

## Chapter 2

# Poverty or Sugarcane Incentives? Explaining the Negative Dynamics of Sugarcane Farming on Youth Education in Eastern Uganda

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### Abstract

Sugarcane farming is a livelihood opportunity for both adults and young people in East Africa and beyond. However, while incentives such as jobs and cash are subjectively useful in supporting people's survival, community perceptions in Eastern Uganda portray sugarcane farming as harmful to youth education. To mitigate the negative impact of sugarcane farming on children's education, local authorities engage in community sensitisation campaigns to keep children in school, using heavy-handed mechanisms such as impromptu arrests. Combining youth surveys with focus group discussions and key informant interviews, this study finds that young people drift from school to work due to a high-poverty spiral. Notwithstanding the pulling effect of sugarcane farming incentives, this paper argues that the dire socio-economic challenges render attending school as a high opportunity cost for young people because sugarcane farming offers an opportunity for survival. Thus, it is not that education is less important but the current survival challenges trump future human capital development. Rather than focus on harsh interventions, it may be necessary to address socio-economic hardships to deal with sugarcane–education intricacies, not only in Eastern Uganda but also, in any poverty-stricken area where there are ambiguities associated with primary production.

**Keywords:** Youth, work, sugarcane farming, education, poverty



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## 1.0 Introduction

The lives of rural youths in Uganda resonate with vulnerability, weakness, and defencelessness, arising from insufficient income and wealth to support a decent living. Constituting 22.5 percent of Uganda's population, youth vulnerability is manifested by problems of low income, unemployment, and a lack of assets and education skills; the majority of the youths are based in the countryside (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2017b). With regards to unemployment or the lack of gainful work, the magnitude of the problem is apparently higher among urban youths. Unemployment is relatively high among urban youths, and more generally, the incidence is even higher among female youths, compared with their counterparts in rural areas. The high unemployment problem is attributed to the lower number of jobs available vis-à-vis the higher number of young people, with 400,000 people competing for about 9,000 jobs per year (Ahaibwe and Mbowa 2014; Magelah and Ntambirweki-Karugonjo 2014). As such, the majority of youths in Uganda are either inactive, unemployed, or both. Such characteristics imply weak capabilities and conditions of poverty; thus, there is a need for interventions that support and sustain youth livelihoods.

Globally, a significant number of youths are involved in work. For rural communities that depend on farming, young people are involved in work either as part of a family support mechanism or to earn money through exchange of their labour entitlements. While such work is a subjective source of livelihood, it can have negative implications, such as being lured and trapped at the expense of education. Building on the debates about young people's engagement in primary production work, this study investigates the experiences of sugarcane farming and its impact on young people's education in Eastern Uganda. Although sugarcane farming is a source of livelihood, there is a perception that it negatively affects young people's education as they are lured by jobs and income incentives to drift from school into sugarcane work. To keep young people in school, local authorities in Busoga invariably apply punitive measures to restrain young people from engaging in sugarcane work during school time. Given this

background, this study aims to determine the extent to which sugarcane farming incentives cause young people to trade school time for sugarcane work in the Busoga sub-region, and to examine the sustainability of punitive measures in preventing young people from working.

Notwithstanding the attraction of sugarcane farming, this paper argues that the perceptions of sugarcane farming incentives as a problem for young people's education is symptomatic of the high-poverty spiral in the Busoga sub-region, which pushes children towards survival rather than educational attainment. As such, the dire socio-economic challenges reduce the chances of children staying in school because they have to labour to ensure their well-being. Thus, the need to support oneself and the socio-economic needs of the family appear to be a problem for young people's access to education and the development of their human capital. For policy purposes, keeping children in school has more to do with poverty reduction strategies and less of stringent regulations. This study addresses a pertinent development problem, namely, the push and pull factors affecting young people's educational choices as a result of entrapment in poverty and the incentives in the primary production industry.

For conceptual clarity, the terms 'education' or 'school' here mainly refer to primary and lower secondary education. Notwithstanding its contextual and subjective application, 'youth' and 'young people' denote persons aged between 18 and 30 years, as established by the law in Uganda (National Youth Council Act 1993). For the purposes of this study, the adopted definition provides limits within which to regard youths in a contextual manner as young adults. In general terms, youth embodies a transitory stage not only to adulthood but also, from being dependent to being able to provide for oneself (Kristensen and Birch-Thomsen 2013). Thus, the term is used interchangeably with young people. The term 'commercial farming' is used in reference to agricultural production for market purposes (Pingali and Rosegrant 1995). The concept of commercial farming is mainly applied in reference to sugarcane farming. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section two presents the theoretical

review. This is followed by section three, which features the study methodology, while section four presents the context of sugarcane farming in Busoga, the findings, and the discussion. The final section concludes the paper.

## **2.0 Young people versus work in the world**

Work is a given because it is the basis for human survival. Despite being a given, the threshold for working is age; but oftentimes, circumstances force minors or children to engage in work through choice, compulsion, or both, especially in the Global South. In this part of the world, children work in various contexts, including family work and waged employment, mainly to sustain themselves and to contribute to household well-being (Marcus and Harper 1997). Whether by choice or compulsion, young—below eighteen years—people's engagement in work is tantamount to child labour. The prevalence of child labour is predominantly high in the Global South, but there are variations across regions. The Asian Pacific has the highest incidence of young people involved in work, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Latin America, and the Caribbean (United Nations Children's Fund 2007). The vice of child labour poses physical, social, and psychological challenges for its victims. Despite the associated challenges, the employment of young people is regarded as normal because it is part of their developmental path. Young people often have to work for their own survival and that of their families, but work, whether waged or unwaged, contributes to their skills in rural farm areas; most importantly, work is seen as an avenue of 'essential socialization' (Ennew 1994; Marcus and Harper 1997). Notwithstanding the implications of young people's engagement in work, the conditions and consequences of involvement in work vary, depending on the impact of the work on their personal development, the working conditions, and the extent to which young people balance work with human capital development or their ability to study alongside work. This means that work has both damaging and beneficial implications for young people's development and achievement.

The extent to which work is damaging or beneficial to young people depends on several factors. These include, but are not limited to the number of hours spent at work, the nature of the work, its conditions, and its effect on their educational attainment (Marcus and Harper 1997). Young people are often exposed to appalling fiscal conditions in work, such as reduced or no pay, and they face severe physical and health conditions (Weston 2005). The severe work conditions make young people's engagement in work a key theme in academic research and development because work can sometimes become problematic and harmful, in the sense that children meet recurrent survival and livelihood needs at the expense of their health and future educational attainment. More specifically, work becomes harmful to children when it compromises their educational attainment and human capital development (International Labour Organisation 2017; Verner and Blunch 1999). Despite being subjectively problematic, harmful labour continues to manifest itself in global development, giving it more relevance in academia.

