

Empowering Rural Youth for Sustainable Livelihoods: Assessing Access to Livelihood Assets in Community Conservancies of the Zambezi Region, Namibia

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How to cite this paper: Sisinyize, N. L. (2026). Empowering Rural Youth for Sustainable Livelihoods: Assessing Access to Livelihood Assets in Community Conservancies of the Zambezi Region, Namibia. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 430-452.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.148025>

Received: December 6, 2025

Accepted: August 16, 2026

Published: August 19, 2026

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Abstract

This study investigates strategies for fostering sustainable livelihoods among rural youth living in community conservancies of Namibia's Zambezi Region. It focuses on evaluating how young people access and utilize various livelihood assets within these conservation landscapes to support their socio-economic well-being. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employed interviews and focus group discussions to gather data from local youth and major stakeholders. The analysis examines how socio-economic conditions, institutional mechanisms and environmental settings shape youth participation in livelihood activities. Findings reveal that rural youth have access to multiple livelihood assets namely natural, human, social, physical, and financial capitals, yet their utilization remains constrained by limited market access, inadequate financial and training support, insufficient involvement in decision-making processes, and restricted access to relevant information. The study emphasizes the need for integrated and inclusive approaches that align conservation objectives with youth-centered development strategies. Such approaches can enhance the capacity of rural youth to actively contribute to both sustainable livelihood creation and environmental stewardship within the Zambezi Region.

Keywords

Rural Youth, Sustainable Livelihoods, Community Conservancies, Livelihood Assets

1. Introduction

Namibia is internationally recognized as a pioneer in Community-Based Conser-

vation (CBC), where local communities play a central role in the stewardship of natural resources and wildlife. This approach has been widely celebrated for aligning biodiversity conservation with rural economic development, making Namibia a model for community-led environmental governance in Africa (Balduş, 2009). Through the adoption of innovative policies, the government has embedded conservation within the framework of national development plans, poverty reduction strategies, and Vision 2030, all aimed at promoting inclusive and sustainable growth (Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), 2013).

One of the cornerstone strategies under this framework is the communal conservancy model, implemented through the Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) programme. This model seeks to restore the intrinsic link between rural livelihoods and natural resource conservation by granting communities greater control over local ecosystems. Since the enactment of the Nature Conservation Amendment Act of 1996, the Government of the Republic of Namibia legally empowered communities to form conservancies and manage wildlife and other natural resources within their ancestral lands. The first four conservancies are Nyae Nyae, Salambala, #Khoadi//Hôas, and Torra were gazetted soon after the Act, marking the beginning of a transformative era in Namibia's conservation landscape.

Before this policy reform, residents of communal lands had no ownership rights over wildlife resources, and even subsistence hunting was prohibited. Consequently, many resorted to poaching as wildlife had no tangible economic value and was often perceived as a direct threat to livelihoods destroying crops, livestock, and property (NACSO, 2019). The introduction of conservancies reversed this dynamic by providing communities with legal rights and economic incentives to protect wildlife.

Under the CBNRM framework, communities now share the revenues generated through trophy hunting, eco-tourism and Community-Based Tourism Enterprises (CBTEs). These income streams are distributed in various forms, including household cash dividends, meat distributions, community infrastructure projects, and compensation payments for human-wildlife conflicts (Jones, 2004). Each conservancy functions as an autonomous, legally recognized institution with a constitution, an elected management committee, and defined governance structures. This model promotes both environmental conservation and the equitable use of natural resources for poverty alleviation and community empowerment (Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), 2013).

In the Zambezi Region, the conservancy approach has gained remarkable traction, with the first conservancy established in 1998 (Weaver & Petersen, 2008; NACSO, 2013). The region is endowed with abundant natural assets, including wildlife, forests, fisheries, and fertile floodplains, which serve as critical livelihood sources for local communities (National Planning Commission (NPC), 2004; Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), 2011). However, access to and benefits from these resources remain unevenly distributed. Conservancies situated near rivers and

protected areas such as Impalila, Kasika, Salambala, and Mayuni often have greater potential to attract tourism and hunting concessions than those in more remote locations. To date, sixteen conservancies have been registered in the region, reflecting both the success and complexity of Namibia's CBNRM strategy (NACSO, 2013).

At the heart of Namibia's conservancy policy lies the goal of enhancing rural livelihoods through inclusive participation in natural resource management. Yet, the extent to which rural youth, a demographic central to future development, benefit from these initiatives remains underexplored. Youth access to livelihood assets such as natural, human, social, physical, and financial capitals determine their ability to engage meaningfully in conservation-based economic activities. Understanding these dynamics is therefore essential to designing strategies that not only sustain biodiversity but also empower young people as active agents in local development. This study thus seeks to assess rural youth access to livelihood assets within community conservancies of the Zambezi Region, with the aim of identifying opportunities and constraints in achieving sustainable and inclusive rural livelihoods.

2. Statement of the Problem

The pursuit of sustainable livelihoods among rural communities remains a central pillar of Namibia's socio-economic development agenda. In this context, community conservancies were introduced to integrate biodiversity conservation with rural development objectives, particularly in marginalized areas such as the Zambezi Region (Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), 2013; NACSO, 2019). Despite this progress, the anticipated poverty reduction and empowerment outcomes for rural youth, who form the majority of the population have not been fully realized. The persistence of youth poverty, unemployment, and limited access to livelihood assets undermines the goals of unlocking sustainable livelihoods within these conservation landscapes.

