

Opportunity Pathways for Youth Entrepreneurship in Zambia's Eastern Province: A Qualitative Study of Enablers, Motivation and Enterprise Entry

Bridget Phiri¹, Professor Mpundu Mubanga², Dr. Chipeta Eleanor Meda³

¹University of Zambia, Graduate School of Business,

²University of the Western Cape, Department of Economics, EMS Faculty, Robert Sobukwe Road, Bellville, Cape Town, South Africa.

³University of Witwatersrand, School of Business,

Abstract

Youth entrepreneurship is widely promoted as a pathway for employment creation, livelihood security and inclusive development in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, much of the literature still describes young entrepreneurs mainly through the language of barriers, informality and survival. This qualitative article retains the original focus of the study by examining Objective One of a broader doctoral research project: to identify the key opportunities that motivate youth entrepreneurs to engage in business activities in Eastern Province, Zambia. The study was guided by the question: What opportunities motivate youth entrepreneurs to engage in business activities in Zambia's Eastern Province? Data were generated from 50 in-depth interviews with youth entrepreneurs, 10 key informant interviews and three focus group discussions involving 24 participants in Chipata, Petauke and Lundazi districts. The study used the Capability, Opportunity, Motivation and Behaviour (COM-B) model to interpret entrepreneurship as a behavioural process shaped by motivation, external opportunity and practical capability. Thematic analysis was conducted with support from NVivo. Findings show that youth entrepreneurship in Eastern Province is shaped by necessity-mediated opportunity recognition. Young people enter business because of unemployment, income insecurity and household responsibilities, but they also identify real opportunities in agriculture, agribusiness, agro-processing, mobile money, digital platforms, cooperatives, Constituency Development Fund-linked support, local trading and cross-border commerce. The article contributes by shifting the discussion from a deficit-based view of youth enterprise towards an opportunity-pathway perspective that recognises young people as active economic agents working within constrained rural and semi-urban ecosystems.

Keywords: youth entrepreneurship; opportunity recognition; COM-B model; cooperatives; agribusiness; digital entrepreneurship; Zambia

1. Introduction

Youth entrepreneurship has become an important development strategy in Zambia and across Sub-Saharan Africa because formal labour markets have not created enough decent, stable and productive

work for young people. Recent evidence continues to show that youth enterprise activity cannot be understood only as a personal choice; it is also a response to unemployment, insecure work, uneven education-to-work transitions and limited access to wage employment (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024; Ofosu-Appiah, Boahen, & Agbenyegah, 2025). At the same time, young entrepreneurs should not be presented only as victims of weak labour markets. Many are alert to opportunities around them and are willing to use business as a practical route into income generation, household support and local development.

This article maintains the original argument that youth entrepreneurship in Eastern Province is shaped by both need and opportunity. Classical entrepreneurship theory presents entrepreneurs as agents of innovation and economic transformation (Schumpeter, 1934), while opportunity-based theory defines entrepreneurship around the discovery, evaluation and exploitation of opportunities (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). In rural and semi-urban African contexts, however, opportunity is rarely separated from necessity. Young people may start trading, farming, providing mobile-money services or processing agricultural products because they need income, but the business they choose is still shaped by visible local opportunities. This is why the manuscript uses the idea of necessity-mediated opportunity recognition rather than treating youth entrepreneurs as either purely necessity-driven or purely opportunity-driven.

Current literature strengthens this position. Ofosu-Appiah et al. (2025) show that youth entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa is affected by barriers at individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels, including weak skills, limited social capital, poor credit access and inadequate business support. Leger, Arsenijevic and Bosma (2025) further show that non-formal entrepreneurship training in Sub-Saharan Africa is most useful when it responds to the actual environment in which young entrepreneurs operate. These studies are important for the present article because they show that opportunities do not benefit youth automatically. Opportunities become useful when young people have the capability, networks, information and institutional support needed to act on them.

The study also responds to recent work on youth entrepreneurship enablers, digital tools and social entrepreneurship. Choi and McLain (2024) propose an 8Es view of youth early-stage entrepreneurship, emphasising education, experience, self-efficacy, enthusiasm, exposure, endorsement, encouragement and ecosystem support. De Klerk, Buick and Ranasinghne (2025) show that digital technology and social media can help youth break market barriers, especially where young entrepreneurs use platforms to identify customers, advertise products and mobilise resources. Alzate, Mejía-Giraldo, Jurado, Hernandez and Novozhenina (2024) similarly show that youth social entrepreneurship is connected to strategies, economic participation and innovation. These recent studies support the present article's focus on opportunity pathways, including digital platforms, mobile money, cooperatives and local institutions.

Eastern Province provides a useful setting for this inquiry because it combines an agrarian economy, cross-border trade possibilities, emerging local service markets, mobile-money growth and decentralised public support through structures such as the Constituency Development Fund. Chipata, Petauke and Lundazi also represent different rural and semi-urban entrepreneurial conditions. Chipata is a stronger commercial and administrative centre, Petauke combines trading and agricultural activity, while Lundazi is more rural and more strongly affected by infrastructure, market and institutional access constraints.

