Using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach to explore economic empowerment for youth with disabilities in rural Uganda

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\begin{abstract}
This paper presents findings from a community-based participatory study exploring the lived experiences and key livelihood changes post-intervention of a vocational skills training for young people with disabilities in rural Uganda. Twenty-four youth with disabilities (13 female, 11 male) who had previously taken the vocational training were trained to become peer researchers and conducted 72 in-depth interviews with a more recent cohort of youth with disabilities. Findings were gathered into core themes of capacity building, security and interaction. They showed that training in a skill is an important part of the economic empowerment journey for youth with disabilities in rural Uganda. Beyond this, transition from training to work, marketing, proving competence, managing chronic pain whilst working and probable risk are also areas that need guidance and support. Renewed hope for better livelihood prospects was mixed with a degree of uncertainty. Some were unprepared for the complexities around community respect and had also not considered that their financial situation may get worse before it gets better, as part of the risk of self-employment.
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1. Introduction

Uganda has approximately 6 million people living with a disability, an estimated 14\% of Uganda’s population (Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), 2019) with young men and women with disabilities forming the biggest majority - most of these live below the poverty line (Uganda National Action on Physical Disability (UNAPD), 2017). Around 30\% of the population of persons with disabilities in the country is under the age of thirty (UBOS, 2019). Despite employment being seen as a critical factor for the independence and full inclusion of persons with disabilities and the realization of other rights (Harpur, 2012; Kiernan, 2000; Schur, 2002), limited employment opportunities continue to undermine the ability of young women and men with disabilities to earn enough income and contribute economically to their families and communities in Uganda. Key reasons for this may be found in how well-prepared workplaces are to address the employment support needs of individuals with disabilities (Griffiths et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2020).
Practitioners and commentators have argued that increasing the employability and employment of young men and women with disabilities would enable them to gain a livelihood, lead dignified lives and contribute economically to their families and communities (Lindsay et al., 2015; Plan International, 2015). Specifically, achieving national targets for reducing the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training requires that persons with disabilities are deliberately targeted as both agents and beneficiaries of employment policies and programmes (Rohwerder, 2020). It stands to reason that when empowerment of youth with disabilities, which constitute nearly half of the those with disabilities in Uganda, is made a priority in the national development strategies and interventions, the attainment of ‘no-one left behind’ is more likely to be realized.

Since 2012, Sightsavers, an international non-governmental organization (NGO), has been working in collaboration with the Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda and the Uganda National Association of the Blind in the four districts of Hoima, Buliisa, Kinyandongo and Masindi to increase opportunities for economic empowerment, informal employment and access to financial services for youth with disabilities. Funded by the European Commission (EC) in 2012, Sightsavers began a programme to provide young women and men with disabilities in rural Uganda with basic vocational skills training, equip them with start-up kits and actively links them to local businesses and entrepreneurs for financial services, apprenticeships and job opportunities. With additional funding from the EC in 2016 and later the National Lottery Community Fund in 2017, the catchment area for these interventions has since been expanded beyond the original four districts to include the neighboring Acholi sub-region.

This paper presents findings from part 1 of a wider ongoing mixed methods study which was designed to be conducted in three connected parts. Part 1 explored participants’ experiences and documented key livelihood changes post-intervention through participatory methods. Part 2 used some of the part 1 data and insights to inform the design and conduct of a detailed cohort survey with all the young women and men with disabilities who were enrolled in the service delivery programme (Bechange et al., 2021). Part 3 involved a targeted policy analysis to influence decisions that affect their lives. The findings of Bechange et al. (2021) based on the cohort from which our 72 study participants were drawn suggest that a targeted package of interventions built around vocational skills training can improve the livelihoods of young people living with disabilities in rural African settings, but what this quantitative study could not explore are the narratives and experiences of the participants during training and employment or whether training translates into worthwhile employment.

With this background, the purpose of this study was to better contextualize the lived experiences of youth with disabilities, further our understanding of what economic empowerment looks like for them and whether vocational training for youth with disabilities translates into worthwhile employment in this setting. Understanding their experiences during training and employment will help inform the development of initiatives that seek to increase participation of youth with disabilities in labour markets in resource-constrained contexts such as our study setting.