Engaging youth in conservancy-based economic activities is vital, as they represent a dynamic and innovative segment of rural society capable of transforming community-based conservation into a sustainable development mechanism (UNDP, 2021). However, youth participation in conservancy governance, tourism, and resource management remains minimal, leaving them on the periphery of economic benefits. Although community conservancies were designed to serve as platforms for poverty alleviation, the pathways through which rural youth access key livelihood assets such as education, finance, and natural resources are still poorly understood (Jones, 2004). This knowledge gap hinders evidence-based policymaking aimed at promoting youth empowerment within Namibia's CBNRM framework.

Empirical data reveal that youth unemployment remains alarmingly high across Namibia, with the Zambezi Region among the top five regions most affected, recording an unemployment rate of 60.2% (Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), 2016). This chronic unemployment has exacerbated social challenges such as alcohol

abuse, crime, and poverty, especially among young people in rural conservancies (National Planning Commission, 2021). The limited access to formal employment opportunities and productive income-generating activities prevents youth from leveraging the economic potential embedded within the conservancy model. Consequently, the vision of community conservancies as engines of rural development and youth empowerment remains largely unfulfilled.

A further obstacle lies in the restricted access to financial capital and credit facilities for rural youth, which constrains entrepreneurship, agricultural productivity, and innovation (African Development Bank (AfDB), 2020). Youth-led enterprises in tourism, craft production, and wildlife-based ventures remain underdeveloped due to inadequate financial inclusion. Additionally, youth often lack representation in local governance structures, which limits their ability to influence decision-making on resource use and benefit-sharing within conservancies. This exclusion perpetuates feelings of marginalization and disconnects from conservation-driven development initiatives.

3. Research Objectives

The study was to achieve the following objectives:

- To analyse the socio-economic profile of rural youth in Zambezi community conservancies.
- To evaluate access to key livelihood assets, natural, human, social, physical, and financial among rural youth.
- To examine barriers limiting youth engagement in sustainable livelihood opportunities within conservancies.
- To formulate policy recommendations enhancing rural youth access to livelihood assets and promoting sustainable livelihoods.

4. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study employed the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) of DFID (2000) as the theoretical lens to understand how rural youth in the Zambezi Region access and mobilize livelihood assets within community conservancies. The SLF provides a structured approach to analyze the capabilities, resources, and strategies that rural youth employ to achieve sustainable livelihoods while navigating socio-economic and environmental constraints.

In line with the title, the framework allows the study to assess the specific assets available to youth, human, social, natural, physical, and financial capital and how limitations in accessing these assets constrain their ability to unlock sustainable livelihoods within conservancy settings (DFID, 2000; Kollmair & Gamper, 2002). For example, human capital through education, skills, and health determines youth capacity to engage in conservation-related enterprises, tourism, and natural resource management. Social capital through networks, youth groups, and conservancy committees' shapes access to information and collective decision-making. Natural capital, wildlife, forests, and water form the foundation of income-gener-

ating activities, while physical and financial capital enable infrastructure, tools, and investment needed for youth-led initiatives.

By focusing on rural youth, the SLF emphasizes their agency, highlighting that they are not passive beneficiaries but active participants in translating assets into livelihood outcomes (DFID, 2000; UNDP, 2021). This directly relates to the article's aim of assessing access to assets as a mechanism for unlocking sustainable livelihoods in the Zambezi conservancies (Figure 1).

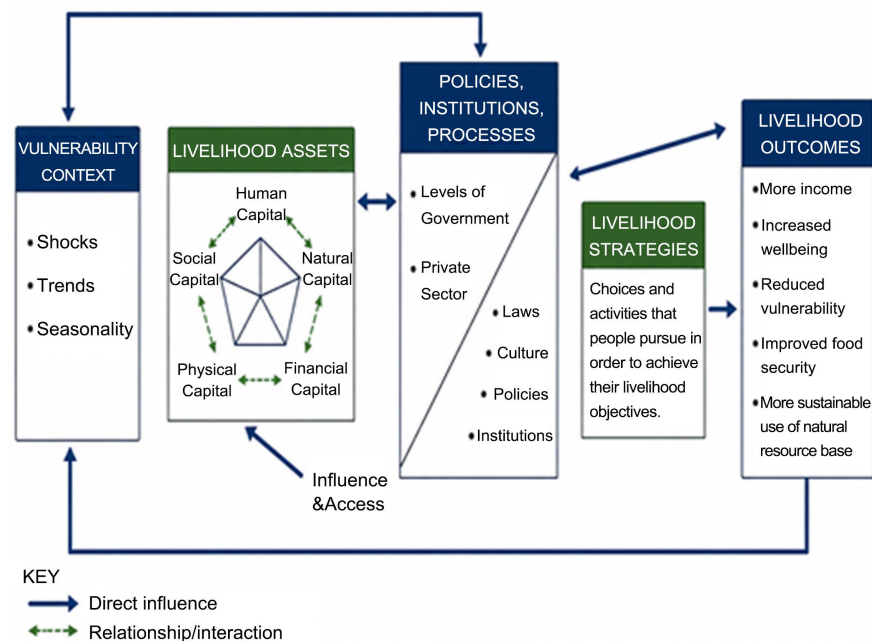


Figure 1. The livelihood framework of the DFID indicating the assets. Adopted from: DFID, 2000.

4.1. Community-Based Conservation (CBC) and Youth Livelihoods

Community-Based Conservation (CBC) provides a practical setting in which the SLF can be applied to assess youth livelihoods. CBC is a participatory, people-centered approach where communities are empowered to manage wildlife and natural resources while deriving socio-economic benefits (Roe & Jack, 2001). In Namibia, CBC is operationalized through communal conservancies, which grant communities, including rural youth, legal rights to benefit from natural resources, wildlife tourism, and related enterprises (Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2013; NACSO, 2022; World Wildlife Fund, 2021; UNDP, 2022).