The rise and consistent participation of young people in work is attributed to different factors. On the one hand, the increasing number of young people engaged in work is attributed to the freedom of employers to take on whoever seeks work, and to household behaviour or the decision of young people to work (Marcus 1998). In this case, their choice to engage in work is underlined by the free market conditions of labour. On the other hand, young people are pushed into employment because of the challenges of poverty, defined by inequality and the inability to obtain basic household needs (Marcus 1998; Schwarzbach and Richardson 2015; Verner and Blunch 1999). From an economic point of view, it is not a question of choice; young people are compelled to work because of economic crises. However, the economic constraints argument does not overshadow the fact that young people can work for reasons other than economic deprivation. In addition to economic independence, young people engage in work for reasons such as companionship and social interaction (Brown 2001). The non-economic reasons for youth engagement in work not only

challenge the poverty paradigm as a push factor but also, suggest that the young-people-in-work nexus can extend beyond economic factors, especially in the wake of a youth bulge or a demographic structure composed of a large percentage of young adults (Lin 2012).

With the high number of young people and the corresponding challenges of providing for their well-being, most countries face the dilemma of mitigating the conditions of unemployment and other attendant challenges of a rising youth population. Dealing with the plight of rising youth numbers underlines the focus on young people's employment in the overall achievement of Sustainable Development Goal number eight, namely, 'decent work and economic development', which seeks to achieve full productive and decent employment for young people and reduce the proportion of unemployed youths (United Nations 2019). For SSA countries whose populations predominantly depend on farming, agriculture is the central sector for addressing the challenges of youth unemployment and other livelihood challenges (Aferre et al. 2019; Sumberg, Yeboah, Flynn, and Anyidoho 2017). The problem is that while a high tendency towards increased investment in farming presents the youth dividends of employment and income, there is less consideration of the negative implications of commercial farming. Furthermore, there are questions relating to youth interest in farming and issues of commodification embedded in a business model of farming.

In terms of interest, existing research shows diminishing youth interest in the farm sector because of lower productivity and the input and production costs, making farming a non-favoured option for young people (Leavy and Hossain 2014; Leavy and Smith 2010). Furthermore, there is a disjuncture relating to the commodification of farming, which presents further challenges to rural youths (Sumberg et al. 2017). Specifically, commercial farming, which is the most favoured alternative for youth, is based on a business model and is capitalistic in nature. As a system, capitalism is concerned with profit and in enforcing the motives of surplus value. There are dichotomies engendered through the inherent

classification of people into 'haves' (the bourgeoisie/capitalists) and 'have-nots' (the proletariat/labourers) (Marx 1977). In maximising profits, there is less consideration of workers' feelings because people are treated as instruments of production regardless of their age and sex (Tucker 1978). Such objectives imply that projects such as commercial farming can be enclaves of powerful groups at the expense of local poor groups. Earlier studies about sugarcane farming in Busoga attribute the limited youth benefits from sugarcane farming and its suboptimal impact to the recurrent effects of capitalism and imperialism rooted in colonial policies in Uganda (Mwanika, State, Atekyereza, and Österberg 2020). Unlike existing studies, the current study focuses on commercial sugarcane farming to highlight the underpinnings of primary production on young people's human capital development.

### **3.0 Sugarcane farming and young people's education**

Sugarcane is one of the leading tropical cash crops in the Global South. Latin America and Asia are the world's largest sugarcane-producing regions, followed by African countries (International Labour Organisation 2017). In East Africa, sugarcane is one of the oldest crops, a raw material that has contributed to industries which have grown proportionally with the population and the corresponding growth in energy demands (Ogendo and Obiero 1978). Typically foreign in nature, sugarcane farming was introduced by Indians during British colonial rule, following reduced profitability from traditional cash crops such as cotton. Given their middleman position, the decline in cotton prices prompted the Indians to venture into alternative cash crops; thus, sugarcane was part of the diversification of commercial farming by the wealthy Indian groups in Uganda (Martiniello 2017). Beyond East Africa, sugarcane farming is one of the largest and most beneficial commercial crops in Africa.

The most common benefits of sugarcane farming include contributions to infrastructure development, generation of employment, and provision of opportunities for foreign exchange through export sugar



and sugar products (Richardson 2010; Watkins 2004). As a sector, sugarcane farming is important to people's livelihoods; it generates employment opportunities that support at least 100 million people in rural areas (Hess et al. 2016; International Labour Organisation 2017). Employment both on estates and in sugar factories is the most direct benefit among the complementary opportunities associated with sugarcane farming and sugar production processes in Africa and beyond. The significance of sugarcane farming for employment is underlined by the fact that the majority of field sugarcane jobs are physical in nature and require the hiring of manual labour.

However, there are critical issues associated with sugarcane production. The most common challenge is the overly exploitative nature of sugarcane farming in terms of the arduous working conditions, poor remuneration of employees, and limited contribution to local economic development (Coote 1987; de Menezes, da Silva, and Cover 2012; Richardson 2010). In terms of the contribution to national economic development, there is contrasting evidence for sugarcane farming. For example, the majority of SSA sugarcane-producing countries are also among the poorest countries globally (Hess et al. 2016). The recurring issues and contrasting evidence are signs of the underlying disadvantages of sugarcane farming and its incentives. One of these relates to the employment of young people and its implications for educational attainment. Existing research reveals that the majority of sugarcane farming tends to employ relatively young people because they are energetic and are a readily available source of relatively cheap labour (Beinart 1991).

The dependence on young people as a source of labour for sugarcane production presents two major problems. First, sugarcane farming promotes child labour in sugarcane-producing regions such as Latin America, Asia, and African countries such as Uganda, where children under 17 years of age are employed in different activities in the value chain of sugar production (International Labour Organisation 2017; Schwarzbach and Richardson 2015; U.S. Department of Labour 2018). However, the



scope of this study does not cover child labour; the focus here is on the implications of young people's engagement in sugarcane farming on their educational attainment. Second, there is an inextricable relationship between sugarcane farming and young people's educational attainment because of the problems associated with balancing sugarcane work and school attendance.

As a crop and activity, sugarcane farming is associated with low educational attainment among young people. The problems of sugarcane farming stem from children being tasked with helping their parents in sugarcane jobs, either by earning extra income or taking care of household chores (Coote 1987). In some cases, labour migration involves parents moving with their children for jobs in sugarcane farms during busy seasons, such as harvesting. In such circumstances, children's education can be interrupted because it is difficult to access schools during such times, which affects both their comprehension and performance at school (Sanket 2018). Furthermore, incentives for sugarcane farming, such as the prevalence of informal and seasonal work and dependence on unskilled labour, constitute significant pull factors for young people into different activities of sugarcane farming (Schwarzbach and Richardson 2015). Such pull factors attract young people into sugarcane work, which fundamentally compromises school time. However, as previously shown, any work that interferes with young people's school attendance in the form of time limitations or which otherwise compels young people to combine heavy work with school attendance is considered hazardous (International Labour Organisation 2017). Hazardous labour is any kind of primary production activity, such as sugarcane farming, which offers various forms of job opportunity but comes with consequences that, for example, compromise education.