2. Methods

2.1. Study setting

Full details on the study setting have been described previously (Bechange et al., 2021). Briefly, the study was part of a wider mixed methods programme of research (Sightsavers, 2016) and was nested in a livelihoods programme for youth with disabilities in rural Western Uganda. The programme was funded by the European Union and the National Lottery Community Fund to increase opportunities for employment and access to financial services, and by 2016 approximately four hundred young women and men with disabilities from Masindi, Kinyandongo, Buliisa and Hoima districts, had been enrolled on the programme.

2.2. Study design and sampling

The study was underpinned by a community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology (Wallerstein & Duran, 2017). The overall aim of CBPR is to increase knowledge and understanding of the situation being studied together, to construct meaning together and integrate this with interventions and policy change to improve quality of life (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). It involves respectful collaboration with the community, shared decision-making and ownership, and where members of the community participate in planning, gathering evidence, analyzing it and sharing what is discovered. By asking questions about participants’ lived experiences, the design of this research seeks to break down social injustice and help everyone to re-think power structures and issues.

Approaching research this way identifies enablers and barriers to economic empowerment. It also supports young men and women with disabilities to realize their potential through voice, agency and participation. A peer researcher is someone who lives in the local area where the research is taking place, cares about and is involved in the research topic and is not a professional researcher (Arnul & Kanijal, 2022; Lushey & Munro, 2014). Peer researchers worked alongside a professional researcher, interviewing community members and observing professional situations, enriching the research with their unique contribution.

Twenty-four peer researchers with disabilities (13 female, 11 male) were trained to collect qualitative data in the form of in-depth interviews from young men and women with disabilities in their communities who had been trained in vocational skills and provided with tools by the project. Peer researchers were proficient in at least one of the four main languages spoken in the study area (Runyoro, Lugunju, Swahili, and Alur) or sign language for participants who are deaf or with severe hearing impairments. To assist the peer researchers with data collection, especially audio recording and note taking, twelve young women and men (five with mobility impairments, one with visual impairment and six without disabilities) were also recruited and trained. Training took place over a one-week period at the beginning of the study covering various aspects of the research process. It was delivered by facilitators from Kyambogo University and Sightsavers, and covered methodology, interview techniques and ethical conduct of research. Two additional two-day refresher training workshops were conducted mid-way through the data collection period to provide additional support and to document challenges faced and experiences of collecting data from those with similar life experiences and struggles. The principal investigator (SB) and a research coordinator (DN) maintained weekly contact with the peer researchers after training to support them with data collection, interview debriefs, and early analysis.
To capture a range of experiences the study design sought to select men and women, a mix of vocational training courses attended and people with different disabilities. A stratified purposeful sample created from the programme enrolment list was used to place participants into gender, course and disability categories. Using this structured sampling frame, purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 72 youth with disabilities (Table 1). Purposive criteria were geographical spread across the four study districts, sign language accommodation needs and matching of the peer researchers and the participants, and peer researchers’ knowledge about participants’ ongoing residence in the community and willingness to participate in the study.

2.3. Data collection

Between September 2016 and January 2017, 24 peer researchers, together with their assistants, collected data from other young people with disabilities in their homes using open-ended topic guides. The peer researchers used a semi-structured interview guide built around participants’ adaptive strategies and changes in their lives and wellbeing since starting vocational training. The face-to-face interviews explored people’s experiences and how they felt about their day-to-day work and achievements (or disappointments). To capture data on daily lives and activities we encouraged the peer researchers to spend time with participants on a visit to the homes or places of work and engage in and observe what they were doing. This involved a range of interactions and interview types in various locations in the homestead: sitting down under a tree in the compound to talk, walking around the compound, talking at their workshops or in the fields and helping with bits of household work. These interactions allowed a degree of rapport to develop which led to rich discussions of participants’ experiences. The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h and were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. A total of 72 interviews were conducted. In addition, the research assistants to the peer researchers took notes and immediately after the visit, wrote a detailed visit report. Following interviews, the peer researchers also debriefed with the principal investigator (SB) or research coordinator (DN) and wrote notes separately. These notes were used to corroborate and supplement the audio records. Data was collected from a previous cohort of young people with disabilities who had completed vocational training. Specific adaptations and supports were provided to enable peer researchers and their assistants with a range of disabilities to participate fully and safely in the data collection. These included sign-language interpretation, producing consent forms and related documentation and materials in Braille format, and paying an allowance and transport allowance for personal helpers or guides for those who use or require them.