This variation allows the study to show how place shapes what young people see as possible and how they enter enterprise.

The article therefore focuses on Objective One of the broader doctoral study: to identify the key opportunities that motivate youth entrepreneurs to engage in business activities in Eastern Province, Zambia. The guiding research question is: What opportunities motivate youth entrepreneurs to engage in business activities in Zambia's Eastern Province? The article uses the COM-B model because entrepreneurship is treated as behaviour: young people enter, persist, reinvest, search for markets, join networks, use digital tools, form cooperatives and expand when motivation, opportunity and capability align (Michie, van Stralen, & West, 2011; Timlin, McCormack, Simpson, & using COM-B evidence, 2020). The central argument is that youth enterprise entry in Eastern Province is best understood as necessity-mediated opportunity recognition.

2. Related Research Work and Theoretical Framing

2.1 Youth Entrepreneurship, Opportunity and Livelihood Motivation

Youth entrepreneurship has been examined through economic, behavioural, institutional and development perspectives. Early work viewed entrepreneurship as innovation and new combinations (Schumpeter, 1934), while later work emphasised opportunity recognition, venture creation, risk-taking and resource mobilisation (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). In developing economies, youth entrepreneurship is also shaped by unemployment, low-quality jobs, household responsibilities, informality and weak labour-market absorption (Chigunta, 2002; Schoof, 2006; Williams & Williams, 2014).

Recent literature has sharpened this discussion by showing that young people's entrepreneurial behaviour is shaped by both internal and external conditions. The 8Es model of youth early-stage entrepreneurship suggests that education, experience, self-efficacy and ecosystem support can encourage young people to act on opportunities (Choi & McLain, 2024). The systematic review by Ofosu-Appiah et al. (2025) also shows that youth entrepreneurship barriers are multi-level rather than merely individual. Therefore, youth enterprise development requires more than motivation; it requires capability-building, social support, credit, market access and enabling institutions.

For Eastern Province, these insights are important because youth entrepreneurs do not operate in abstract markets. They operate in local markets where farming seasons, household needs, trading routes, digital connectivity, cooperative structures and public support systems shape what can be done. This article therefore retains the original emphasis on opportunity while acknowledging that opportunity is often recognised under pressure.

2.2 Agriculture, Agribusiness and Value Addition

Agriculture remains one of the most important opportunity spaces for youth entrepreneurship in rural Africa. It provides entry points in crop production, poultry, livestock, aggregation, agro-dealerships, transport, storage, processing and marketing. In Eastern Province, opportunities are visible in maize, groundnuts, sunflower, tobacco, vegetables, poultry, livestock, agro-processing and crop trading. The original content of this manuscript is therefore retained: agriculture is not treated only as subsistence activity, but as a locally embedded opportunity pathway.

However, recent research also warns that accessible entry points are not the same as growth pathways. Youth farming becomes more developmental when it is linked to skills, finance, irrigation, storage, processing, quality control, branding and structured markets. This is consistent with the Resource-Based View, which explains that enterprise performance depends on valuable resources and capabilities that firms can use to create advantage (Barney, 1991). It also aligns with recent evidence that training programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa need to be practical and context-specific rather than generic (Leger et al., 2025).

Agro-processing and value addition therefore receive special attention in this article. Peanut butter processing, sunflower oil production, milling, vegetable packaging, fruit drying and branded food products can move youth beyond selling raw produce. These activities can reduce post-harvest losses, raise margins and create additional jobs, but only where youth have equipment, skills, market links and safe production practices.

2.3 Digital Entrepreneurship, Mobile Money and Platform-Based Opportunity

Digital entrepreneurship literature shows that digital technologies can change how entrepreneurs discover opportunities, communicate with customers, mobilise resources and create value (Nambisan, 2017; Sussan & Acs, 2017). More recent studies confirm that digital technology usage is increasingly connected to entrepreneurship in Africa (Ajide & Osinubi, 2023) and that digital ecosystems can influence entrepreneurial activity at national level (Zhang, van Gorp, & Kievit, 2023).

For young entrepreneurs in Eastern Province, digital opportunity is practical rather than abstract. It includes WhatsApp selling, Facebook marketing, mobile-money booths, phone-based customer communication, digital payments and simple online market searching. De Klerk et al. (2025) show that youth can use technology to overcome market barriers, but they also need the skills and confidence to turn online visibility into real sales. Therefore, this study understands digital tools as opportunity structures that still require capability: phones, data, electricity, digital literacy, cyber awareness, customer communication and working capital.

Mobile money is especially important because it creates both a service business and a transaction infrastructure. A youth entrepreneur may earn income from a booth while also helping other traders receive payments, save small amounts and buy stock. In COM-B terms, mobile money expands physical and social opportunity, but sustainable behaviour depends on float management, trust, record keeping and reinvestment.