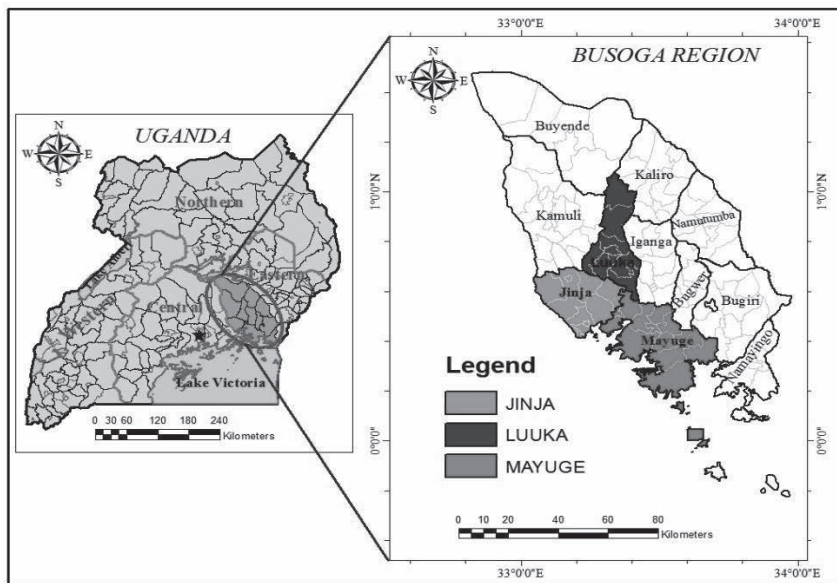
To mitigate the intensity of the problems associated with sugarcane farming incentives, such as the impact of jobs on young people's education, pragmatic and stringent regimes have been adopted in some sugarcane-producing countries. In the Philippines, non-government organisations

such as World Vision injected resources to ensure that children keep out of sugarcane jobs and stay in school, and have had collaboration with the government and other stakeholders through monitoring and referral systems to mitigate the problem, resulting in a government code of conduct against hazardous work (U.S. Department of Labour 2011). However, the effectiveness of regulatory approaches seems to be relatively ineffective. As the International Labour Organization (2012) reports, the progress of protocol-based interventions rarely guarantees long-term effectiveness because the problem tends to recur, manifested by children drifting into hazardous sugarcane jobs (International Labour Organisation 2012). In the Busoga sub-region, sugarcane farming predominates the commercial farm sector, making it a useful case to illuminate the sugarcane farming–education nexus. Despite being a job provider for Busoga’s population, sugarcane farming negatively affects young people’s education because children are lured by sugarcane cash and jobs; as a result, they leave school and drift into sugarcane farming (Kyalya 2013). Determining whether and, if so, how sugarcane farming and its job and income incentives lead to increasing youth participation in sugarcane jobs at the expense of school attendance is the main aim of the current study.

#### **4.0 Study area and methodology**

This study was conducted in the Busoga sub-region of eastern Uganda. Spanning up to 11 districts, the Busoga sub-region comprises an island because its demarcation from the neighbouring regions is marked by water bodies, namely the River Nile in the west, the Mpologoma River in the east, Lake Victoria in the south, and Lake Kyoga, which separates Busoga from the north (Isiko 2018). The Busoga sub-region is the largest sugarcane farming belt in Uganda and high intensity of sugarcane farming has given the Busoga a new identity as a sugarcane ‘island’, as manifested by the massive coverage of sugarcane farms, ranging from small and medium to corporate farms. In terms of procedure and methods, the study findings are based on eight months of fieldwork conducted between March and

October 2018. The field activities were primarily based on the three purposively selected districts of Jinja, Luuka, and Mayuge (see area map in Figure 1). The selected districts not only border each other but also, form the highest concentration of sugarcane farming in the region. A sub-county was selected from each district, from which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Busedde sub-county was selected from Jinja district, while Imanyiro and Bukanga were selected from Mayuge and Luuka, respectively.



**Figure 1. Map showing location of the study area**

*Source:* Developed using updated-shape files from Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2018)

Socially, Busoga is mainly occupied by Bantu-speaking people locally known as Busoga and whose name originates from their language, Lusoga. Reflexively, my own culture and background relate to the study area in two ways. First, my proximity of my own culture and background to Busoga sub-region meant that I was familiar with the region and its socio-economic dynamics. Second, because of the similarities between the culture and language of Busoga and my own culture and my local language,

Lugwere, I was able to relate to respondents through those shared aspects of our cultures whose understanding was relevant in data collection.

Data were collected in two phases. The first phase involved a survey in which 320 youths were interviewed using structured questionnaires. The second phase involved qualitative data collection, in which 21 key informant interviews and nine focus group discussions were conducted in the selected districts and the respective sub-counties. Focus group discussions were conducted at the village level and involved purposively selected young males and females. The criteria for focus group discussion participants were age (18 to 30 years), involvement in sugarcane farming, lived experience, and knowledge of sugarcane farming. The key informant interviews included technical, political, and opinion leaders at the district, sub-county, and village levels. The data collection tools covered the major theme of the general implications of sugarcane farming on youth livelihoods and, specifically, the impact of sugarcane farming on youth education among other livelihood outcomes and indicators. It was envisioned that, given the long history of sugarcane farming in the Busoga sub-region, both the young people and other selected participants, especially the political technical leaders, would have adequate experience of the sugarcane–education nexus there.

### **5.0 The dynamics of education and sugarcane farming in Busoga**

The aim of this study was to determine whether and, if so, how young people's choice of sugarcane work over school is caused by sugarcane farming or precipitated by factors beyond sugarcane farming. Both male and female youths participated in the study, with non-uniform socio-economic characteristics. Of the 320 participants in the youth survey, 82 percent were male, and only 18 percent were female. The stark difference in male and female participants reflects that sugarcane farming in the Busoga sub-region is a male-dominated activity. The domination of male youths in sugarcane farming is not surprising given the patriarchal nature of the Busoga community. Available research shows that commercial

farming is a reserve of the male gender in the Busoga community because of its patriarchal community norms, which limit women's work to food crops for household consumption (Sørensen 1996). The dominance of male youths in Busoga's sugarcane farm sector conforms to existing studies showing that male youths tend to be more involved in commercial labour activities than female youths are (International Labour Organisation 2017). In terms of age, 41 percent of the youth were aged 18 to 21 years, followed by 35 percent aged 26 to 29 years and the remaining 24 percent of the youths were aged 22 to 25 years. The study participants were largely of the age of consent, thus fitting the definition of young adults. More than half (51.2 percent) of the youths were unmarried and only 47.5 percent of the participants had family and marital responsibilities. The relatively low percentage of married participants indicates that most of the young were of school-going age and had no independent family responsibilities. In terms of occupation, the majority of the participants depended on farming, with sugarcane as their principal commercial activity. In relationship to farming, 83 percent of the youths indicated that they had access to land but most of them had access to given or family land with most youths having between half to one acre. Regarding sugarcane farm ownership, only 20 percent of the youths owned sugarcane farms while the majority were involved in sugarcane farming as workers.