2.4. Data analysis

Consistent with the CBPR methodology (Wallerstein & Duran, 2017), a 4-day participatory analysis workshop bringing together the peer researchers, their assistants and the professional multi-disciplinary team of researchers (SB, MG, PE, WK and DN) was convened. The interviews were analysed as hardcopy transcripts or with audio recorders for blind peer researchers. Themes were identified based on the interview content itself, examining each transcript line and paragraph in detail, but also based on the research questions and existing theoretical and empirical work. Initially working in groups of 4–6 and later pairs, the peer researchers and their assistants undertook three stages of coding stemming from a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): open, axial and selective coding. This involved an intense reading of the full set of transcripts (or listening to the audios) by all the workshop participants – breaking down, examining, comparing and conceptualizing data – then making connections between categories and finally selecting the core theme by systematically comparing it to other categories. In this way, the groups were able to compare and discuss their coding of the same transcripts in detail and resolve any interpretation discrepancies. In order for the peer researchers and their assistants to further break down, examine, compare and conceptualize data as a whole, they used a framework of seven questions in pairs.

1. What is said in the interview (transcript) about development of skills?
2. What emotions are being expressed and why?
3. What does the person telling the story say about their interactions with others?
4. What is said in the transcript about security, specifically: food, shelter, safety, health?
5. How does the person telling the story perceive their chances of a livelihood that lasts?
6. What does the person telling the story say about coping with setbacks during and after training?
7. What else is described in the transcript that you think is significant?

The themes brought together under these seven questions were then discussed in more detail by the entire participatory analysis workshop group that included the peer researchers, their assistants and the professional multi-disciplinary team of researchers. Through this participatory process a final list of themes and sub-themes were identified across all the data and structure the findings presented in this paper. Frequently, repeated expressions across the interviews are not quoted but cited using quotation marks.

2.5. Ethical considerations

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Mulago Hospital Research and Ethics Committee (MREC973) and the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (SS 4133). All participants received information about the purpose and methods of the study both verbally and on easy to read information sheets in their local language (or braille for blind participants). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants in the research prior to any data collection.

3. Findings

All 72 youth with disabilities (37 women and 35 men) who were approached by the peer researchers consented to the in-depth interview. Most participants had either a physical or sensory disability, were single, had acquired primary school education, and were rural residents (Table 1). Seventy-five percent of the participants were in self-
employment, running their own businesses at the time of the peer researcher visit. The 72 participants had completed a range of courses at the vocational training institutes including: tailoring (n = 16), carpentry (n = 8), construction (n = 4), hair dressing (n = 12), knitting (n = 11), motor mechanics (n = 13), welding (n = 2), computing and information technology (n = 4) and catering (n = 2). Participants spent between 9 and 12 months at the vocational institute, followed by 3-months of on-the-job training (internships) at small and medium size businesses and enterprises located close to their homes.

Findings on the lived experiences of young people with disabilities in relation to the inclusive model of economic empowerment training they undertook were gathered into three core themes.

1. Capacity building: feeling empowered, leadership, commitment, creativity, independence, communication, financial literacy, maturity, specific vocational skills, and sensing a lack of capacity building
2. Security: money, resources, health, physical safety and food
3. Interaction: with self, with family and with community

3.1. Capacity building

3.1.1. Feeling empowered

More than half of participants (40/72) expressed that they sensed that they were more empowered. They gave examples of encouraging others to work hard, helping fellow young people to be creative and save and encouraging them to embrace available livelihood support programmes. One young man explained,

The project has helped me to see I have got skills and I get what I really wanted in Hoima where I studied. I am advising youth like me outside there to work hard. Second to be trustworthy, third to avoid voluntary work, fourth help some of your fellows who have the same problem like us. You know we differ you may think that you are too badly off, yet there are others worse off than you.’

Some shared that they had learnt to avoid unnecessary expenditure and felt ready for the next step. About half of the participants said that they had found great value in being heard and listened to, and implicitly demonstrated that they knew they had something to say and share. There was a felt sense from some of being respected: ‘Now my friends are respecting me … Now I do not beg. Many guys were just languishing out there. Now they are working.’

3.1.2. Leadership

Leadership was another emerging theme. Participants spoke of having started lobbying and advocating for other young people with disabilities to get assistive devices. There were examples of future planning, becoming self-employed, training and helping others. One woman shared:

Later some woman came and told me that she wanted her child to come and work with me. She wanted me to teach her child. I agreed and started training her daughter. Then another woman also brought her daughter, that I should train her. And for this one I accepted but charged her … Right now, I am training others. So far, twelve have completed.