2.4 Networks, Cooperatives and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Social networks are important because they provide information, trust, encouragement, access to customers and sometimes start-up resources (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Youth entrepreneurs often rely first on bonding networks such as family, friends and peers. These networks help them start and survive. However, growth usually requires bridging networks: buyers, mentors, financial institutions, business associations, NGOs, cooperatives, processors and formal markets.

Cooperatives are particularly relevant in Zambia because they can help young people pool labour, share equipment, access training, apply for CDF-linked support, aggregate produce and negotiate with buyers.

For example, a youth sunflower cooperative may organise members to bulk sunflower seed, negotiate with a local oil processor, access a press through a grant and sell branded cooking oil. A poultry cooperative may buy feed in bulk, standardise production and link members to schools or local restaurants. A tailoring cooperative may share sewing machines and bid for local uniform contracts. These examples are not presented as automatic success stories; they show how cooperatives can convert scattered individual effort into a more organised opportunity pathway when governance is transparent.

Recent youth entrepreneurship literature supports this ecosystem view. Choi and McLain (2024) emphasise exposure, endorsement and encouragement as enablers of early-stage enterprise, while Alzate et al. (2024) connect youth social entrepreneurship to innovation and collective value creation. Cooperatives therefore fit well with an opportunity-pathway framework because they can join social capital, institutional support and practical capability.

2.5 Institutions and the COM-B Model

Institutional theory explains that rules, policies, norms and support systems shape entrepreneurial behaviour by enabling or constraining access to resources and markets (North, 1990; Scott, 2014; Urbano, Aparicio, & Audretsch, 2019). Recent African evidence also shows that institutional quality matters for innovation and entrepreneurship development (Abdulai, Hussain, & Queku, 2026). This matters for Eastern Province because youth opportunities are shaped by CDF structures, cooperative registration, local government information, training programmes, market regulation and financial institutions.

The COM-B model explains behaviour as the interaction of capability, opportunity and motivation (Michie et al., 2011). Capability refers to knowledge, skills and psychological capacity. Opportunity refers to external conditions that make behaviour possible, including social networks, markets, institutions and infrastructure. Motivation refers to conscious and automatic processes that energise action. In this article, business entry, persistence, reinvestment, digital adoption, cooperative participation, market seeking and value addition are treated as entrepreneurial behaviours. Figure 1 presents how this behavioural logic was adapted for youth enterprise entry in Eastern Province.

The model is useful because it avoids blaming youth for weak enterprise outcomes while also avoiding the assumption that opportunities alone are enough. A young person may be motivated to farm, trade or run a mobile-money booth, but enterprise behaviour is shaped by whether they have skills, capital, networks, institutional access and market routes. This is why the article focuses on the interaction between motivation and opportunity, while still recognising capability as the bridge between seeing an opportunity and using it effectively.

Figure 1. COM-B interpretation of youth enterprise entry

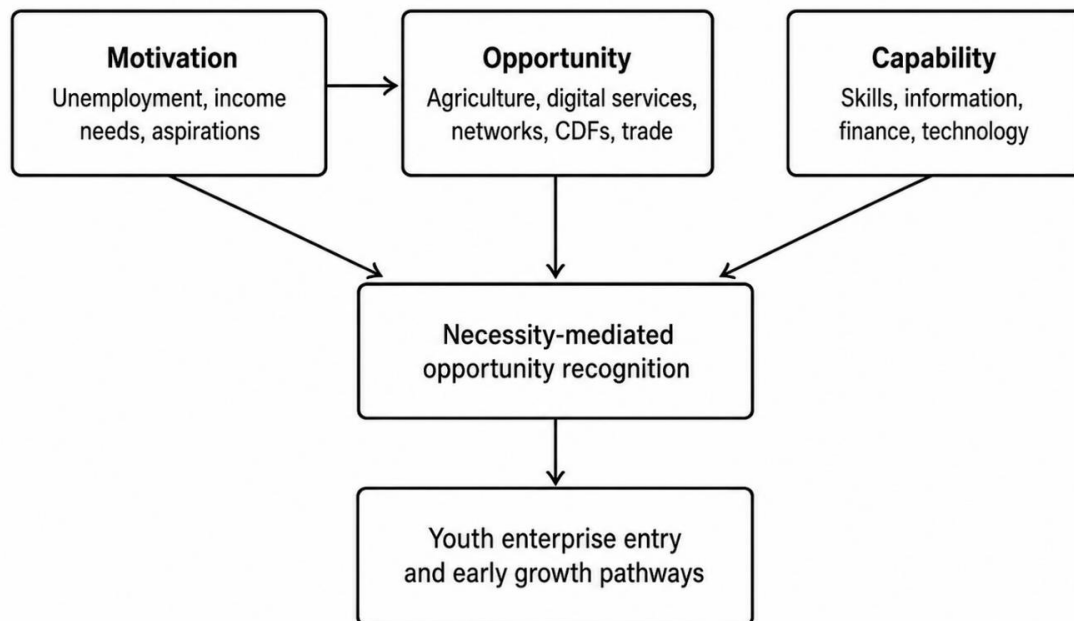


Figure 1. COM-B interpretation of youth enterprise entry through motivation, opportunity and capability.