In addition, apart from farming, 17 percent of the youths earned a living through other activities as casual labour, the retail trade, hairdressing, brick laying, and a motorcycle taxi service locally known as 'boda-boda'. This dependence on several livelihood activities implies a lack of single solid jobs. In actual sense, however, this diversity of activities generally tends to characterise the livelihood structure of rural populations (Chambers and Conway 1991). In terms of education, 56.5 percent of the youths had attained a primary level of education. A further 34.4 percent had attained a lower secondary education and 5.5 percent had attained an advanced secondary-level education (5.5 percent). Only 2.5 percent had a tertiary education qualification and 1.3 percent had no formal education training.

Thus, the majority of the youths had not studied beyond primary school. The low education attainment has implications for youth agency. First, low educational qualification implies high youth vulnerability and second is limited youth agency and competitiveness, especially in activities that require skilled labour. As such, the need to prioritise youth education cannot be overemphasised. However, the need for educational goals appears to be undermined by the major source of livelihood in the region, a claim that this study analyses through respondents' views on sugarcane farming and young people's education.

Economically, the population of Busoga depends on subsistence farming of principal food crops, such as maize, cassava, sweet potatoes, and beans, along with cotton and coffee as traditional cash crops (Sørensen 1996). The 1920s marked the beginning of the cultivation of sugarcane as a cash crop in Busoga. Sugarcane farming emerged as part of the diversification of the cash crop economy in Busoga due to the low profitability of cotton, which was precipitated by a decline in global cotton prices (Martiniello 2017). As previously shown, the decline in cotton prices and cotton profitability led the Indian population, who occupied an intermediary status, to venture into sugarcane farming as an alternative cash crop, thus establishing Kakira Sugar and sugarcane plantations in Jinja (Ahluwalia 1995; Mamdani 1976). Beyond its nucleus district of Jinja district, sugarcane farming gradually expanded to a large part of Busoga through the neighbouring districts of Kamuli and Iganga, from which the present-day Luuka and Mayuge districts were carved.

The gradual expansion of sugarcane from Jinja has given Busoga a greater identity as a sugarcane hub. Sugarcane farming is the dominant commercial farm activity in the sub-region, replacing traditional cash crops such as coffee and cotton (Mwavu et al. 2016). Compared to Central Uganda and other sugarcane-producing areas, such as Kinyara in central-western Uganda, Busoga is the largest sugarcane producer. Given the intensity of the activity in the sub-region, Busoga is regarded as a sugarcane island because it has the highest number of licensed sugar processing

factories in Uganda (Khisia 2019; Kyalya 2013). The high concentration of sugarcane farming is also evident in land use, with the majority of the households in the sub-region adopting sugarcane farming, something evident and visible from most of its entry and exit points. Over 80 percent of arable land has been committed to sugarcane farming in the study districts of Jinja, Luuka, and Mayuge (Kyalya 2013). The high intensity of sugarcane farming in Luuka and Mayuge is attributed to their proximity to Jinja, the nucleus of sugarcane farms and factories. The growth and expansion of sugarcane farming had spillover effects on the neighbouring districts as promoters sought land opportunities for the sugar industry. Furthermore, the growing sugar business has attracted more actors, reducing the monopoly of the Madhvani Group, which was not only the first but also, the largest investor in sugarcane farming in the Busoga sub-region. The entry of sugar corporations in Mayuge, Kaliro, and Kamuli increased competitiveness and local interest in sugarcane farming as a livelihood activity.

Despite being the largest producer of sugarcane and home to a booming sugar industry, the Busoga sub-region is a characteristically poverty-stricken region. The national household survey ranks Busoga among the income-poor regions, the third poorest in Uganda, with the poverty index standing at 42 percent in comparison to the national average of 27 percent (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2017a). Furthermore, the Busoga sub-region is marked by the educational challenge of apathy among young people, as indicated by poor concentration and performance in school due to engagement in sugarcane work. As such, the local community in the Busoga sub-region perceives sugarcane farming as a bane to young people's educational attainment goals. Efforts by local government authorities to overcome the perceived negative effects of sugarcane farming on young people's education in the Busoga sub-region are twofold. One is a peaceful approach, through community sensitisation and rising awareness, and the other is through heavy-handed, punitive measures to deter young people's engagement in sugarcane work to the detriment of school attendance.



## 6.0 Youth motivations for sugarcane farming

Opinions on sugarcane farming in Busoga are both interesting and contradictory. The youth opinions are interesting in the sense that sugarcane farming is not only viewed as contributing to young people's education but also, contradictory in the sense that the seemingly positive outcomes are viewed negatively. However, before dwelling on the youth opinions of sugarcane farming and education, it is vital to examine youth motives and incentives for participation in sugarcane farming. Understanding these incentives and motivations for sugarcane farming vis-à-vis community perceptions can be a pertinent way of delineating the extent to which the decision to choose sugarcane work over education is a pull or push factor. Grasping the pull and push factors is also vital in determining whether sugarcane is a problem for youth education and, if not, in identifying the underlying problem or cause for young people's preference for sugarcane work over education. As an entry point, the youths were asked to indicate their motivations for participation in sugarcane farming. This was done to examine the validity of the community perceptions of sugarcane farming incentives as a pull or lure into work for youths. According to the survey findings, the youths in Busoga are drawn into commercial sugarcane farming for two major reasons: (i) cash and (ii) employment (Table 2).

**Table 2: Motivations for youth participation in sugarcane jobs**

Youth Motivation in sugarcane	Tally (N = 320)	Cases (percent)
Quick cash from sugarcane farming	275	87
High unemployment	111	35
Sugarcane is a year-round activity	64	20
Sugarcane is a family business	39	12
Lack of alternative livelihood opportunities	25	8

*Source:* Youth survey (Jinja, Luuka, and Mayuge) – 2018.