One woman felt a sense of contribution as she could help financially:

Customers got to know me more and I progressed. As I did so, my brother who was in school in senior six (S6), had been told to drop out in third term, since there was no money. I said, but mum, the last term! I told my mother, let him go back. Whatever money I make, I will send you and you supplement it. Let him go back to school. So, my brother went back to school. I would divide the money I made: survive on it, pay rent for my business and pay school fees for my brother. My brother completed S6.

Another man felt good that he could support his parents.

3.1.3. Commitment and creativity

Commitment and creativity were expressed implicitly. There were numerous examples from participants of maintaining machines and learning to self-repair machinery in order to continue working. Decisions such as moving location for work showed commitment to progressing. Creative thinking included moving to popular locations, shifting business from the town centre to home to save money, and farming land besides depending on the skill learnt in vocational training. One young woman explained,

I want to operate from a big town. Because here now business is declining. It is like people are migrating away from this place due to shortage of money. Therefore, I should at least go to a big town where I will be able to make money. And it also becomes cheaper for me in terms of transport of purchasing the things that I use - here in the village, the transport for getting those things is consuming a lot of money.

3.1.4. Independence

There were various instances of participants gaining independence since training. One participant was building his own house. Another was able to buy his medicine and juggle a couple of jobs: ‘If you compared to those days, there is a very big improvement - now am earning my own money and buy what I want. I also help my father; I am buying medicine for myself. I can buy things that can help me tomorrow. I am doing mechanic work as I save.’ One woman expressed not feeling reliant on marriage: ‘I first want to get how my future is going on. The issue of men will be thought of later. People get married, fine, but not now for me. I do not see the value or benefit of getting married now.’ There were many small changes that built up a new situation. For example, ‘When my shoe got spoiled before I would say ‘my shoe is spoiled but where am I going to get money from for mending it?’ But now even if my shoe gets spoiled, I do not tell my mother, I just get it and I take to the cobbler.’ Self-employment was also expressed as creating independence.

3.1.5. Communication

Capacity building through communication was another significant theme. Participants spoke of joining with others and developing more skills. There were several examples of working in a group and friendships forming, and a few examples of struggling/being annoyed with customers’ poor treatment of them. One participant was conquering this initial poor treatment:

The work is there. First of all, you must have customer care and secondly you must make sure that you tell the truth to your customer. I do not think that those customers can run away from you after telling them that today I will finish your cloth and it happens. I do not think they can deny me a job then and today people are coming from different villages because of my good work.

A few participants described poor communication from the vocational training institute. For example, ‘The course that I had gone to study was tailoring but when I reached there, I got a certain teacher who told me that I am lame, and I can’t do what I had been accepted for.’

3.1.6. Financial literacy

Participants spoke of financial literacy, mainly came from the 3-month internship part after initial vocational training. This included saving money, developing business skills, understanding marketing, enjoying financial freedom, and getting support from VSLA (Village Savings and Loan Association). One young man explained, ‘We would grow food and cassava and beans from the money I sent; I would sell after harvesting and reinvest the money in the business.’ Another young woman explained,
I have achieved so many things. I bought myself some five chickens. I bought a phone which was not there before. I bought a panga with the money from Sightsavers. I have bought a few house items. Gardens are there. I am using my earnings to dig them at this moment. And at weeding time, I work and send money. I grow maize and then get money out of it.

3.1.7. Sense of achievement and specific vocational skills

Examples of patience, hope, and acceptance in relation to the economic empowerment journey were also shared. Participants derived a great sense of achievement and pride from vocational skills training. They felt good about getting a certificate from the vocational institute which demonstrated their competence in the courses they had been trained in. There were many stories of specific vocational skills having been built on: knitting, hairdressing, leather making, tailoring, building, carpentry, plumbing, computing and catering. Feedback on the teaching was overall very positive. One young man expressed: ‘And he wanted so much to teach us so that we get knowledge. And the truth is he taught us.’

3.1.8. Sense of lack of capacity building

However, numerous participants also expressed a sense that they were not experiencing an expansion of their capacity. Just under half of participants (35/72) spoke of struggling to cope with situations, especially those often out of their control, such as being admitted to hospital regularly during and after training and the associated costs. Course progress could be slow:

‘We were not allowed to touch new or running vehicles. So that was a problem on its own because one could not tell that I repaired something, and it is running. They told us – you did not come to repair here; you came to learn introduction only; you will learn most of the things when you go into a garage when you have gone for internship. Indeed, that is what we did.’