Source: Author's construction, adapted from the COM-B model of behaviour change by Michie, van Stralen and West (2011), and informed by the qualitative themes from youth entrepreneurs, key informants and focus group participants in Chipata, Petauke and Lundazi.

3. Research Methods

This section has been strengthened with citations because qualitative methodology must be reported transparently. The study followed a qualitative design because the objective was not to measure the frequency of opportunities, but to understand how youth entrepreneurs interpret and describe the opportunities that motivate them. Qualitative research is appropriate where the aim is to understand meanings, experiences and context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reporting was guided by principles reflected in the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research and the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research, especially the need to explain context, sampling, data collection, analysis and ethical procedures clearly (O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2014; Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007).

3.1 Research Design

The article draws from the qualitative component of a broader doctoral study on opportunities and challenges faced by youth entrepreneurs in Eastern Province, Zambia. Although the broader doctoral work used a mixed-methods design, this manuscript focuses only on Objective One and therefore uses the qualitative material directly linked to opportunity motivation and enterprise entry.

The qualitative approach allowed participants to speak in their own terms about why they entered business, which opportunities they saw, how they used networks and digital tools, and how local

institutions shaped their decisions. This was important because youth enterprise behaviour is often lived in small decisions: buying stock, joining a cooperative, using mobile money, looking for customers, applying for support, saving from farming income and reinvesting into another activity.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Chipata, Petauke and Lundazi districts. These districts were selected because they represent different entrepreneurship contexts within Eastern Province. Chipata is a stronger commercial and administrative centre, Petauke combines agriculture with semi-rural trading, and Lundazi is more rural with stronger infrastructure and market access constraints. This district variation helped the study examine how place shapes entrepreneurship opportunities, consistent with contextual entrepreneurship literature (Welter, 2011).

Eastern Province was suitable because many youth enterprise opportunities are linked to agriculture, agribusiness, cross-border trade, mobile money, local service demand, cooperatives and decentralised support. The setting therefore provided rich evidence for examining opportunity pathways rather than focusing only on barriers.

3.3 Target Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of youth entrepreneurs aged 18 to 35 years who owned or managed micro and small enterprises in the selected districts. Both formal and informal enterprises were included because informality is a major feature of youth entrepreneurship in rural and semi-urban Zambia. Key informants from government, NGOs, business support organisations, financial institutions and community structures were included to provide institutional and ecosystem perspectives.

Purposive sampling was used because participants needed to have direct experience or knowledge of youth entrepreneurship. This was appropriate for a qualitative study seeking information-rich accounts rather than statistical representativeness. Variation was sought across district, gender, sector and enterprise type so that the study could capture opportunity experiences in agriculture, trading, services, mobile money, agro-processing and cooperative-related activities.

3.4 Sample Size and Data Saturation

The qualitative sample comprised 50 youth entrepreneurs, 10 key informants and three focus group discussions involving 24 participants. This produced 84 qualitative engagements across interviews and focus groups. The sample was adequate because the study combined multiple sources of evidence and continued until recurring patterns were visible across districts and participant groups.

The justification for the sample follows the idea of information power, which argues that the more relevant the sample is to the research question, the fewer participants may be needed for strong qualitative analysis (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). In this study, information power was strengthened by the narrow objective, the direct experience of participants, the use of key informants and focus groups, and the recurrence of themes across Chipata, Petauke and Lundazi. Recent methodological discussions also caution that saturation should not be used mechanically; researchers should explain how adequacy was reached in relation to the purpose, richness and analytic depth of the data (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Questions focused on reasons for starting a business, perceived opportunities, sources of motivation, agriculture and agribusiness, mobile-money services, use of phones and social media, networks, cooperatives, CDF-related opportunities, local markets and cross-border trade. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain consistency while still allowing participants to explain their lived realities.

Interviews with youth entrepreneurs captured individual experiences of enterprise entry, persistence, reinvestment and opportunity recognition. Key informant interviews added institutional perspectives on government support, NGOs, finance, cooperatives and training. Focus groups helped reveal shared community understandings, especially around farming, trading, CDF, youth groups and local market access. This triangulation strengthened the credibility of the findings (O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007).

3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically using NVivo and Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022; Byrne, 2022). The analysis combined inductive coding with theory-informed interpretation. First, transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Second, initial codes were generated around opportunity, motivation, agriculture, digital tools, mobile money, cooperatives, CDF, local markets, cross-border trade, networks and value addition. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed against the original accounts to ensure that they reflected participants' meanings rather than only the researcher's assumptions.

