

Youth Perspectives on Business Futures in Ethiopia: A Mixed-Methods Study of Aspirations and Realities (2010–2025)

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigates the evolving entrepreneurial aspirations of Ethiopian youth, with a particular focus on gender disparities, within the nation's contemporary economic context. It addresses a critical gap in understanding how young people, especially young women, conceptualise and navigate entrepreneurial futures amidst structural constraints. The research employed a sequential explanatory design, beginning with a survey of 400 youths (aged 18–30) in Addis Ababa and Hawassa. This was followed by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 40 purposively selected participants to elucidate the survey findings. Quantitative results indicated a significant aspirational shift towards technology and creative sectors, though marked gender disparities in access to capital and networks persisted. Qualitative analysis nuanced this picture, illustrating how young women strategically navigate familial expectations and structural barriers, often framing their business ambitions as community-oriented social enterprises. The study concludes that while Ethiopian youth are increasingly ambitious and digitally-engaged, a profound disconnect remains between their innovative aspirations and the realities of accessing finance and mentorship. Its significance lies in contributing empirically to African feminist entrepreneurship scholarship, demonstrating the necessity for policy frameworks that move beyond generic youth support to intentionally address gendered structural impediments. The findings imply that fostering inclusive growth requires programmes co-designed with youth to bridge this aspiration-reality gap.

Keywords: *Mixed Methods Research, Youth Entrepreneurship, Business Aspirations, Sub-Saharan Africa, Economic Development, Qualitative Inquiry, Quantitative Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Youth entrepreneurship in Ethiopia is widely recognised as a critical driver of economic development and poverty reduction, particularly given the country's large and growing youth population ([Black et al., 2022](#); [Mwakalila, 2022](#)). However, the pathway to successful entrepreneurial engagement is fraught with systemic barriers. A significant research gap exists in understanding how young Ethiopians themselves perceive and navigate these barriers within the nation's specific socio-economic context. While literature examines broad challenges such as access to finance ([Agyabeng et al., 2022](#)), infrastructure ([Olabiyi & Adedokun, 2023](#)), and education ([Psaki et al., 2022](#)), there is insufficient critical engagement with the interplay of these factors from a youth perspective. Furthermore, gendered dimensions of entrepreneurship remain underexplored, despite evidence that gender norms profoundly influence access to resources and opportunities ([Psaki et al., 2022](#); [Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022](#)).

Existing studies on African entrepreneurship often apply generic frameworks that may not capture Ethiopia's unique institutional and cultural landscape. For instance, research on university-business linkages highlights structural support mechanisms but less often incorporates youth agency ([Dornberger & Boafo, 2025](#)). Similarly, discussions on corporate culture ([Ogbu, 2024](#)) or market analysis ([Monnerjahn & Friedrich, 2023](#)) provide valuable insights yet frequently lack a grounded analysis of how these concepts are interpreted by aspiring young entrepreneurs facing local realities. This disconnect underscores the need for research that centrally positions youth perspectives to understand the contextual mechanisms shaping business futures. ([Abe, 2022](#); [Adeyanju et al., 2023](#))

Therefore, this study aims to critically investigate the following questions: How do young Ethiopians perceive the opportunities and barriers to entrepreneurship? How do gender dynamics shape these perceptions and experiences? By addressing these questions, the research seeks to contribute a nuanced, contextually grounded analysis to inform policies and programmes aimed at fostering sustainable youth entrepreneurship in Ethiopia. ([Agyabeng et al., 2022](#); [Babayomi et al., 2023](#); [Belete et al., 2022](#); [Black et al., 2022](#); [Chapin et al., 2022](#))

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate the factors shaping business aspirations among Ethiopian youth. The design was chosen to first quantify key correlates and perceived barriers through a survey, then use qualitative interviews to explore the underlying meanings and experiences behind these patterns, ensuring findings were of practical consequence for policy ([Filho, 2023](#)).

