youths. The Pearson correlation result indicated a significant association ($r = 0.683$, $p = 0.000$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This shows that KO-YEP significantly contributes to poverty reduction in Kogi State.

This means that beneficiaries of KO-YEP recorded improvements in income levels and living standards after participating in the programme. Many respondents reported that financial support, start-up kits, and skills acquired through the programme enabled them to engage in income-generating activities that improved their household welfare. This supports Midgley's (2013) social development perspective, which links empowerment programmes to improved welfare outcomes and sustainable poverty reduction.

However, the impact of KO-YEP was not uniform across the study areas. Beneficiaries in Lokoja experienced higher levels of economic improvement due to better access to markets and infrastructure, while those in Dekina recorded comparatively lower gains, suggesting that environmental and infrastructural factors influence programme effectiveness.

Summary of Key Findings

KO-YEP has a strong positive effect on youth economic empowerment in Kogi State ($r = 0.701$, $p < 0.05$).

KO-YEP significantly contributes to poverty reduction among youths in Kogi State ($r = 0.683$, $p < 0.05$).

Discussion of Findings

Overall, the findings confirm that the Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) functions as an effective social investment intervention that promotes both youth economic empowerment and poverty reduction. The statistical evidence from the PPMC analysis demonstrates that participation in KO-YEP is significantly associated with improved economic outcomes among beneficiaries.

The results further validate Amartya Sen's Social Investment (Capability) Theory, which emphasizes that development programmes are most effective when they expand individuals' capabilities and freedoms. KO-YEP achieves this by combining skills acquisition, entrepreneurship support, and financial assistance to reduce unemployment and poverty.

However, the study also highlights the influence of contextual factors such as infrastructure and location on programme effectiveness. Therefore, for KO-YEP to achieve maximum impact, there is a need for improved institutional support, equitable coverage, and strengthened rural inclusion strategies.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study, based on Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis, demonstrate that the Kogi State Youth Empowerment Programme (KO-YEP) has a statistically significant positive effect on both youth economic empowerment and poverty reduction in Kogi State. The results revealed a strong positive relationship between KO-YEP participation and youth economic empowerment ($r = 0.701$, $p = 0.000$), as well as a significant positive relationship between KO-YEP participation and poverty reduction among youths ($r = 0.683$, $p = 0.000$). These findings indicate that KO-YEP has contributed meaningfully to improving beneficiaries' access to vocational skills, entrepreneurship development, and income-generating opportunities. Consequently, many participants have attained improved economic status, enhanced self-reliance, and reduced vulnerability to poverty.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Strengthening programme implementation: KO-YEP should be expanded and strengthened to ensure more equitable access across all local government areas, particularly rural communities that are currently underserved.
2. Improved monitoring and evaluation systems: A more robust monitoring and evaluation framework should be established to track beneficiaries' progress and ensure accountability and effectiveness in programme delivery.

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