Aside from job and cash benefits, some youths are attracted to sugarcane farming by its non-seasonality, such as the presence of a ready market that makes it an all-year-round activity. Other youths are motivated to cultivate sugarcane because it is the most available activity that accommodates young people with and without education skills; for some youths, sugarcane farming is a family business. The different motivations for youth participation in sugarcane farming indicate that sugarcane farming has incentives not only for them but also, for the community at large. As such, the incentive for sugarcane cash is not unique to youth. Interviews with political, technical, and opinion leaders confirmed the significance of sugarcane cash in pulling the Busoga community into sugarcane farming. A 61-year-old male respondent from Luuka district confirmed the significance of sugarcane cash as follows:

Here, people are deeply attached to sugarcane because it brings cash. In every part of the district, you are greeted by sugarcane farms. Even people with little land have committed it to sugarcane to get cash. Whether young or old, everyone is fond of sugarcane activities because they are the major source of income and cash resources. For the majority of youths, sugarcane is now the most available opportunity to make cash.

Reminiscing the importance of sugarcane farming, a 24-year-old male youth from Mayuge district underscored the centrality of sugarcane cash and other incentives, such as job creation as follows:

Sugarcane farming is a saviour. As you can see for yourself, we do not have jobs in this area. Sugarcane farming is a darling [smiles about the description] to us because we can get some work and earn cash. When you talk about sugarcane farming, you talk about us because it is the only sweet deal that we know here, it is a sustaining activity and that is why the majority of the labour force is made up of young people. Those who have land are happy because, with sugarcane farming, you are assured of a market, and for those without

skills, sugarcane farming is home to both the educated and uneducated.

The quotations above highlight the attractive incentives with which sugarcane is associated, and one can interpret and describe sugarcane farming incentives as attractions and pull factors for the young. As such, it is not surprising that the majority of the youths highlighted cash as the major pull and sustaining factor for their engagement in sugarcane jobs. Evidence from field observations revealed a dominant role of youth labour in sugarcane farming in Jinja, Luuka, and Mayuge. Most of the farm and off-farm sugarcane jobs such as cutting and transportation appear to be a preserve of the youth people (picture 1).



Picture 1: A group of male youth heading to load canes on a truck at a sugarcane collection point in Luuka District

*Source:* Field picture (September 2018).

The dominance of the sugarcane labour force by young people was attributed to two reasons: first, the high number of youths versus the limited number of job opportunities in the region, and second, sugarcane being the major commercial farm activity. Although there is evidence of increasing youth rejection of the farm sector in preference to formal,

industrial, and urban lifestyles in Uganda, in Busoga's case, there is still evidence of significant youth interest and involvement in sugarcane farming activities due to cash incentives (Kristensen and Birch-Thomsen 2013; Kyalya 2013). The undertones of the youths' narratives indicates that they treat sugarcane not only as a source of quick cash for survival but also, as a significant livelihood activity. The interview findings showed that the strong youth sentiments in favour of sugarcane farming are underlined by Busoga's limited livelihood options, thus making sugarcane farming the most available fallback activity for the young. For a group that is categorically constrained, young people's positive attitudes towards sugarcane farming lend credence to the idea that participation in farming depends on income outcomes. Confirming this, studies show that financial and income benefits are critical motivations for young people's participation in farming activities (Oladeebo and Ambe-Lamidi 2007; Oladoja, Adisa, and Adeokun 2008). On the one hand, income and cash proceeds tend to attract and retain young people's interest in farming and on the other hand, the lack of income outcomes reduces youth interest in the farm sector (Kristensen and Birch-Thomsen 2013; Leavy and Hossain 2014).



Picture 2: A group of male youths loading sugarcanes on a truck in the Mayuge District.

*Source:* Field picture (September 2018)

## **7.0 Young people's views of sugarcane farming and education**

Notwithstanding the benefits of youth participation in sugarcane farming jobs, the contrary view in Busoga is that sugarcane farming incentives are problematic for young people's education. However, young people do not appear to consider sugarcane farming as problematic as the community does. The negative views of sugarcane farming stem from the incentives it offers to young people to work at the expense of their education, thus turning sugarcane farming jobs into hazardous labour. From the youths' perspective, there are mixed narratives about sugarcane farming and their education. Most of the youth responses portrayed sugarcane farming as a direct and indirect enabler of young people's education in Busoga. The interviews revealed that sugarcane farming was supportive to the education of the youths. Both formal and informal group discussions revealed positive opinions of sugarcane farming in relation to youth education. However, the relevance of sugarcane farming to youth education appears to vary according to socio-economic characteristics, such as economic background and mode of connection to sugarcane farming. For example, the youths from well-off families commended sugarcane farming as a source of income that enabled their parents to meet the costs of education.

Similar sentiments were shared by the youths who had land and owned sugarcane farms, who argued that income proceeds from sugarcane sales gave them agency to meet school requirements and education costs for themselves. For most of the young people who lacked land and who were only attached to sugarcane farming through the exchange of their labour and time, sugarcane farming contributed to their education through wages that enabled them to meet school requirements such as scholastic materials and school fees. However, for the labouring-class youths, the contribution of sugarcane farming to their education was minimal and limited to the lower educational levels, such as primary and lower secondary levels. This was attributed to the meagre earnings, which could not meet the requirements for higher education because it is more expensive than primary and ordinary secondary levels, which are free and universal. In such

cases, the young people appear to be pushed into sugarcane work by poverty and the need to provide for themselves, including for their education. This partly explains why most of youth responses show that young people are motivated to engage in sugarcane farming for cash and job incentives that directly support their livelihood. As such, the youth drift into sugarcane jobs has several implications.

On the one hand, the negative opinions about sugarcane farming's impact on education can be seen in terms of young people's reaction to the positive outcomes of farming, given that financial and income benefits are critical motivations for their participation in farming activities (Oladeebo and Ambe-Lamidi 2007; Oladoja et al. 2008). Thus, the negative community perception of sugarcane incentives against education may be valid because there is evidence to show attractive incentives and pull factors from sugarcane farming. On the other hand, young people's drift from school to sugarcane work can be seen through a broader lens because there are a host of factors beyond the sugarcane incentives. Analysis of the push factors in young people's preference for work over school is academically vital to avoid presenting a one-sided story. It is vital to understand the sugarcane farming–education context from the community point of view and the existing dynamics in the Busoga sub-region.

## **8.0 Community views of sugarcane farming and education**

Besides the positive youth attributes of sugarcane farming, the local community and authorities have varying opinions. Despite some conceivably minimal but positive opinions about the direct and indirect contributions of sugarcane farming to education, sugarcane farming is seen as undermining young people's educational achievement and human capital development. The shared narratives by the local community and authorities show that sugarcane farming incentives, such as cash and jobs, lured young people into sugarcane jobs at the expense of studies. As a consequence, the community in Busoga viewed sugarcane farming as compromising children's commitment to education and their overall performance.

Throughout the three districts of study, the majority of the key informants, such as technical staff and opinion leaders, commented on the attractive nature of sugarcane jobs and concerns about mitigating the sugarcane–education problem. Throughout the study area, the most common narrative of sugarcane farming is that it undermines young people’s educational attainment goals. Efforts by local government authorities to overcome the perceived negative effects of sugarcane farming on young people’s education in the Busoga sub-region are twofold.