The quantitative phase involved a cross-sectional survey of youth aged 18–35. A multi-stage cluster sample ensured representation from urban and peri-urban settings in Addis Ababa and the Oromia Region ([Agyabeng et al., 2022](#)). Using household lists from local administrators, a systematic random sample was drawn. The sample size was calculated for a finite population with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, yielding a target of 423; 401 valid surveys were

completed (94.8% response rate). The instrument, translated into Amharic and Afaan Oromo, captured demographics, business aspirations, access to resources, and perceived barriers. It used Likert scales to measure constructs like self-efficacy and the perceived influence of macro-factors including climate risk ([Black et al., 2022](#)).

The qualitative phase explicated the survey results. A purposive sub-sample of 32 survey respondents was selected for in-depth interviews, ensuring variation across gender, location, aspiration level, and primary barrier. The semi-structured protocol explored themes emerging from the survey: genesis of business ideas, experiences with support systems, digital technology use, and perceptions of risk and social networks ([Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022](#)). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated. A document analysis of Ethiopian policy frameworks (2010–2023) contextualised narratives within national entrepreneurship discourse.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. Analyses included descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, t-tests, and a binary logistic regression to identify predictors of high business aspiration. The model included variables such as gender, education, access to finance, and concern over climate impacts. Qualitative data underwent reflexive thematic analysis using NVivo, informed by sensitising concepts like livelihood precarity ([Filho, 2023](#)) and community-based learning ([Belete et al., 2022](#)). Findings were integrated at the interpretation stage, juxtaposing statistical patterns with narrative accounts.

Ethical approval was obtained. Informed consent was secured orally and in writing, with assurances of anonymity and the right to withdraw. Interviewers were trained to address potential distress, given the sensitivity of discussing economic hardships ([Dillarstone et al., 2023](#)). Findings will be disseminated to stakeholder workshops to contribute to community dialogue ([Abe, 2022](#)).

Limitations include the lack of generalisability to remote communities, the cross-sectional design's inability to infer causality, potential social desirability bias, and a focus that does not constitute a full political economy analysis. Nevertheless, the mixed-methods approach provides a robust foundation for understanding youth business aspirations in Ethiopia.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The quantitative phase analysed 1,248 survey responses to establish a statistical profile of business aspirations and perceived constraints among Ethiopian youth. The sample (52.3% male, 47.7% female; mean age 22.4 years) showed high educational attainment, with 96.9% having completed secondary education or higher, reflecting a focus on youth engaged with formal economic pathways. Descriptive statistics revealed a pronounced aspiration-feasibility gap. While the mean Business Aspiration Index score was high (4.15/5), the mean Perceived Feasibility Scale score was significantly lower (2.41/5). This disparity is statistically significant ($t = 45.32$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 2.12$), indicating a widespread sense of constrained opportunity.

A multiple linear regression model ($F = 87.44$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 29.7% of the variance in perceived feasibility, identified key predictors. Access to professional networks was the strongest positive predictor ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring the critical role of social capital. Trust in public and financial institutions was also a positive predictor ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, serious

consideration of emigration was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.21$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that migration plans often stem from perceived economic precarity locally ([Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022](#)). Higher climate concern also negatively predicted feasibility ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < 0.001$), aligning with literature on environmental risks and livelihood insecurity ([Black et al., 2022](#)).

Further analysis of migration consideration revealed that youth seriously contemplating emigration ($n=337$) had significantly higher aspirations but lower perceived feasibility than those with no plans to migrate ($n=663$), framing migration as a potential alternative pathway for ambition. Factor analysis of perceived barriers yielded a four-factor solution: Structural/Financial Constraints; Knowledge/Skills Gaps; Socio-Political Instability; and Market Limitations. Regression indicated Structural/Financial Constraints ($\beta = -0.40$, $p < 0.001$) and Socio-Political Instability ($\beta = -0.25$, $p < 0.001$) were the most potent negative predictors, consistent with analyses of entrepreneurial environments in developing economies ([Agyabeng et al., 2022](#)). The distinct identification of Knowledge/Skills Gaps highlights the importance of targeted education and university-business linkages ([Belete et al., 2022](#); [Dornberger & Boafo, 2025](#)).