Those with hearing impairments relied on visual learning. For example, ‘The teachers did not know sign language, but I learnt on my own. The teachers could teach me all right, but I had to learn mainly by seeing – as they were taking the measurements, cutting the garments. I learnt more through my friends however they could help me – especially those who knew some sign language or gestures.’

Several participants shared that they need more regular customers. One young woman felt that the course could have taught this and did not:

The challenge I have right now is that customers are not regular. And I do not what to do to get more and regular customers. I have not been able to figure out how other people get and retain customers. You see I am new to all this. At vocation, they did not teach us anything or give us any tips about customers and increasing the number of customers. If I went back to vocation, I would ask the teachers to give me some practical tips. I am bad in that area, and I worry about that big problem which can stop my progress.

Machine failure due to inadequate power and differences between machines from vocational training to since vocational training hindered some from building on their skills. For example, ‘The tailoring machines which they gave us to sew leather clothes are not supposed to sew leather clothes. And when a customer comes and tells you to make for him or her what they want, I cannot do it because of the poor materials I have.’

Slow government programmes since vocational training also held some back.

3.2. Security around money, resources, health, physical safety and food

Security around money, resources, health, physical safety and food arose as themes. Before training there were positive and negative comments regarding financial security. There were two examples of participants being content with their job/earning before training and giving this up in hope of something better, which did not emerge. Most examples were of a lack of employment or money prior to training. After training there were mixed responses in terms of finance – for example being hopeful for prosperity (via business expansion, owning assets), planning to construct a house, starting to save, being no better off than before training, dealing with high rent, negative perception of market and lack of hope for expansion. One young woman expressed that, although her knowledge increased in one area, her economic situation became worse after training, partly because she gave up part-time work to attend vocational training:

Income wise … things are worse now. Worse than it was before. I had resigned from the job where I was earning some money. Someone else has taken it. Currently, I have no employment. That is what I meant when I said some of us made losses! At times I regret, but then on the other hand, I say it is okay, I got the knowledge. They decided it was not fitting to provide more students with equipment to help us to benefit from the training (one computer for six of us). I am not sure where that one computer is at the moment.

There were many examples of gradual financial security: ‘From what I get I am able to feed myself and also save. I save weekly, and the money we save is five thousand shillings that we put in our savings. From these savings I bought two goats.’

In terms of security around resources, participants cited poor accommodation, lack of assistance and lack of land in the period before training. Frustration was expressed in one story that the course had conditions (around completing primary six: P6). Comments about resources during training included lack of access at the training institute, feeling happy to be given choice, being heard and listened to. After training, comments included the equipment either no longer working or not being received: ‘My tailoring machine has problems … it was not moving and I called someone who knows it and they told me it was made for people with disability in the legs and he told me the person who fixed it did not fix the parts very well … it’s still in the house until I get the money for that person to fix it for me.’ Positive comments such as: ‘They gave me tools and I am still using them very well up to now’ and ‘They gave me a tailoring machine which I didn’t have, and I never expected to have it’ were frequent.

In relation to health security, participants spoke of a lack of treatment and lack of accessibility prior to training. A few spoke of health problems since, due to their situation or work conditions. For example, ‘I started working in conditions that were not conducive. I had to abandon the sewing machine down there. I could not manage to cope and report for work. The attacks became weekly.’ In relation to physical safety, there was a specific example from a participant with albinism, where fear was expressed of bodily harm due to albinism. This was in reference to before the training and was not discussed in terms of post-training.

There were examples of not having good quality food to eat before training, mixed experiences of having suitable food during training (food was not fully cooked) and being able to buy food after training: ‘They [my parents] feel happy because as I get money, I buy food. We sometimes pool resources together with my parents and may be slaughter a chicken and we eat. For me that shows that I am working.’

3.3. Interaction with self, family or community

Interaction with self, family or community was an important part of all disclosure. In relation to self, examples from participants included acceptance of disability in their life and building towards leadership in their work. Various participants described mistreatment or no assistance from family before the training, such as being left at home when others could go to school or events, which caused them frustration. Post-training, examples included being respected by family members for
decision-making, and describing good relationships with siblings and parents: ‘It is reassuring to know that they believe in me somehow. They know that I can work and be able to support myself [since training].’