Some of the measures include forcing children into school through punitive approaches, conducting community sensitisation against child labour, and emphasising the significance of children’s education. The punitive approaches have roots in Buyende district, where they were pioneered by local security personnel using heavy-handed measures initiated by the District Police Command office with threats to arrest all parents failing to ensure that their children were in school (Wambuzi 2017). Similar approaches are used in Luuka district following unfruitful community engagement vis-à-vis rising numbers of school dropout and young people’s increasing engagement in sugarcane work such as cane cutting (Nakato 2017). Efforts and stringent measures to ensure that children attend school take different forms. The ‘arrests’ are for instance conducted sequentially, involving all stakeholders—the children, their parents, and employers—as a punitive measure and as a mitigation mechanism to limit the impact of sugarcane incentives on education. The arrest of parents is intended to deter other parents from assisting with school dropout and the children’s preference for work over school.

Such arrests are only conducted as a last resort, following unsuccessful community engagement through the media and community awareness-raising meetings. In circumstances where the community is non-responsive to the sensitisation and where there is evidence of a persistent increase in lax school attendance, the security forces are called into action. Interviews with one of the Resident District Commissioner’s office staff



from Luuka district revealed that the arrests were not conducted in a haphazard manner:

The arrests you have heard of do not happen randomly. Before invoking the iron hand, we conduct awareness-raising meetings with stakeholders such as parents, sugarcane farm owners, local leaders, and schools. Therefore, arrests come in handy after fruitless community engagement about sugarcane work and young people's education.

Further, existing reports confirm the state of affairs involving direct community engagement by district security offices and technical staff in Busoga. Luuka district's Inspector of Schools, for example, says this:

...we have held several meetings with most of the stakeholders to sensitize them on the need to educate their children. We are working on it because sometimes police intervene to chase the children from the sugarcane plantations and trucks. Child labour has forced most of the children in some of the schools to attend schools during the examination time and that is the reason why Luuka always the worst in performance (Nakato 2017).

In the same report, primary school teachers from Luuka district emphasised the problem of the increasing number of school dropouts in preference for jobs on sugarcane farms. According to existing reports, the school dropout rate associated with sugarcane farming in Busoga sub-region is estimated at 12 percent (Nakato 2017). The increasing lax of school attendance among young people and the problem of school drop-out is mainly attributed to sugarcane farming.

In districts such as Buyende, the authorities attributed the increasing apathy of young people in schools to the increasing number of sugar factories and their attractive incentives for children to work. As a mitigation measure, authorities invoke stringent measures, such as arresting parents whose children have been involved in sugarcane work at school

time (Wambuzi 2017). According to the interview findings, such arrests aim to deter young people from engaging in sugarcane work instead of school. In line with the existing evidence, the major reason for invoking heavy-handed approaches is to curb poor educational performance in districts such as Luuka that is attributed to young people's engagement in sugarcane work, with some children only attending school during exam time (Nakato 2017). The key issue, however, is that the heavy-handed mechanisms come as last resort, after exhausting peaceful measures and following unproductive community engagement.

However, community perceptions of the negative implications of sugarcane farming on young people's education are not exclusive to the Busoga sub-region; they extend, for example, to neighbouring central Uganda, where sugarcane is a major commercial farm crop. In Buikwe district, investigations into the problem of poor performance in the primary leaving examination<sup>1</sup> (PLE) show that the vast sugarcane farming activities have forced children to provide labour on the plantations, leading to irregular school attendance and, consequently, poor performance in final examinations (Initiative for Social and Economic Rights 2018). In Busoga's case, the different interview findings and reports demonstrate the clear reality of young people dropping out of schools in preference for sugarcane plantation work and incentives for sugarcane cash and availability of work. In this case, the local perceptions of sugarcane farming as the common denominator for problems of drifting from school to sugarcane work can be, to some extent, valid but relative, in the sense that the causal link of young people's choice of sugarcane work over school must be understood. However, local perceptions can also be valid in the sense that the survey findings revealed that the majority of the youth seem to confirm that sugarcane farming is associated with alluring incentives of cash and jobs, which constitute significant pull factors for young people into sugarcane work.

Studies on primary production in Uganda suggest that the availability of paid work presents escape routes for young people from

schools to jobs. Evidence from Uganda's fishing villages on the shores of Lake Victoria in Mukono and Kalangala districts shows that fish-related work has provided avenues for young people to earn money, which motivated them to work, with many opting out of school in preference for paid work (Westway, Barratt, and Seeley 2009). While the need to earn money could be an incentive and motivation for drifting into work, it also represents an underlying causal factor embedded in an individual's socio-economic status that may constitute a driver or push factor. What is evident in the case of Busoga is the negative effect of sugarcane farming on young people's education. Community perceptions appear to suggest that pull rather than push factors bear the blame for young people's increasing participation in sugarcane farming jobs. However, from the youth point of view, the problem appears to be economically motivated, involving factors or incentives beyond sugarcane farming. Similarly, the question is whether punitive and stringent measures can offer lasting solutions to the sugarcane farming and education complexities in Busoga. Understanding the extent to which sugarcane farming is a cause of poor school attendance in Busoga requires a pluralistic approach that includes youth perspectives, community opinions, and factors external to sugarcane farming.

### **9.0 Sugarcane incentives vis-à-vis socio-economic drivers**

The community perceptions paint a picture of sugarcane farming as a problem for young people's education in Busoga. Interview findings from the three sub-counties revealed voices that treated sugarcane incentives as the major cause of young people's drift from school to sugarcane work. In this case, sugarcane farming is explicitly regarded as a pull factor, without considering any underlying causes or push factors. It was therefore worth dwelling on push factors for youth participation in sugarcane farming to determine objectively whether the youth drift into sugarcane work is symptomatic of underlying factors or caused by sugarcane farming, as perceived by the community. While jobs and cash incentives appear to be alluring and pull factors, as noted earlier, a deeper analysis of the causes of

youth drift into sugarcane work offers a better understanding of the extent to which sugarcane farming bears the blame for the educational complexities in Busoga.

As a sector, sugarcane farming presents livelihood opportunities, which constitute pull factors for the youth, and to that extent, it can be argued that sugarcane farming may be problematic for children's education in Busoga. Further, sugarcane farming mainly depends on unskilled labour, and as shown earlier, sugarcane farming is the largest employer in Busoga region, providing both casual and non-seasonal work. Due to the predominantly manual nature of sugarcane jobs, formal education and training are seldom relevant. The irrelevance of formal skills arguably gives the youth leverage to dominate the bulk of sugarcane farming work force. Interview findings revealed, that the youth domination sugarcane farming workforce could be explained by the high number of youths and the fact that the majority of field jobs do not require educational qualifications which would disqualify some youths. A focus group discussion with male youth in Mayuge District confirmed the irrelevance of education towards sugarcane jobs when one of the participants stressed the following:

Sugarcane farming is *kayoola*<sup>2</sup> for us who never went to school. Sugarcane jobs require a healthy and energetic body, so all the non-educated energetic youths can work in the sector ... even the educated but *bakona*<sup>3</sup> are in sugarcane doing the same jobs with us. You do not need to go to school to learn how to cut sugarcane or load them on a lorry.