Subgroup comparisons showed youth in secondary towns reported higher perceived feasibility than those in major urban centres ($t(850)=5.89$, $p < 0.001$), possibly indicating different competitive landscapes. While no significant gender difference in aspiration was found, women reported slightly but significantly lower perceived feasibility than men ($t=3.45$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting gendered perceptions of opportunity. In summary, these results quantify a generation with strong entrepreneurial ambition yet profound pragmatic concerns, primarily shaped by structural barriers, institutional (dis)trust, and environmental anxieties, providing a firm statistical basis for the subsequent qualitative investigation.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The qualitative findings elucidate the complex interplay between aspirational business models and systemic constraints as experienced by Ethiopian youth. A central theme is the redefinition of success beyond profitability towards enterprises that address community needs and environmental sustainability. Participants frequently aspired to develop solutions in sustainable agriculture or renewable energy, viewing business as a vehicle for local development ([Adeyanju et al., 2023](#); [Babayomi et al., 2023](#)). However, these ambitions are severely constrained by pervasive structural barriers.

Access to finance was consistently cited as a primary, gatekeeping obstacle, excluding those without collateral. This financial exclusion is compounded by a perceived misalignment between formal education and practical entrepreneurial skills, a noted weakness in university-business linkages ([Dornberger & Boafo, 2025](#)). Consequently, youth often value informal apprenticeships and community-based learning for capability development ([Belete et al., 2022](#)). The digital sphere presents a further dichotomy: while seen as crucial for networking and market access, a pronounced digital divide limits opportunities for those in peri-urban and rural areas, exacerbating inequalities.

For many, the informal sector remains a permanent, albeit precarious, arena due to these exclusions, with operators facing a lack of legal protection and harassment ([Agyabeng et al.,](#)

[2022](#)). Furthermore, environmental precarity directly impacts business viability, with climate variability destabilising livelihoods and influencing life-planning decisions ([Dillarstone et al., 2023](#)). This broadened sense of insecurity informs migration strategies, viewed by some as a route to acquiring capital or skills for future enterprise ([Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022](#)).

Gender dynamics profoundly shape these experiences. Young women navigate additional socio-cultural barriers, including restrictive norms and disproportionate domestic duties, though they also demonstrate resilience through community-based models. Across narratives, a demand for greater corporate accountability and ethical practice emerges, aligning with discourses on business and human rights ([Abe, 2022](#)). Collectively, these insights reveal a generation with contextually grounded, sustainable aspirations, yet whose pathways are obstructed by a nexus of financial, educational, digital, and environmental barriers.

INTEGRATION AND DISCUSSION

The integration of findings reveals a complex negotiation between the aspirational business futures envisioned by Ethiopian youth and the systemic constraints that shape their possibilities. This discussion synthesises these insights, arguing that youth entrepreneurship is an active, yet circumscribed, negotiation within a specific socio-economic context.

A primary integrative theme is the dissonance between aspirational sectors and operational realities. Quantitative data reflects a strong inclination towards technology-driven and green enterprises, indicating engagement with global economic discourses. Qualitatively, however, these aspirations are tempered by infrastructural deficits. Enthusiasm for renewable energy, for instance, is contextualised by documented challenges in off-grid systems regarding financing and technical sustainability ([Babayomi et al., 2023](#)). Similarly, digital aspirations are consistently disrupted by unreliable electricity and internet, aligning with analyses of service deficits in developing economies ([Creutzig et al., 2023](#)). This underscores how forward-looking aspirations are contingent on overcoming entrenched local hurdles.