Relating to the article title, CBC in the Zambezi Region functions as a platform through which youth access livelihood assets and engage in income-generating activities such as game monitoring, tourism operations, and community projects. These activities strengthen financial, social, and human capital, contributing directly to sustainable livelihoods while supporting conservation goals (Ashley et al., 2002; Roe, 2001). However, studies indicate that youth access to these benefits remains uneven, with many excluded from governance, decision-making, and

economic opportunities precisely the gap this study seeks to investigate (FAO, 2021; UNDP, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

4.2. Youth as Active Agents of Sustainable Livelihoods

The concept of youth, though variably defined (United Nations, 1995; African Union, 2006; Kimando et al., 2012), is central to understanding who benefits from conservancy-linked livelihood opportunities. In rural Namibia, youth are key actors in the sustainability of natural resource-based enterprises, yet face barriers including limited skills, financial constraints, and restricted participation in governance. This aligns with the study's focus on unlocking sustainable livelihoods by assessing rural youth access to assets, highlighting both challenges and opportunities for policy and programmatic interventions (FAO, 2016; UNDP, 2021; ILO, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

By integrating the SLF with CBC, this study situates rural youth as active participants whose livelihood strategies and access to assets determine both the sustainability of conservancies and their personal economic empowerment. This provides a direct conceptual and empirical bridge to the article title, demonstrating that the unlocking of sustainable livelihoods is contingent on enhancing rural youth access to and control over critical assets within community-based conservation frameworks.

4.3. Linking SLF, CBC, and the Study Title

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) provides a robust lens to examine how rural youth in the Zambezi Region access and utilize critical assets to achieve sustainable livelihoods. By focusing on human, social, natural, physical, and financial capitals, the SLF emphasizes that rural youth are active agents whose capabilities and choices determine their livelihood outcomes (DFID, 2000; Kollmair & Gamper, 2002; Scoones, 2021). In the context of community conservancies, this approach enables an assessment of how youth convert available resources, such as wildlife, tourism infrastructure, and financial support programs, into meaningful economic and social benefits. The article's focus on "assessing rural youth access to assets" is thus conceptually anchored in the SLF, linking asset availability and utilization directly to the potential for unlocking sustainable livelihoods.

Community-Based Conservation (CBC) complements the SLF by providing a participatory platform where rural youth can actively engage in decision-making, resource management, and income-generating activities (Roe & Jack, 2001). In Namibia, conservancies grant communities, including youth, legal rights to wildlife and other natural resources, allowing them to derive benefits through tourism, trophy hunting, and conservancy-related enterprises (Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2013; NACSO, 2019, 2022). Despite these opportunities, youth participation often remains limited due to structural barriers such as restricted governance roles, insufficient access to finance, and lack of skills training. Assessing these constraints aligns directly with the study title, emphasizing that unlocking

sustainable livelihoods requires both access to and effective utilization of assets within conservancy frameworks.

Finally, linking the SLF and CBC to the study emphasizes the policy and practical implications of rural youth asset access. Understanding how youth interact with natural, social, and financial capital informs targeted interventions aimed at enhancing participation, reducing vulnerability, and improving livelihood outcomes (Ashley et al., 2002; FAO, 2016, 2021; UNDP, 2021, 2022; World Bank, 2022). This integrative perspective highlights that youth empowerment in conservancies is central to achieving sustainable livelihoods, as access to assets alone is insufficient without enabling policies, institutional support, and participatory mechanisms. Consequently, the study situates rural youth at the intersection of conservation and development, directly addressing the title's focus on unlocking sustainable livelihoods through the assessment of asset access in Zambezi community conservancies. Recent studies in sub-Saharan Africa further emphasize that youth empowerment in community-based conservation requires integrated approaches that combine skills development, inclusive governance, and improved access to financial and market opportunities to achieve sustainable livelihood outcomes (ILO, 2022; World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2022).

5. Research Methodology

5.1. Research Philosophy

This study was guided by the interpretivism research philosophy, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals. The philosophy aligns with the study's intention to explore how rural youth in the Zambezi Region understand and experience access to livelihood assets within their community conservancies. Rather than seeking to generalize findings, the interpretivist stance prioritizes depth of understanding and contextual interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). It recognizes that knowledge emerges through interaction between the researcher and participants in their natural environments (Bryman, 2016). Hence, the researcher engaged with participants to interpret the meaning they attach to livelihood opportunities and challenges. This philosophical orientation ensured that the study focused on subjective experiences rather than objective measurements, which are central to qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015).

5.2. Research Approach

The study employed a qualitative research approach, which was considered most suitable for exploring complex social and economic issues affecting rural youth livelihoods. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth examination of participants' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding their access to livelihood assets (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach emphasizes understanding the "why" and "how" of human behaviour rather than quantifying data (Mar-

shall & Rossman, 2016). Through interviews and focus group discussions, the researcher captured detailed narratives that reflected the realities of youth in community conservancies. The approach also allowed flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes during data collection (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Overall, it provided the framework for capturing rich, descriptive insights necessary for understanding youth livelihood dynamics in the Zambezi Region (Silverman, 2020).