In such settings, it is possible for the economically constrained rural youth to abandon school because the immediate job environment does not require any formal training. The lower or limited relevance of education for sugarcane farming jobs is exacerbated by the fact that even educated youth are involved in the same jobs as those with no or low educational qualifications. Such a scenario reduces the potential opportunity cost of working rather than attending school, and in a way, education becomes less

relevant to the surrounding job environment; for this reason, the negative community perceptions of sugarcane farming in relation to education may be valid.

Notwithstanding the attractions of sugarcane farming, the interview findings suggest that the majority of the youth tend to choose sugarcane jobs over schooling because of two major factors: the high cost of education and household socio-economic hardships. First, with regard to the high costs of education, most of the youth interviewed argued that completing the education cycle involved requirements and financial resources that neither they nor their parents could afford. Some of the school dropouts who had turned to sugarcane jobs revealed that the failure to raise and sustain the costs of school requirements were major drivers. Existing reports about poverty and young people's education in Busoga region present a case of a female school drop-out lamenting that being in school was 'hell on earth' due to the inconveniences resulting from the challenges of paying for the school uniform and scholastic materials such as books and pens (Mudangha 2018). The young girl's expressions and narratives about the difficulties posed by economic constraints paint a picture of a poor young girl who is committed to her studies; her parents could not support her education dreams. According to the young girl, the unending socio-economic challenges not only led to her dropping out of school but also compelled her to join her mother and other family members in sugarcane plantation jobs to contribute to the family finances at the expense of schooling.

Discussions and findings from the youth interviews suggest that poverty and economic distress undermine youth education goals, including the free education programmes provided by the government of Uganda. Despite free Universal Primary Education and Universal Secondary Education, the majority of the youth who had resorted to sugarcane jobs argued that their parents could not afford either basic household needs or most school requirements. While primary education and most of lower-secondary education is free in Uganda, some of the youth interviewed in

Busoga said that their parents could not afford the basic requirements, such as school uniforms and scholastic materials. Such conditions affect students' morale and concentration in school because there is no guarantee of them completing education after the primary school level. As such, sugarcane being the most immediate activity, and the majority of the youth find themselves going into casual labour to support themselves and their families.

A case in point is the 9 and 12-year-old boys from one of the villages in Mayuge district who resorted to sugarcane work after dropping out of school because of financial hardships (see picture 3 and 4). In their story, the 9 and 12-year-old boys dropped out of school when they were in primary two and primary four classes respectively. Under normal circumstances and all things, the same, a 9-year-old child should be in primary five while the 12-year-old should be in either in primary six or the last class of primary school level, namely primary seven. However, the two boys did not only drop out of school at an early age but their financial hardships had trumped their normal progress in primary school education because their parents could not afford the school requirements. In order to survive outside of school, the boys wander from farm to farm looking for sugarcane work such as planting, weeding and cane cutting as a way of contributing to their family wellbeing. In this case, resorting to sugarcane farming work is not necessarily out of choice but it is something that the two young boys do because their economic crises do not warrant continuation with studies.

Busoga region is thus a representative case of the socio-economic burdens of poverty affecting parents' ability to support and keep children in school. Existing research shows that parents' inability to support children in school comes with unwanted consequences, such as compelling children to work while studying or, at worst, dropping out of school (Matsuno and Blagbrough 2006). Such socio-economic constraints turn out to be major drivers for young people drifting from school to work.





Picture 3

Picture 4

Picture 3 shows two young boys of the same family weeding sugarcanes and in Picture 4, boys are part of the group doing sugarcane collection at a farm.

*Source:* Field pictures (2018)

This finding confirms the observation that children tend to engage in work as a way of contributing to their family and household needs, as well as their own needs and skills (Ennew 1994; Marcus and Harper 1997). In Uganda, the impact of poverty on young people's education is not unique to the Busoga sub-region. Evidence from both urban and rural non-sugarcane farming regions of Uganda, such as Kampala, Bundibugyo in western Uganda, Kitgum in the north, and Moroto in north-eastern Uganda, reveals that while young people value education, the inability to afford school-related costs forces them out of school and into income-generating work (Perezniето, Walker, Villar, and Alder 2014). In Busoga, similar experiences were reported in Mayuge district, which is one of the sites of this study. A report about Buyende district in the Busoga sub-region shows that parents could not afford to contribute 3 kg of maize per school term as part of a school feeding programme (Wambuzi 2017). The increase in the number



of young people getting involved in sugarcane work at school is partly attributable to problems of famine and food insecurity. This partly explains why a number of male youths drop out of school and become sugarcane plantation workers.

The second reason for opting out of school and into sugarcane work involved complex socio-economic household and livelihood constraints. Interview findings revealed that some youths were faced with unending problems of meeting their basic needs, thus compelling them into sugarcane work as a way of contributing to their household well-being. Some of the interviews showed that sugarcane farming jobs tend to be sought and taken up by children from poor and economically constrained families, which in Busoga's case comprised the majority. According to a chairperson of one of the three sub-counties, the challenge of survival was a causal factor for youth drift into sugarcane jobs:

... yes, some children are lured by sugarcane cash and they abandon school, but it is not common for children from well-to-do families. Most are from poor families, very desperate, and unsure about their future. For them, the issue is how to survive today, and therefore, they have to search for work rather than go to school.

A 21-year-old male youth from Busedde in Jinja agreed:

You know that school is important for the future, but survival is more important today. When you go to school and there is no food at home, you will return home to an empty stomach. For our poor families, the best decision is for us to work, and we do not choose not to be at school. However, the conditions at home were appalling.

The quotations above indicate that poor youths in Busoga are forced to choose between school for the future and sugarcane work for current survival. However, the explicit choice of sugarcane work over school appears to be largely driven by the socio-economic vulnerability of poverty,

which compels individual youths and their families to participate in work for survival, thus affecting time in school. However, while poverty's impact is quite explicit, it is not uniform, and varies between the sexes. The case of Busoga shows that socio-economic constraints cause more boys to miss school than girls. Documented reports of teachers' opinions in Luuka district show that a relatively higher number of girls attend classes than boys. The lower number of boys attending classes is attributed to engagement in jobs such as sugarcane cutting, with some of the boys acting as breadwinners for their families and having to find work in sugarcane plantations and other activities, such as fishing and scaring birds away from rice farms (Nakato 2017).