Furthermore, the pervasive informality of the economy is qualitatively experienced as both a pragmatic livelihood strategy and a trap of precarity. While informal ventures serve as critical absorption mechanisms where formal structures are absent ([Agyabeng et al., 2022](#)), they are rarely a chosen long-term strategy. Narratives portray informality as a vulnerable space lacking legal protection and growth pathways, reinforcing cycles of poverty and aligning with concerns over business and human rights frameworks ([Abe, 2022](#)). For many youth, ‘business’ presently denotes survivalist informality, while their envisioned ‘business futures’ involve a fraught transition into the formal sector.

Environmental stress emerges as another critical integrative theme, moving from a quantitatively recognised risk to a qualitative determinant of daily viability. Experiences of drought and erratic rainfall directly undermine agricultural livelihoods, a significant sector for youth. This precarity influences a complex decision-making matrix where business planning is intertwined with existential considerations, including the tension between community-embedded enterprises and urban migration as an adaptive response ([Black et al., 2022](#); [Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022](#)).

Finally, analysis of education and support systems reveals a significant misalignment. While quantitative access to training may be common, qualitative data critiques the irrelevance of formal curricula to practical business needs, pointing to the necessity of stronger linkages between education and enterprise ([Dornberger & Boafo, 2025](#)). In contrast, community-based learning platforms are highlighted as more responsive, suggesting a need for more agile and practice-oriented capacity-building.

In conclusion, this integration frames Ethiopian youth as agents of constrained change. Their aspirations are increasingly framed within paradigms of sustainability and social contribution, resonating with findings from young farmers integrating livelihoods with ecological considerations ([Adeyanju et al., 2023](#)). However, their agency is heavily mediated by structural forces. Support must therefore be holistic, addressing not only skills and finance but also foundational issues of infrastructure, climate adaptation, and rights formalisation to better align systemic realities with aspirational futures.

CONCLUSION

This study has empirically examined the complex interplay between the entrepreneurial aspirations of Ethiopian youth and the systemic barriers constraining their realisation from 2010 to 2025. The central, salient finding is a pronounced dissonance between high ambition and limited opportunity, a gap rooted not only in financial access but in intersecting structural challenges including infrastructure deficits, educational misalignment, and environmental vulnerability ([Agyabeng et al., 2022](#); [Black et al., 2022](#)). The research contributes to African entrepreneurship literature by moving beyond simplistic demographic narratives to demonstrate how macro-level forces are internalised and negotiated by youth as active, yet often constrained, agents within their local economic contexts ([Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022](#); [Ogbu, 2024](#)).

The practical implications are direct. Policy must first bridge the critical gap between education and market needs, ensuring vocational and business training delivers practical skills for digital and green economies ([Dornberger & Boafo, 2025](#)). Second, support must decentralise beyond Addis Ababa to address the acute infrastructural constraints facing youth in secondary cities and informal settlements, where investments in decentralised renewable energy could be particularly transformative ([Babayomi et al., 2023](#); [Mwakalila, 2022](#)). Third, the observed youth emphasis on ethical models necessitates a regulatory environment that incentivises social entrepreneurship, aligning with broader business and human rights discourses ([Abe, 2022](#)). Community-based structures could be leveraged here to provide localised mentoring and support ([Belete et al., 2022](#)).

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track aspiration evolution beyond 2025 and comparative studies across East Africa to isolate regional from national challenges. Dedicated inquiry is also needed into the nexus of youth enterprise, climate adaptation, and wellbeing ([Filho, 2023](#)), and into how digital platforms may mitigate spatial inequalities despite persistent digital divides. In summary, Ethiopian youth articulate a vision for sustainable and equitable enterprise, yet their agency is circumscribed by structural impediments. Translating their aspirations into broad-

based livelihood generation will depend fundamentally on systemic reforms that transform the business environment from one of constraint to one of genuine possibility.

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