There were numerous examples of community discrimination before training, including dehumanizing taunts. One young man explained that even children could wear him down: ‘Young children, yes, it was so bad. They had stood before me on the way abusing when I have not talked to them - they would abuse and run.’ During training, it seemed that the intention of others was mainly positive, and yet experiences were not always positive in practical ways. A common experience was that ‘There was no student who would make fun of people, like ‘you are disabled, leave this place’; we used to be with all people equally. Those guys could draw us to themselves in their own ways, saying come and we be with you, come and we chat.’ Despite this, there was often a lack of consideration and help, such as, ‘Getting food was very hard where you find the able people squeezing themselves in the line, so they used to make it very hard. When the teachers later noticed the problem, they decided to make the disabled make their own line.’ Such an intention was well meant, and yet did not promote inclusion. Lack of awareness was common: ‘There were times when disabled youth would barely reach to fetch the water and the able youth would look on and pass them by. We the disabled came in to help. And yet when we move for a while, we also get problems with our legs.’ A couple of young people reported that stealing was common generally, but when their items, such as soap and oil disappereed, it was a challenge to move around and find them.

Post training, there were examples of creating community from the training, such as ‘Connecting the dots has made us to know each other ... we got to know all of them and in their homes.’ There were more positive stories surrounding community than negative, though it remained mixed. Some participants spoke of respect: ‘People do give me respect because of the project’ and ‘These days even those who used to see me as a person without value respect me ... I am the one who can help my parents at home.’ There remained some customer wariness, for example,

My customers are few because in the tailoring job customers must be used to you so that they can give you a job. But when they do not know you, they by-pass you and they undermine you. And for us who are disabled, people think you are going to do useless work from the way you look. Even when they give you a job they ask you, “But will you manage?” Let me go to town”. You find when they are by-passing you like that, those who come after that customer ask themselves why people are passing by here, thinking that means she does not know what to do.

This struggle to prove competence remained for many participants. However, stories were coming through that participants were winning others over with excellence: ‘And all people come to my garage. That means they trust in me and what I do and my skills. When you repair well for somebody with joy, he goes without any complaint. They have never brought to me a bad report here.’ This sense of acceptance was vital for their psychological wellbeing and was enhanced further by the pleasure they got from knowing that community members value the skills they had obtained from the vocational training institute.

4. Discussion

What emerges from the findings is a sense that training in a skill is an important part of the economic empowerment journey for young men and women with disabilities in rural Uganda. Our study reveals that transition from vocational training to work, marketing, proving competence, managing chronic pain whilst working and probable risk are also areas that need guidance and support. Renewed hope for better livelihood prospects was mixed with a degree of uncertainty. The experiences of our participants were complex, but several issues identified by our analysis resemble the experiences of people with disabilities in other settings (Bartram & Cavanagh, 2019; Gill, 2005; Hunt et al., 2022; Kavanagh et al., 2015; Mauksch, 2021; Naami, 2015). Many participants in our study seemed unprepared for the complexities around community respect, and some believed that doing a good job would be enough and found it far more nuanced in reality. Most had also not considered that their financial situation may get worse before it gets better, as part of the risk of self-employment. Topics such as pre-empting community attitudes and preventing flare-ups of chronic pain through wise choices around physical working conditions could sit alongside skills training.

In terms of the training itself, there were some very positive accounts. Participants perceived themselves more empowered and independent; felt creative and positive about their future; gained new knowledge and skills – in financial management, marketing, business and leadership; felt they were respected and listened to and some started savings. These findings add to the growing body of evidence that high-light employability and the need to increase employment opportunities for youth with disabilities (Banks et al., 2022; Magrin et al., 2019; Ramachandra et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2022). When zooming in on the frustrations, they seem to stem from perceived thoughtlessness of other students and course organizers or trainers. Our findings echo the results of others who have documented access problems (Greenan, 1982; van Pletzen et al., 2021), attitudes of customers and fellow students (Hbeiny et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2022) during training and employment of people with disabilities in other parts of the world. Issues such as participants being told they are not suitable for the course of choice once they arrived, participants not understanding how the training and the internship were juxtaposed, lack of provision for hearing impairments (or more broadly, inaccessible training made learning harder) and other students having a welcoming attitude, but inconsiderate actions are resolvable with clear communication and sensitization in relation to disability. Other young people with disabilities stepped in to help practically because they had acute awareness of need and the implications of not receiving help. Also surrounding the training was the outcome of creating community. Participants got to know and support each other, which seemed rather ad hoc post-training. Instead, intentional networking support could be built into the wider context of the training.