5.3. Research Design

The study adopted an exploratory case study design, which enabled a detailed investigation of youth livelihood experiences within selected community conservancies. This design was appropriate because it focuses on exploring phenomena in their real-life contexts. The case study approach helped to identify specific challenges, opportunities, and institutional conditions shaping youth access to livelihood assets. It also facilitated the comparison of experiences among different conservancies in the region (Stake, 1995). The exploratory nature of the design allowed the researcher to discover new patterns and relationships as they emerged from participants' accounts (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This design thus contributed to a holistic understanding of how livelihood assets influence the sustainability and empowerment of rural youth (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

5.4. Target Population

The target population for the study consisted of rural youth residing in communal conservancies across the Zambezi Region of Namibia. These youth are directly or indirectly involved in conservation and livelihood activities that influence their socio-economic well-being. The population was considered appropriate because they represent the group most affected by limited access to livelihood assets within the conservancy framework (Cohen et al., 2018). The study specifically focused on youth aged between 18 and 35 years, as defined by the Namibian youth policy. Their inclusion was based on their active participation in local economic and social activities within their communities. Engaging this population ensured that the study captured voices from those who experience both the opportunities and barriers associated with community-based conservation (Palinkas et al., 2015).

5.5. Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

The study sample comprised forty (40) participants, selected from eight (8) registered conservancies in the Zambezi Region, namely Salambala, Mayuni, Sikunga, Sobbe, Mashi, Nakabolelwa, Bamunu, and Lusese. These conservancies were purposely selected to reflect diverse socio-economic and ecological contexts across the region. The participants were chosen using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of individuals who possessed relevant knowledge and experience regarding youth livelihood activities,

while snowball sampling assisted in identifying additional participants through recommendations from initial respondents (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The sample size was adequate for qualitative inquiry, as it allowed for data saturation while maintaining depth in the exploration of participant experiences (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020). Each conservancy contributed between four and six participants to ensure balanced representation across the study area (Palinkas et al., 2015).

5.6. Research Instruments

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides and focus group discussion (FGD) schedules. These instruments were developed to elicit detailed information about youth access to natural, human, social, physical, and financial assets. The semi-structured format provided flexibility for follow-up questions and clarification of responses, ensuring that participants could freely express their views (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The focus group discussions encouraged interaction among participants, revealing shared perspectives and differences in experiences within conservancies (Morgan, 2019). Both instruments were reviewed by research experts to ensure content validity and alignment with the study objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pre-testing was conducted in one conservancy to refine the clarity and relevance of the questions before the main data collection (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

5.7. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place over several weeks, with interviews and FGDs conducted in participants' communities to create a comfortable and familiar environment. The researcher personally facilitated the sessions to ensure consistency and to build rapport with participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, while focus group discussions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All sessions were conducted in English and local languages where necessary, with consent obtained for audio recording (Silverman, 2020). Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Ethical conduct was maintained throughout the process, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality of all participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The flexible approach during data collection allowed for deeper exploration of emerging themes and clarification of critical issues raised by respondents (Bryman, 2016).

5.8. Data Analysis

The collected data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis. The process involved reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify patterns, concepts, and recurring issues (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Coding was carried out manually, grouping similar ideas and statements into categories that aligned with the study's objectives. These categories were then developed into themes that rep-

resented the core findings of the study. Interpretation involved linking the emerging themes to the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, which guided the analysis of how different livelihood assets influenced youth empowerment (DFID, 2000). The researcher ensured accuracy and consistency through cross-checking the transcribed data against field notes. The use of thematic analysis enabled a rich and detailed understanding of the lived experiences of rural youth in accessing livelihood assets (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

5.9. Ethical Clearance

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the relevant institutional research ethics committee to ensure that the study complied with established research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Permission to conduct the research in the Zambezi Region was also sought from regional authorities and conservancy management committees. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Written and verbal consent were obtained before interviews and FGDs commenced. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed by using pseudonyms instead of participants' real names. The researcher-maintained respect, cultural sensitivity, and integrity throughout the study, ensuring that all interactions were ethical and professional (Saunders et al., 2019).

6. Findings

The findings of this study were organized into meaningful themes discussed below. The section begins with the profile of the respondents.

6.1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Figure 2 illustrates the gender distribution of the respondents in conservancies.

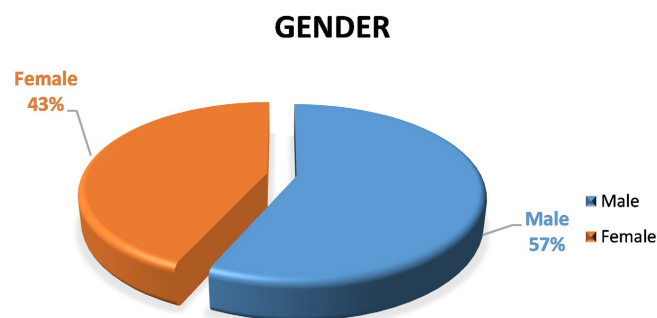


Figure 2. Gender distribution of the respondents in communal conservancies.

The study interviewed 30 respondents in conservancies. Out of the total 30 respondents, 57% comprising male respondents, and 43% of the respondents were female. **Figure 3** below, illustrates the marital status of the respondents in conservancies.

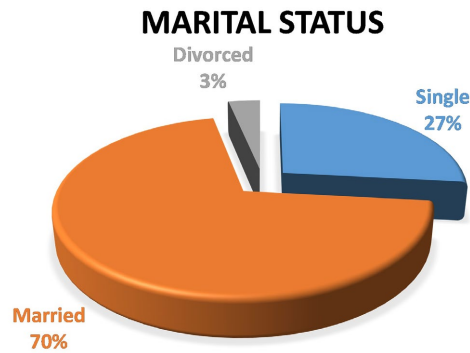


Figure 3. Marital status of the respondents in communal conservancies.