COM-B was then used as an organising framework. Motivation captured unemployment, income need, independence, household responsibility, ambition and persistence. Opportunity captured agriculture, markets, digital platforms, mobile-money services, cooperatives, CDF, networks and cross-border trade. Capability was used to interpret the skills, information, finance, technology and confidence needed to convert opportunities into business behaviour. This theory-informed interpretation helped the study move from description to explanation while still remaining grounded in participant narratives.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, key informants and focus groups; comparison across three districts; repeated reading of data; use of illustrative quotations; and transparent explanation of the analytic process. The analysis also benefited from reflexive attention to context, recognising that participants' statements were shaped by local market conditions, livelihood pressures and institutional experiences. Methodological literature emphasises that qualitative rigour depends on transparency, coherence between research question and method, and evidence that themes are grounded in data (O'Brien et al., 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ethical approval for the broader doctoral study was obtained on 10 th February, 2025 from the University of Zambia Biomedical Research Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, anonymity, their right to withdraw and the

use of anonymised quotations. Written informed consent was obtained before data collection. Pseudonyms and non-identifying descriptions were used to protect participants.

4. Results and Discussion

Figure 2. Main opportunity pathways identified by youth entrepreneurs

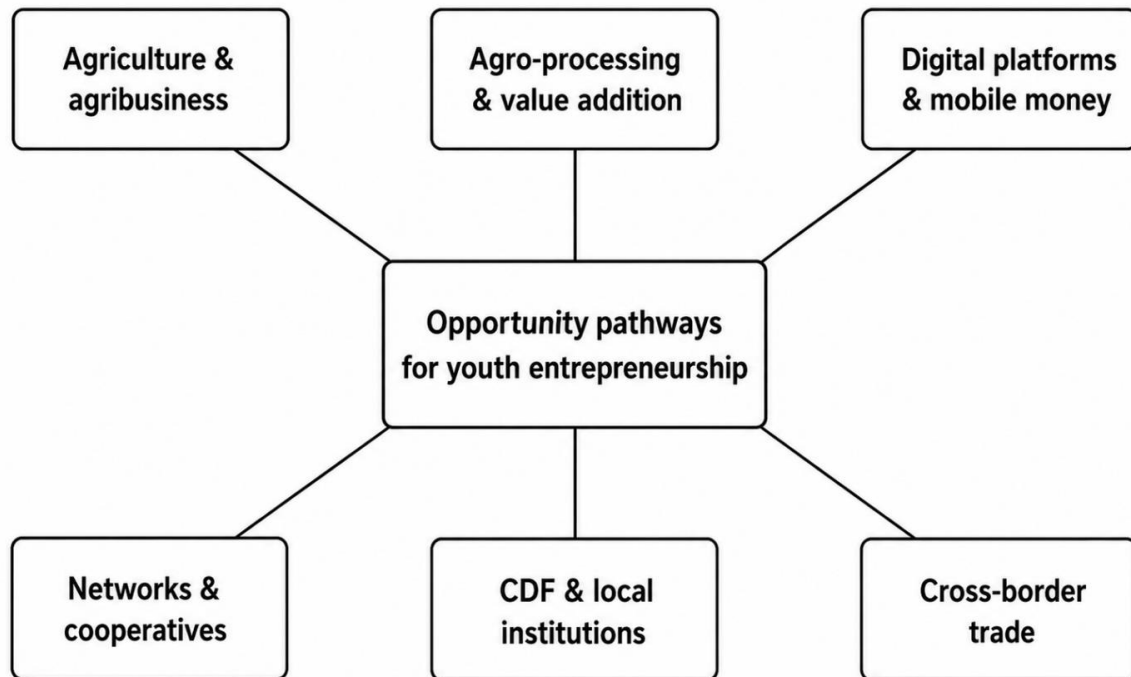


Figure 2. Main opportunity pathways identified by youth entrepreneurs in Eastern Province.

Source: Author's construction from the qualitative field findings of this study. The opportunity pathways were generated from thematic analysis of interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions, and interpreted using the COM-B framework (Michie et al., 2011).

Figure 2 summarises the main opportunity pathways that emerged from the field evidence. The results and discussion are integrated to keep the participant evidence close to interpretation. The original themes are maintained, while the discussion has been strengthened with recent DOI-based literature and clearer cooperative examples. The findings show that youth entrepreneurship in Eastern Province is shaped by livelihood motivation and locally available opportunities. Youth enterprise entry was rarely driven by one reason only. Participants described business as a response to unemployment and household needs, but also as a way of using opportunities in agriculture, agribusiness, agro-processing, mobile money, digital platforms, cooperatives, CDF-linked support, local trading and cross-border commerce.

4.1 Entrepreneurship as a Response to Unemployment and Livelihood Insecurity

Youth entrepreneurship was strongly motivated by unemployment, underemployment, income insecurity and the desire for financial independence. Many participants did not describe business as a fashionable choice. They described it as a way to survive with dignity, support family members and avoid waiting endlessly for formal jobs. One youth entrepreneur explained, 'I started because I could not continue

waiting for employment. At home people still need food, school fees and support. Business was the only way I could begin to stand on my own.’