However, other research shows that economic hardships in Busoga affect both boys' and girls' education. In Mayuge district, the need to contribute to household needs forces parents to withdraw their children from school, pushing boys into sugarcane cutting activities while the girls are engaged in rice farming, household chores, and petty trade (Bantebya, Muhanguzi, and Watson 2013). This is more challenging for girls because of the traditional norms of boy-child preference and lower interest in the education of girls. My findings about the impact of socio-economic hardships on the educational choices of children in Busoga conform to existing studies about the inextricable relationship between poverty and children's educational attainment. For instance, evidence from Bangladesh shows that 26.5 million out of 63 million children live below the national poverty line; due to high poverty levels, one in every six children is involved in work, thus depriving them of education and other services (Shohel 2014). Theoretically, poverty is correlated with school dropout and living in poverty causes psychosocial stress, emotional dysfunction, and low academic achievement (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov 1994; Evans and English 2002). This confirms that poverty can be both a barrier to educational inclusion and a push factor for young people's engagement in work at an early age. This partly explains the high incidence of child labour

in the majority of sugarcane-producing countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia (International Labour Organisation 2017).

The socio-economic challenges of poverty in rural areas force school-going children to engage in income-generating activities as a way of contributing to their critical household needs, which sometimes occurs at an early age (Bennell 2007). This sums up the situation in Busoga, where the high-poverty spiral seems to be a more valid explanation for the existing educational complexities. According to the demographic household survey report, the Busoga sub-region is the third poorest in Uganda (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2017a). Without negating the potential of sugarcane incentives in pulling children to work, poor socio-economic characteristics can be fundamental push factors for families and households into trade-offs of survival at the expense of school. Such trade-offs are reached as a result of, among other things, a push to acquire additional income for household survival (Verner and Blunch 1999).

Reports from other districts, such as Jinja, Kamuli, and other parts of Busoga, show that the high-poverty spiral in the region has pushed young people not only into sugarcane farming but also, other income activities. In one of the documented reports, for example, technical heads of education from Jinja and Kamuli revealed that children between 6 and 12 years of age were attending school only in the morning hours, after which they left school for sugarcane cutting, washing cars, and fishing in streams and rivers, while those between 12 and 18 years were operating bicycle and motorcycle boda-boda services (Kiirya 2010). Without being overly definitive, it can be argued in view of the poverty spiral that sugarcane farming is subject to the complexities of education because it is the only activity available to economically constrained youth and school dropouts. In reality, however, the problem goes beyond sugarcane farming because it is only a host to the victims of poverty and the failure to sustain school. Such scenarios raise fundamental questions about the applicability and relevance of stringent security approaches and community sensitisation engagements. Where poverty is the major problem, the perception that young people drift into

sugarcane farming may be valid but largely symptomatic of socio-economic hardships as both causes and push factors for children to leave school. As such, invoking stringent measures, such as forcing young people out of sugarcane jobs, could be slightly helpful but to a greater extent problematic and unsustainable. The challenge is that, whereas sugarcane jobs affect young people's education, the evidence shows that some young people actually engage in sugarcane jobs as a way of supporting their own school and educational expenses as well as those of their siblings (Schwarzbach and Richardson 2015). Given the persistent household economic hardships, forcing such groups out of sugarcane work may offer short-term solutions but could endanger their livelihoods as well as those of the people who depend on them for survival and study.

A meaningful policy framework for mitigating the drift of children out of school and into sugarcane work may need to be matched with supportive mechanisms that deliver a win-win result. As such, stopping young people from engaging in sugarcane work without providing alternatives can generate a plethora of problems rather than solutions, because the majority of them work out of necessity, due to the harsh socio-economic conditions of poverty. Thus, a sustainable intervention should involve actions that directly address the drivers of child labour, such as income poverty. Evidence from Brazil, one of the largest sugarcane-producing countries, shows that mitigating child labour in sugarcane farming requires a pluralistic approach involving laws infrastructure, and, most importantly, income support or conditional cash transfers to poor children so that they can sustain themselves without sugarcane jobs (Rosati, Manacorda, Kovrova, Koseleci, and Lyon 2011). In the case of Brazil, successful mitigation of the impact of work on young people's education is attributed to the conditional cash transfers to households living below the minimum wage, provided their children recorded school attendance records of at least 85 percent of school attendance records, and to children's involvement in after-school activities, such as art, sport, culture, and other

complementary activities to formal education, which increased school attendance to 97 percent.

Supporting people through conditional cash transfers could be challenging in most poor countries, but the evidence from Brazil suggests that conditional support for children's educational cycles could be logical, because cash-support mechanisms evidently produce meaningful school enrolment and attendance (Handa and Davis 2006). Given Uganda's relatively poor economic base, cash-support mechanisms may be relatively expensive, but evidence of household support outcomes on educational attainment appears to be more practical than community sensitisation and heavy-handed or forceful approaches such as impromptu security arrests. Despite being costly, direct economic interventions could be a more sustainable way of addressing the sugarcane–education complexities in Busoga because the absence of economic support means that young people are always at risk of reverting to sugarcane as a way of dealing with their socio-economic constraints.

## **10.0 Conclusion**

This study sought to solve the paradox of the local perceptions of the inextricable relationship between sugarcane farming and young people's education in the Busoga sub-region. Cognizant of the incentives of sugarcane farming as pull factors for young people into sugarcane jobs, the drift and choice of sugarcane farming over school is only symptomatic and reflective of the socio-economic hardships caused by the high-poverty spiral in the region. The major contention is that the socio-economic hardships at both household and regional levels are more valid reasons for young people's continuous drift not only into sugarcane but also, other income-generating activities in the Busoga region as a way of meeting their individual and household needs. Contrary to the local perceived views of sugarcane farming and its incentives as a problem for youth education, children's involvement in sugarcane farming is a trade-off between future educational benefits and current survival needs. Given the existing socio-

economic hardships, keeping children in school as much as possible requires that the issue of poverty be dealt with, because this is the direct cause rather than a symptom of the problem. Blaming sugarcane farming as the problem is mainly a result of the scale of the activity, covering as it does the largest part of the region and supplying work to the largest number of young people. In reality, economically constrained youth and school dropouts engage in both farm and non-farm work, but in numerical terms, no other work rivals sugarcane farming. With persistent poverty, young people are bound to drop out of school and engage in work for survival. Approaches such as sensitisation and stringent and punitive measures against child labour can only be applied when backed by direct income support mechanisms that deal with the core problem of poverty. Such efforts need to target both boys and girls because they are both at risk of low academic achievement.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This is the national summative examination for all children completing the seven-year cycle of primary school education in Uganda.

<sup>2</sup> *Kayoola* is used to refer to jobs that anyone can do without the need for qualifications.

<sup>3</sup> *Bakona* is used to refer to those educated groups who have failed to find jobs and have resorted to sugarcane jobs.

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