Figure 3 above illustrates that of the total 30 respondents of the study, most 70% of them were established to be married, whereas 27% were single and 3% represents the divorced respondents. **Figure 4** indicates the age range of the respondents in communal conservancies.

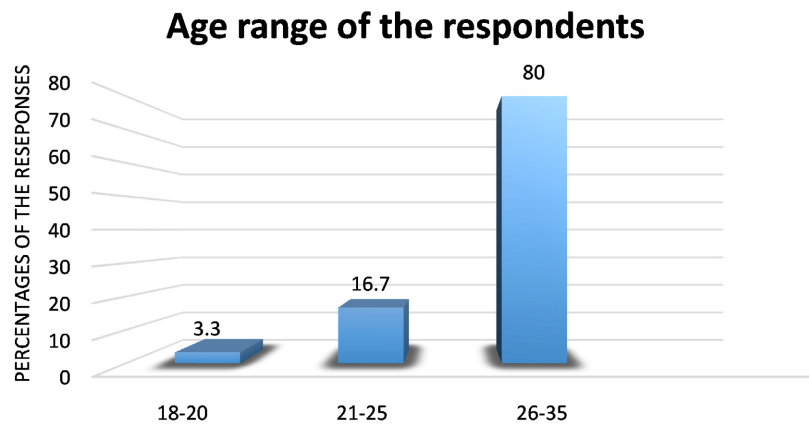


Figure 4. Age range of the respondents in communal conservancies.

Respondents were requested to indicate their age range, as indicated in **Figure 4** above that 80% of the total respondents were established to be aged 26 - 35. Whereas 16.7% were aged between 21 - 25 and the remaining 3.3% were those aged 18.20. Most of the respondents in conservancies were dominated by age groups 26 - 35 as stated in **Figure 4** above. This was attributed to them being the most available respondents during the study. **Figure 5** indicates the level of education of the respondents in conservancies.

Respondents were requested to indicate their level of education, 50% of the total respondents indicated that they attended secondary schools. Whereas 43.3% of the respondents said they attended university/ college and 6.7% have attended non-formal education.

Concerning occupation as indicated (**Table 1**), 76.7% of the total respondents were established to be unemployed and 23.3% were employed in various community conservancies in the study areas.

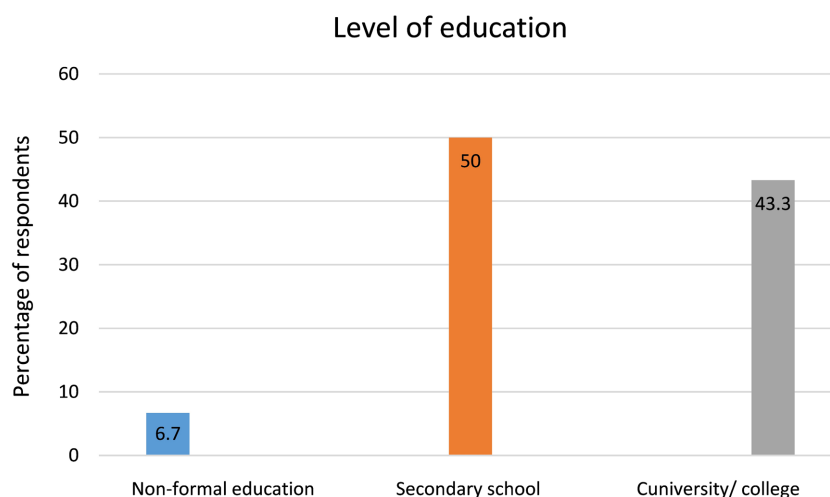


Figure 5. Level of education in communal conservancies.

Table 1. Occupation of the respondents in communal conservancies.

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Employed	7	23.3	23.3	23.3
	Unemployed	23	76.7	76.7	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

6.2. The Socio-Economic Profile of Rural Youth in Zambezi Community Conservancies

The findings revealed that most rural youth residing in the community conservancies of the Zambezi Region are within the economically active age group, highlighting their potential contribution to local development and natural resource management. Most respondents were between the ages of 18 and 35 years, which aligns with the age category commonly used to define youth in Namibia. The results further indicated that a substantial proportion of the participants were unmarried, reflecting demographic trends observed among young people in rural communities. Educational attainment varied among respondents, with most having completed secondary education, while a smaller proportion possessed vocational or tertiary qualifications. Despite these educational achievements, employment opportunities remained limited, resulting in high levels of unemployment and underemployment among the youth. Similar patterns have been reported in rural areas across sub-Saharan Africa, where young people often face challenges in transitioning from education to meaningful employment due to limited economic opportunities (African Development Bank, 2022). These findings suggest that although rural youth possess human capital in the form of education and skills, structural barriers continue to constrain their socio-economic advancement.

The study also found that household livelihood strategies were largely dependent on natural resources and small-scale economic activities. Many respondents

reported that their households relied on subsistence agriculture, livestock rearing, fishing, and harvesting of natural resources as primary sources of income and food security. Community conservancies played a significant role in supporting livelihoods through conservation-related activities, including tourism and natural resource management initiatives. However, income generated from these activities was often insufficient to meet the diverse needs of youth and their households. Consequently, many young people engaged in informal economic activities or sought temporary employment opportunities outside their communities. These findings are consistent with previous studies which indicate that rural livelihoods in Namibia are characterized by a combination of natural resource dependence and diversified income-generating activities aimed at reducing vulnerability (Ashley & Jones, 2001; Republic of Namibia, 2023). The continued reliance on natural resources underscores the importance of strengthening sustainable livelihood opportunities within conservancies to enhance youth economic resilience.