This finding is consistent with recent systematic evidence showing that youth entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa is shaped by structural barriers, including weak skills, limited credit, poor policy support and inadequate business facilities (Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025). However, the Eastern Province evidence adds a more human layer: young people are not only pushed by hardship; they also look around their communities and choose the openings they believe can work. A young trader said, ‘Even if the capital is small, you look at what people are buying every day. You start with what is moving.’

The discussion therefore complicates the necessity-opportunity distinction. In Eastern Province, necessity and opportunity are interwoven. Motivation pushes youth into enterprise, but opportunity structures shape the sector and behaviour they choose. This supports the COM-B interpretation that motivation alone does not produce behaviour; it interacts with opportunity and capability (Michie et al., 2011).

4.2 Agriculture and Agribusiness as Dominant Opportunity Spaces

Agriculture emerged as the most widely reported opportunity pathway. Participants identified opportunities in maize, groundnuts, sunflower, tobacco, vegetables, poultry, livestock, agro-dealerships, crop aggregation and small-scale fish farming. Agriculture was attractive because it was familiar, locally available and connected to household livelihood systems. A youth entrepreneur stated, ‘Here, agriculture is not far from us. Even when you do not have a big shop, you can start with vegetables, chickens or crops. People must eat, so there is always a market somewhere.’

A key informant also emphasised the province’s agrarian base: ‘Eastern Province is an agricultural province. Youths can take up space from production up to processing, but they need guidance and markets.’ This statement shows why agriculture is both an entry pathway and a growth challenge. It provides opportunity, but the opportunity becomes stronger when youth have inputs, irrigation, technical skills, storage, transport and buyers.

The original participant evidence has been retained to preserve the lived voice of the respondents:

“Given Eastern Province’s fertile land and favourable climatic conditions, agriculture remains one of the most viable sectors for youth entrepreneurship. Youth entrepreneurs can tap into various agribusiness opportunities, including commercial farming, agro-processing, organic farming, and livestock rearing.”

“I am a tobacco farmer, and farming has helped me to live comfortably by meeting my daily needs. I have also managed to buy a motorcycle through growing tobacco... This is how I started my tailoring shop by buying a sewing machine.”

“In my opinion, agriculture is a big sector in Eastern Province. It is an agricultural province that spans the entire production and processing process. Youths can take up their space there.”

Recent literature supports this finding. Leger et al. (2025) show that entrepreneurship training in Sub-Saharan Africa works better when it is linked to the practical context of entrepreneurs. In Eastern Province, this means that agricultural training should not be limited to production. It should include costing, aggregation, storage, processing, branding and buyer negotiation.

4.3 Agro-Processing and Value Addition as Growth-Oriented Opportunities

Participants distinguished between simply producing crops and adding value to agricultural products. Agro-processing and value addition were viewed as stronger pathways for income growth because they could reduce losses, increase shelf life, improve product quality and attract wider markets. Activities mentioned included peanut butter production, sunflower oil processing, milling, fruit drying, vegetable packaging and branded food products.

One key informant observed, ‘Many young people grow sunflower and groundnuts, but the bigger opportunity is not just selling raw crops. When they process, package and brand, they can earn more and even employ others.’ A young woman involved in food processing added, ‘When you sell raw groundnuts, the money finishes quickly. But when you make peanut butter, people see value and you can sell in shops.’

This opportunity was also expressed through the earlier key-informant account:

“There are many sheds where people store sunflowers; they process them to produce cooking oil, allowing many youths to grow and sell them to these companies. Besides sunflowers, there are maize, groundnuts, tobacco, and so forth. Therefore, many youths can venture into agriculture, which has potential in the business industry since the market is already available.”

The finding aligns with the Resource-Based View because value addition depends on resources and capabilities such as equipment, production knowledge, packaging, quality control, costing and branding (Barney, 1991). It also connects with recent youth entrepreneurship literature showing that young entrepreneurs need more than encouragement; they need practical support that turns opportunity recognition into viable enterprise action (Choi & McLain, 2024; Leger et al., 2025).

4.4 Digital Technology, Mobile Money and Platform-Based Opportunities

Digital tools and mobile-money services emerged as visible opportunity spaces, especially in trading centres and semi-urban areas. Youth entrepreneurs used phones, WhatsApp, Facebook and mobile-money platforms to advertise, communicate with customers, receive payments and manage transactions. Mobile-money booths were especially visible because they offered daily cash-flow opportunities and helped other local businesses transact.

One youth entrepreneur described growth through mobile money: ‘I started with one booth using my savings. At first it was difficult because customers would come and sometimes I had no float. I kept reinvesting. Now I have more booths and I have employed other youths.’ This account shows entrepreneurial behaviour in practice: opportunity recognition, saving, reinvestment, persistence, expansion and job creation.