Specific to communication, addressing the concept of risk and high expectations of financial security after training would benefit future trainings; some gave up a steady income to train and were worse off at the point of interview, with understandable frustration. Communication around understanding that the self-employed challenge would look very different from the training itself could help to build confidence and resilience when things become difficult. Communicating about possible disability/youth/youth with disabilities discrimination and how to cope with this post-training could also prepare trainees and deepen resilience.

Methodologically, a strength of the study was the 4-day participatory analysis process with the peer researchers and their assistants. The seven questions given to the peer researchers when open coding were a helpful framework for them to code with a clear focus on the research question. The questions also created a coherence of open coding across the small groups. Peer researchers with hearing impairments worked with transcripts and a sign language interpreter within their groups. Those with visual impairments listened to the recordings of the interviews and recorded open codes verbally to share with their small group. Various physical impairments were considered in the practical layout of the analysis workshop. Although there were no recorded intellectual disabilities within the 24 peer researchers, each could move forward at their own pace, and additional support was offered in terms of understanding where needed, including in reading out the transcripts a few sentences at a time.

Once peer researchers ended their first day, researchers by profession started a second, axial stage of coding, creating a loose framework by which the peer researchers could continue coding the next day. This took into account potential themes that some peer researchers had already recorded during day one in note form. Peer researchers used the framework of emerging codes to sort the open codes deductively and look for missed codes to add. This process worked well in that it created
natural differentiation: those who were making complex links could create sub-themes and spot where an open code did not fit into the tentative framework, whilst others enjoyed the safety of the deductive process. However, this took the transition between open coding and axial coding away from the peer researchers, which they could have managed, with support. With more time, this could be part of the workshop itself.

Feeding back to each other in small groups kept coherence during the analysis process and enabled peer researchers to own the data in an embodied way. There was more potential to offer inclusive ways of doing this, which will be taken into account in future planning for analysis workshops. Methodological issues around CBPR remain (Greenwood, 2017): reporting back findings in time to influence programmatic decision-making processes was challenging, and power differences surfaced at times. As with previous CBPR research (Holkup et al., 2004; Wilson et al., 2018), peer researchers could not be included in planning until after ethical permissions were granted and so missed key design decisions. Yet this study built on previous CBPR work and progress was made in levelling hierarchy wherever possible and in greater inclusion throughout.

A few more limitations about these findings need noting. First, we do not claim, given our purposive sample, that this qualitative study provides data which is representative of the larger population of youth with disabilities in rural Uganda. However, our study provides transferable insights into understanding what economic empowerment looks like for young people with disabilities. Second, given that the data was collected by peers who live in the same neighborhoods, there may be various drivers of what, and how, the interviewed youth with disabilities chose to share their stories. Another limitation was the inability to conduct multiple interviews and observe the trained youth with disabilities at their places of work or homes over an extended period of time.

5. Conclusion and future research

This study highlights that young men and women with disabilities in rural Uganda benefit from training in a skill as an important part of the economic empowerment journey. The training in focus for this study showed many benefits and resulted in various positive outcomes for those participating in it. Broader training would be beneficial, to include details on transition from training to work, marketing, proving competence, managing chronic pain whilst working, probable risk and complexities around community respect. Specific improvements to training include greater disability awareness training for trainers and other students, communicating when first choice of course is not granted due to disability, making training more accessible and intentional networking support. While the youths were trained in different trades, they reported a remaining lack of capacity in financial literacy, capacity building skills and skills in innovative technologies. The insights derived from this phase of the intervention can contribute to informed programme review and development.

Anecdotal evidence shows that involvement of youth with disabilities as peer researchers has a positive impact on their self-esteem and serves as an empowerment strategy. More research is needed to explore this further, but also assess the effects, cost and quality of data in CBPR that involves youth with different disabilities as peer researchers. Our study generally highlights the need to further investigate the longer-term impact of economic empowerment programmes on the lives and livelihoods of youth with disabilities. For example, in the absence of ongoing programmatic interventions and support, would the positive social and economic outcomes be sustained, and would there be continued opportunities for peer researchers to engage in and shape research within other programmes and studies in this setting? These questions formed the basis for the design of a follow-up sub-study with the broader population of youth with disabilities in this setting. The protocol for this study is currently undergoing ethics review, and we expect ethics approval and start of fieldwork before the of this year.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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