In terms of access to livelihood assets, the findings showed considerable disparities among rural youth in the study area. While respondents generally reported strong social networks through family, community groups, and traditional institutions, access to financial capital remained limited. Many participants indicated difficulties in obtaining credit, start-up capital, and financial services necessary for entrepreneurial activities. Furthermore, inadequate infrastructure, including poor road networks and limited access to markets, constrained opportunities for economic participation and business development. Although some youth had access to land and natural resources through customary arrangements, the productive use of these assets was often hindered by environmental challenges such as drought and wildlife-related conflicts. The findings support the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, which emphasizes that the availability and interaction of different forms of capital influence livelihood outcomes (Scoones, 2001; DFID, 1999). Therefore, improving access to financial resources, infrastructure, and productive assets is essential for enhancing the capacity of rural youth to pursue sustainable livelihood strategies within community conservancies.

6.3. Livelihood Assets of the Rural Youth in Communal Conservancies

The purpose of this section was to assess rural youth access to livelihood assets in community-based conservation, specifically in communal conservancies.

6.3.1. Social Capital

Regarding social capital in conservancies, the study established that certain respondents are serving in conservancy management and executive committees. In these committees, they are involved in decision-making regarding conservancies through conservancy management committee meetings, during community meetings, workshops, and monitoring of conservancy activities. Respondents indicated that though they are on these committees, it suggests nothing related to rural youth members in these conservancies. Asked why they do not talk about youth

in these committees, respondents explained that those who endorse the decisions of committees are elders and thus do not entertain youth-related matters. They explained that conservancies are community institutions recognised by traditional authorities who availed their land for conservation purposes thus they should benefit all members regardless of who they are.

It was also discovered that conservancies have appointed area representatives in their jurisdictions. According to the respondents, the dominant group is the youths, and they primarily represent their areas and local villages in conservancy issues and activities. It was also discovered that conservancies also host annual general meetings, where members of conservancies' share information regarding the progress made, shortcomings and way forward (Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2013: p. 8) and certain of the respondents were established to be members of their conservancies and thus attends the annual general meetings. Respondents shared that on these platforms, it suggests no mention of the youth, thus, it mostly attends because they hope to find employment opportunities and other benefits. The study also established that there are soccer teams in each area of the conservancy. These teams are sponsored by these conservancies to compete in soccer tournaments, which usually occurs on an annual basis. Though some respondents contended that sports have minimal impact on rural youth livelihoods and poverty alleviation since it only benefits the few of the majority such as soccer teams.

The findings reveal a clear imbalance of power between conservancy committees, traditional authorities, and youth. Traditional leaders, as custodians of communal land, wield significant authority over resource allocation and decision-making processes. Conservancy committees often operate in alignment with these authorities, reinforcing existing hierarchies. As a result, youth, despite being numerically dominant in some structures, remain marginalized in influencing decisions. This dynamic limit their ability to advocate for youth-specific programmes and restricts their access to benefits derived from conservancy resources.

The findings further reveal unequal power relations between conservancy committees, traditional authorities, and youth. Traditional leaders, as custodians of communal land, exert significant influence over decision-making and resource distribution. Conservancy committees often align with these authorities, reinforcing existing hierarchies. Consequently, youth despite their presence in some structures have limited influence, which constrains their ability to advocate for youth-specific programmes and access benefits.

6.3.2. Financial Capital

The study discovered that some respondents employed in conservancies depend on the income earned from conservancies such as through salaries. For instance, full-time staff receives a monthly salary, whilst part-time staff is paid based on work performed. Others also include "peace works". Certain respondents asserted that they have access to credit facilities at local banks and furniture shops, though this applies to permanent staff in conservancies. They use their payslips to apply

for financial assistance and other credit facilities.

Despite salaries, respondents also narrated that conservancies also pay cash payouts to each area in their jurisdictions as part of community benefits. One respondent explained that:

“Our area received N\$2500 from the conservancy. Currently, community members are still deliberating on whether to spend the money on a community project or borehole for the community”.

The cash payouts according to respondents are not for the youth-specific, but the entire members of the area. These financial benefits are distributed to community members annually. Regarding livelihood, respondents indicated that they have not benefited from these cash payouts because they are controlled by traditional authorities and other senior leaders in areas and decisions on how they should be spent, lies with them.

6.3.3. Natural Capital

Concerning natural capital in wildlife, respondents expressed that they do not have direct access to wildlife resources, but instead, conservancies arrange on behalf of its members such as meat distribution in areas covered by the conservancies. Other respondents claimed that community members in conservancies can access other natural resources such as firewood, cutting poles, reeds, and grass through obtaining authorisation from traditional authorities and conservancies except in essential areas. They can also collect wild fruits and other plants for medicines, except in essential areas of conservancies where harvesting of these resources is prohibited.

6.3.4. Physical Capital

According to the respondents, there are conservancy offices, where staff members are appointed. Certain respondents in jurisdictions of conservancies were discovered to have access to these offices. Whilst others argued that they do not have access attributable to distances from their villages to offices. Regarding access to information, respondents claimed that through annual general meetings conducted by conservancies, they are briefed on conservancy activities. Some respondents, especially those employed in conservancies are mostly in attendance, and information discussed at these platforms is essential for operating conservancies such as financial expenditure. Other respondents explained that they do not attend annual general meetings because agendas at these platforms do not acknowledge youth poverty but rather benefits those working in conservancies and traditional authorities (Figure 6).