The previous mobile-money quotation has also been restored because it shows motivation, reinvestment and employment creation in one account:

“I own a booth, and my capital came from personal savings from when I was working. The booth business is booming, although competition has increased significantly since I started five years ago. In this business, having more capital is essential so customers do not bounce, and you make more money. I

passed through a lot to reach where I am now. I had the hope and courage to make it. It demands hard work and not giving up. I have opened ten booths and created employment for my fellow youths.”

The finding is supported by de Klerk et al. (2025), who show that technology can help youth entrepreneurs break through market barriers, and by Ajide and Osinubi (2023), who link digital technology usage to entrepreneurship in Africa. However, digital opportunity was not equally available to all youth. Rural participants mentioned poor network coverage, lack of smartphones, high data costs, unreliable electricity and limited digital skills. Therefore, digital entrepreneurship support must include digital literacy, mobile-money record keeping, online marketing, customer communication, cyber awareness and affordable connectivity.

4.5 Networks, Cooperatives and Supportive Ecosystems

Participants repeatedly described networks as important opportunity structures. Family members, friends, peers, suppliers, customers, community groups, NGOs and local institutions helped youth access information, encouragement, customers and sometimes start-up resources. One participant explained, ‘For us young people, you need people around you. Sometimes you hear about funding or a market because someone tells you. If you are alone, you miss many things.’

Cooperatives were discussed as a practical way of organising opportunity. Participants noted that a cooperative can help youth apply for CDF, share equipment, bulk produce, access training and negotiate with buyers. One participant said, ‘A cooperative can help, but only when members are serious and leaders are transparent. If it is only formed for money, it dies.’ This is an important finding because it avoids romanticising cooperatives. Cooperatives create opportunity only when governance, trust and market purpose are strong.

The original network quotation is retained below:

“Having a supportive ecosystem and networks is crucial for us, youth entrepreneurs. It is not just about starting a business but about having the right people around you—mentors, peers, and organisations that can provide guidance, resources, and connections. These networks help us navigate challenges, share ideas, and discover opportunities that we would not have found otherwise.”

A practical example is a youth groundnut cooperative that organises members to produce, bulk and process groundnuts into peanut butter. Another is a sunflower cooperative that links farmers to a local oil press and sells branded cooking oil. A poultry cooperative can bulk-buy feed and supply schools, lodges or restaurants. These examples show how cooperative structures can transform individual survival activities into coordinated enterprise pathways. The finding aligns with social capital theory because networks provide trust and information (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000), and it also aligns with recent youth entrepreneurship thinking that ecosystem support, exposure and encouragement matter for early-stage enterprise (Choi & McLain, 2024).

4.6 CDF, Decentralisation and Institutional Opportunity

Some participants viewed the Constituency Development Fund, cooperative formation and decentralised support as emerging institutional opportunities. They believed localised funding could help youth access resources closer to their communities. One participant stated, ‘The increase in CDF gives youths hope

because support is now talked about in the ward. We can form cooperatives and apply for projects instead of only waiting for people in town.’

Another participant noted, ‘Training is good, but after training youths need tools and follow-up. If someone learns tailoring but has no machine, the skill remains in the head.’ This comment shows why institutional opportunity must be linked to capability. CDF, cooperatives and local training programmes are not enough if youth lack proposal-writing skills, financial literacy, business planning, record keeping, equipment and mentorship.

The earlier CDF and cooperative evidence has been restored:

“The increase in CDF allocation and the opportunities it creates are reaching the grassroots... Youths now have a platform to form cooperatives and apply for projects in their wards, making the future of entrepreneurship in the country look very promising.”

“The current government is actively encouraging skills training through its policies. After completing these training programmes, youths can form cooperatives... Youths can engage, secure contracts, and generate income with these skills.”

Institutional theory helps explain this finding. Formal rules and support systems shape who can access resources and how confidently they engage with institutions (North, 1990; Scott, 2014). Recent African evidence also shows that institutional quality matters for entrepreneurship development (Abdulai et al., 2026). In Eastern Province, CDF can become a stronger youth entrepreneurship pathway when information is transparent, applications are simplified, cooperatives are properly trained and post-funding mentorship is provided.

4.7 Cross-Border Trade and Spatial Opportunity

Eastern Province’s proximity to Malawi and Mozambique creates spatial opportunities for cross-border commerce. Participants described opportunities in agricultural produce, household goods, second-hand clothes, processed foods and small consumer products. A youth trader explained, ‘When the local market is slow, you think of where else people need the product. The border gives some youths a chance, but you need transport, capital and knowledge of how to move goods.’

This finding supports contextual entrepreneurship literature, which argues that place, infrastructure, institutions and markets shape entrepreneurial behaviour (Welter, 2011). Border proximity widens possible markets, but it does not automatically produce enterprise growth. Youth need capital, transport, product information, negotiation skills, knowledge of procedures and sometimes partnerships. Cross-border opportunity therefore requires both capability and institutional guidance.

For policy and practice, youth enterprise support in Eastern Province should include market intelligence, product-quality training, transport linkages and basic guidance on lawful cross-border trading. This would help youth move beyond saturated local markets and connect agricultural and processed products to wider demand.

4.8 Theoretical and Practical Contribution

The central analytical contribution of the study is necessity-mediated opportunity recognition. Young people enter business because unemployment, income insecurity and household responsibilities push

them towards enterprise, but they choose particular businesses because of opportunities visible in their local environment. This contribution extends the COM-B model by showing that motivation and opportunity interact in constrained entrepreneurial ecosystems. Motivation creates the push to act, opportunity structures shape possible pathways, and capability determines whether opportunity becomes sustained entrepreneurial behaviour.

This interpretation responds to recent calls for youth entrepreneurship research that goes beyond listing barriers. Ofosu-Appiah et al. (2025) synthesise the barriers facing youth entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa, while Alzate et al. (2024) show that youth social entrepreneurship includes economic, strategic and innovation dimensions. The present article adds that youth entrepreneurs in rural and semi-urban Zambia should be understood as active interpreters of opportunity, not simply as unemployed people pushed into informal trade.

Practically, the findings suggest that youth enterprise support should move from generic start-up encouragement to opportunity-pathway development. Support should strengthen sectors and pathways that youth already recognise: agriculture, agribusiness, value addition, mobile money, digital marketing, cooperatives, CDF access, networks and cross-border trade. For cooperatives specifically, support should include governance training, transparent leadership, record keeping, market contracts, shared equipment and mentorship.

5. Conclusion

This article examined the opportunities that motivate youth entrepreneurs in Zambia's Eastern Province. The findings show that youth entrepreneurship is shaped by both livelihood necessity and locally available opportunity structures. Young people enter business because formal employment is limited and income needs are high, but they also identify opportunities in agriculture, agribusiness, agro-processing, mobile-money services, digital platforms, cooperatives, CDF-linked support, local trading and cross-border commerce.

The study concludes that youth entrepreneurship in Eastern Province is best understood as necessity-mediated opportunity recognition. Youth entrepreneurs are not merely responding to poverty or unemployment. They are actively interpreting their environments, identifying business openings, mobilising resources and pursuing livelihood improvement through enterprise. However, these opportunities become growth-oriented only when supported by practical capabilities, finance, infrastructure, markets, networks, transparent cooperatives and accessible institutions.

The main policy implication is that youth enterprise support should not only encourage young people to start businesses. It should strengthen the opportunity pathways that young people already recognise. In Eastern Province, this means investing in agriculture and value addition, digital capability, mobile-money business management, cooperative governance, CDF access, mentorship, market linkages and cross-border trade support.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations. First, it focuses only on Objective One of the broader doctoral study and therefore does not provide a full analysis of all challenges affecting youth enterprise performance. Second, the evidence is geographically limited to Chipata, Petauke and Lundazi districts. Third, the

study relies on qualitative self-reported data, which may be influenced by recall, optimism or social desirability. Fourth, the study is cross-sectional and does not track whether identified opportunities lead to sustained enterprise growth over time. Fifth, COM-B is applied qualitatively rather than statistically tested.

Future research should test the concept of necessity-mediated opportunity recognition using larger quantitative or mixed-methods designs. Longitudinal studies could examine whether youth who identify more opportunity pathways are more likely to sustain, formalise or grow enterprises. Comparative studies across Zambian provinces could show how place, infrastructure, digital connectivity and institutional proximity shape opportunity recognition. Sector-specific studies are also needed on youth agribusiness, agro-processing, mobile-money entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship, cooperatives and cross-border trade. Finally, intervention-based research should assess whether integrated packages, such as CDF access plus cooperative governance training, digital skills plus market access, or finance plus mentorship, produce stronger outcomes than single-input programmes.

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Author Contributions

Bridget Phiri conceptualised the study, developed the research problem, reviewed the literature, designed the qualitative research approach, collected the field data, conducted the initial coding and thematic analysis, and prepared the first draft of the manuscript. She also interpreted the findings in relation to youth entrepreneurship, opportunity recognition and the COM-B framework.

Professor Mpundu Mubanga provided academic supervision, methodological guidance, critical review of the manuscript, and intellectual input in refining the theoretical framing, discussion and scholarly contribution of the article. He also reviewed the manuscript for academic coherence, clarity and suitability for journal submission.

Chipeta Eleonor Meda contributed to the review of the manuscript, provided academic and technical input, and supported the refinement of the literature, methodology and presentation of findings.

All authors contributed to the final revision of the manuscript, approved the final version for submission, and agree to be accountable for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the broader doctoral study was obtained on 10th February, 2025 from the University of Zambia Biomedical Research Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were explained, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Separate consent was obtained for the use of anonymised quotations for academic publication.

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