Figure 6. An image of a conservancy office in the rural area of the Zambezi Region.

Respondents also explained that conservancies also conduct community meetings informing members' conservancy activities. Respondents maintained these community meetings to mention no youth-related matters. It was also established from respondents that conservancies have transport used for patrol, game count, and other activities. One respondent added that:

"We had a soccer tournament in one of the areas, teams were transported by conservancy cars".

Despite annual general meetings at conservancy offices, community meetings, and transport, respondents also mentioned that some conservancies have established Traditional Villages to attract tourists and as a source of income generation. There are individuals employed in these villages. Income generated from these villages forms part of the conservancy's coffers. Other conservancies also have lodges and campsites necessary for income generation for the conservancy and certain rural young individuals are employed in these campsites.

6.3.5. Human Capital

Respondents were requested to indicate whether they have received any conservancy-related training. **Table 2** indicates percentages of their responses.

Table 2. Training in wildlife.

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
	Yes	5	16.7	16.7	16.7
Valid	No	25	83.3	83.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

16.7% of the total respondents indicated that they have attended training in wildlife such as wildlife management, the importance of trading, and financial management. The training was organised by conservancies with other support organisations. The study observed that this group of respondents comprised individuals employed in conservancies. 83.3% of the respondents indicated that they have not attended any training in wildlife. According to this group, there is no wildlife training targeting conservancy members, specifically the youth.

Despite training, wildlife activities require health and physically fit individuals to undertake wildlife activities such as game counts, patrols in various areas covered by conservancies, respondents participating in these activities were established to be fit in performing their activities.

6.3.6. Livelihood Outcomes for Rural Youth

Limited access to livelihood assets translates into constrained livelihood outcomes for rural youth in communal conservancies. Restricted access to financial resources, training, and markets contributes to high levels of unemployment and limited income-generating opportunities. Furthermore, the exclusion of youth from decision-making processes reduces their ability to influence resource allocation and benefit from conservancy activities. As a result, many rural youths re-

main vulnerable, with low incomes, limited economic opportunities, and continued dependence on indirect or community-level benefits that are insufficient to support sustainable livelihoods.

7. Problems Impeding Rural Youth Poverty Alleviation in Wildlife Activities

Problems that impede rural youth poverty alleviation in wildlife activities in the Zambezi Region

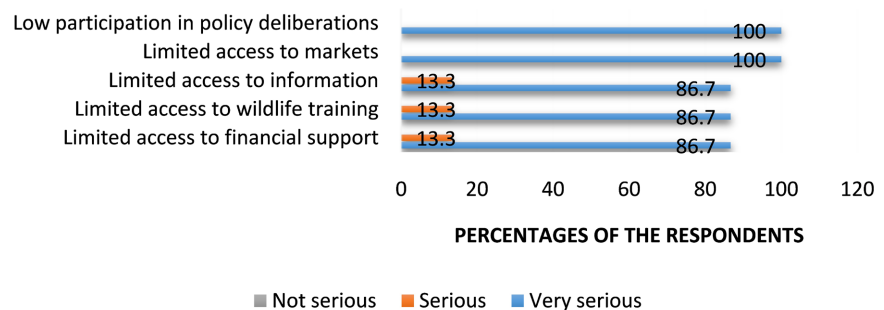


Figure 7. The challenges impeding rural youth poverty alleviation in wildlife activities in the Zambezi Region.

Figure 7 above indicates that all respondents indicated that they do not participate in policy deliberations in wildlife activities. Despite rural youth serving various portfolios of conservancies, the study established that most respondents are not provided opportunities to render such contributions regarding rural youth poverty. Whereas other structures such as traditional authorities are acknowledged. Most of the respondents explained that it suggests no specific platform specifically for rural youth to deliberate on policy issues of conservancy. It was established that conservancies do not directly negotiate with the youth, except concerning sports activities. All conservancy members are treated the same whether they are old or young. As one respondent indicated that:

“Conservancies do not have youth agendas. They regard everyone as conservancy members, and when they have policy issues, they consult the general community members within the conservancy not youth-specific”.

Respondents argued that because of their exclusion in policy deliberation, they are often discouraged to participate in wildlife activities because their concerns remain unattended. As one respondent said:

“Conservancies do not regard youth as important key role players in the success of conservancy activities, we are undermined, and we are not counted. They do not think about us”.

The study also established that 100% of the respondents as indicated in **Figure 7** say that they do not have access to markets. Concerning the respondents, they

have no clue of markets as far as wildlife products are concerned. According to their observations, conservancies recruit trophy hunters and reap the financial benefits thereof and distribute them to community members. Mostly elders are the main beneficiaries in their areas. The understanding of the respondents was that elders are recognised as one of the sole beneficiaries because they are regarded as the owners of conservancies attributable to owners of the land covered by conservancies, which also applies to traditional authorities.

Regarding the lack of information, it was established that 86.7% of the respondents indicated in **Figure 7** said they do not have access to wildlife information. Respondents explained that wildlife information is mostly shared with those employed in conservancies, traditional authorities, and general community members but not youth specifically. The study established that certain of the respondents indicated that some conservancies conduct awareness campaigns in various areas, but these campaigns do not target the youth, but rather the general community members where elders remain the primary focus. Some respondents claimed that there is no youth-related information at conservancies except information related to crucial employment opportunities. The study also established that only 13.3% of the total respondents indicated they have access to information. It was discovered these respondents are employed by conservancies.

Concerning wildlife training, 86.6% of respondents indicated that they do not have access to wildlife training. According to them, there are no wildlife training programmes tailor-made for the youth. Whereas 13.3% of those who indicated that they have attended training were discovered to be working in conservancies.

Regarding financial support for rural youth, 86.7% of the respondents said they have not received any financial support from conservancies. According to them, conservancies do not provide any direct financial assistance specifically for the youth but rather provide benefits such as income to the general community members per area, in most cases decided upon by local traditional authorities. One respondent said:

“There is nothing in our conservancy concerning financial support specifically for the youth, except the money they give to areas, which in most cases benefits the elders, not the youth”.

Other respondents narrated that conservancies were donating N\$10,000 for soccer tournaments for areas covered by the conservancies. Others contended that soccer tournaments mostly benefit players only and non-players benefit nothing. Prices won at these events do not contribute to livelihood and poverty alleviation but spend on social activities such as parties. Meanwhile, other respondents sensed that sponsoring tournaments will not lift them from poverty. One respondent said:

“We want financial support to enable us to generate income or establish sustainable projects that can improve our lives”.

13.3% of the respondents indicated that they have access to financial support. They indicated that they are benefiting financially in the form of salaries they re-

ceive from conservancies.

Variations across Conservancies

Although the findings are presented in aggregated form, some variations were observed across the eight conservancies studied. Conservancies with relatively better-developed tourism infrastructure (e.g., lodges and campsites) tended to offer more employment opportunities for youth, albeit limited. In contrast, conservancies with fewer economic activities exhibited higher levels of youth exclusion and unemployment.

Differences were also noted in access to information and participation in meetings, with some conservancies demonstrating slightly more inclusive practices than others. However, across all conservancies, the overarching pattern of youth marginalization and limited access to livelihood assets remained consistent. This suggests that while local context influences the degree of access, systemic institutional dynamics continue to shape youth outcomes across the region.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study on rural youth access to livelihood assets in communal conservancies underscores the pressing need for targeted interventions to address the challenges faced by young people in these unique conservation contexts. The findings reveal a complex interplay of factors that hinder the ability of rural youth to secure sustainable livelihoods within communal conservancies. Several key points emerge from the research:

Asset Disparities: Rural youth often face significant disparities in accessing various livelihood assets, including natural, social, human, financial, and physical capital. The imbalance in asset distribution poses barriers to their economic empowerment and hampers their ability to actively participate in and benefit from communal conservation efforts.

Inclusive Governance: The research highlights the pivotal role of inclusive governance structures in ensuring equitable access to livelihood assets. Empowering youth through active participation in decision-making processes fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, contributing to more sustainable and community-driven conservation outcomes.

Skill Development and Education: Targeted skill development programmes and educational initiatives are crucial in enhancing the human capital of rural youth. Investing in education and vocational training not only equips them with the necessary skills but also prepares them to adapt to evolving conservation economies.

Social Capital and Mentorship: Building social capital within communities and providing mentorship opportunities emerge as essential strategies. Strong social networks and mentorship programmes contribute to the transfer of knowledge, create support systems, and empower youth to navigate the complexities of communal conservancies.

Innovative Financing Mechanisms: The research underscores the importance

of exploring innovative financing mechanisms to address the financial capital constraints faced by rural youth. This may involve creating microfinance initiatives, establishing community-based enterprises, or leveraging sustainable tourism for economic opportunities.

Cultural Integration: Recognizing and integrating cultural values and practices into conservation strategies is paramount. Respecting and preserving the cultural heritage of local communities not only strengthens their identity but also enhances their engagement and commitment to conservation goals.

Collaborative Partnerships: Effective collaboration between stakeholders, including local communities, NGOs, government agencies, and businesses, is essential for the success of interventions. Collaborative partnerships can pool resources, share expertise, and create a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to addressing the challenges faced by rural youth.

Considering these findings, it is imperative that policymakers, conservation practitioners, and community leaders work collaboratively to design and implement strategies that specifically target the unique needs of rural youth in communal conservancies. By doing so, we can pave the way for more inclusive and sustainable conservation practices that not only protect biodiversity but also foster the socio-economic well-being of the next generation in these rural landscapes.

9. Recommendations

Although conservancies accessed some of the rural youth to livelihood assets in the Zambezi Region, the study findings raised significant recommendations for improving rural youth access to livelihood assets in conservancies that will contribute to rural youth poverty alleviation in the Zambezi Region and Namibia.

Conservancies should strengthen access to targeted training programmes for rural youth, including financial management, entrepreneurship for conservation-based enterprises, tourism guiding and hospitality services, wildlife management, and small business development. Conservancies should allow rural youth to submit sustainable project proposals at conservancy offices for possible funding, such as fish farming, community-based tourism, horticulture/gardening projects and environmental conservation enterprises to enable rural youth to generate income and create employment opportunities. Community conservancies should establish rural youth groups in areas covered by the conservancy. The functions of these groups will be to coordinate rural youth activities in conservancy, such as information-sharing, assist in distributing wildlife resources such as meat and other benefits. This also includes ensuring rural youth benefits from conservancies' settlements. These groups should also serve as formal platforms for youth representation in conservancy decision-making processes, ensuring that youth concerns, priorities, and benefit-sharing arrangements are adequately addressed. Conservancies should also improve youth access to market opportunities, information, and financial support mechanisms by establishing linkages with relevant stakeholders and ensuring that youth are directly included in benefit-sharing arrangements.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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