



Structural Disempowerment and the Mentorship Vacuum: Entrepreneurial Mentorship and Youth Economic Empowerment in Nairobi's Informal Settlements, Kenya

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Abstract: Youth economic empowerment in Nairobi's informal settlements is constrained more by the collapse of mentorship and support systems than by a lack of motivation or entrepreneurial potential. This study examined the contribution of entrepreneurial mentorship to youth economic empowerment using a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 339 youth entrepreneurs aged 18–35 years in Kibera, Mathare 4A, Kangemi, and Mukuru kwa Ruben, while qualitative data were obtained through six key informant interviews with community leaders, civil society practitioners, and a government official. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, *t*-tests, and regression models, while qualitative data were analysed thematically using NVivo. Findings showed that entrepreneurial mentorship significantly improved youth economic empowerment, with mentored youth reporting higher empowerment scores ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.455$) than non-mentored youth ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.642$; $t = 7.963$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis confirmed mentorship as a significant predictor of economic empowerment in both simple and multivariate models. Qualitative findings revealed four key themes: the collapse of formal mentorship structures, the transformative benefits of existing mentorship opportunities, barriers related to poverty and substance abuse, and the growing importance of peer mentorship. The study introduces the concept of structural mentorship conflict, arguing that rebuilding mentorship systems should be treated as a core structural intervention rather than a supplementary programme for promoting sustainable youth economic empowerment in urban informal settlements.

Keywords: entrepreneurial mentorship, youth economic empowerment, informal settlements, Nairobi, mixed methods, empowerment theory.

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1. Introduction

Youth unemployment and economic marginalization remain central development challenges across sub-Saharan Africa. In Kenya, the formal youth unemployment rate stands at approximately 39%, with an estimated 5.2 million young people aged 18 to 34 without formal work, and urban concentrations of unemployment particularly acute in Nairobi City County (Thuku, 2024). Within the city's informal settlements, where structural exclusion,

infrastructure deficits, and limited access to formal institutions compound already constrained economic opportunities, these figures translate into pervasive livelihood precarity (Nyongesa et al., 2022). Entrepreneurship is widely promoted as a viable response to this structural unemployment, yet youth in informal settlement contexts face compounding barriers to building and sustaining enterprises, including restricted access to capital, regulatory hostility, weak support services, and,

critically, the absence of structured mentorship (African Development Bank, 2023; Anyanwu, 2023).

Entrepreneurial mentorship, defined as the guidance, support, and advice provided by experienced practitioners to less experienced individuals engaged in starting or growing businesses, has been identified in global literature as a significant enabler of entrepreneurial self-efficacy, strategic decision-making, and business sustainability (Abaho & Olokundun, 2020; Abaho & Turyakira, 2021). Yet the evidence base for mentorship effectiveness in contexts of extreme resource scarcity, institutional collapse, and concentrated socioeconomic exclusion, such as Nairobi City County's informal settlements, remains underdeveloped. Existing studies have predominantly focused on formal urban economies and structured mentorship arrangements, leaving a knowledge gap about informal settlement contexts where the mentorship support ecosystem has been profoundly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign aid withdrawal, and government institutional disengagement (Muriithi, 2020; Wendo et al., 2025).

This article addresses that gap. It draws from a doctoral study that examined entrepreneurial engagement and economic empowerment among youth in four informal settlements in Nairobi City County, isolating the findings relevant to the second research objective: to examine the contribution of entrepreneurial mentorship to economic empowerment among youth in selected informal settlements of Nairobi City County, Kenya. The broader study investigated four determinants of economic empowerment (entrepreneurial skills, government policy, social networks, and mentorship), providing necessary comparative context for the mentorship analysis presented here. The central argument advanced is that mentorship is not merely a supplementary programme add-on but a structural mechanism through which psychological, cognitive, and behavioural empowerment are simultaneously produced, and that its collapse constitutes a form of structural disempowerment with consequences measurable both statistically and experientially.

The article makes three original contributions. For instance, it provides quantitative and qualitative evidence of mentorship's transformative impact in conditions of severe supply-side collapse. In addition, it introduces structural mentorship conflict as a novel theoretical concept to account for a previously undocumented dynamic in which organisations designed to support youth entrepreneurship begin competing with youth entrepreneurs for market space, thereby inverting their developmental mandate. Furthermore, it identifies peer mentorship as the most contextually appropriate and scalable alternative model while specifying the institutional preconditions necessary for it to function as a replicable system rather than an inspiring exception.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite widespread recognition of entrepreneurship as a pathway to youth economic empowerment, many young people living in Nairobi City County's informal settlements remain trapped in persistent unemployment, underemployment, and insecure livelihoods. Existing policy interventions have largely focused on expanding access to finance, entrepreneurship training, and enterprise development programmes, yet evidence suggests that these initiatives have yielded limited and often unsustainable outcomes. One critical but underexplored factor is the absence of structured entrepreneurial mentorship, which equips young entrepreneurs with practical guidance, business networks, psychosocial support, and strategic decision-making skills necessary for enterprise growth. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, declining donor support, and reduced institutional engagement, mentorship opportunities within informal settlements have diminished substantially, leaving many youth without sustained entrepreneurial guidance. Although international and regional studies have demonstrated positive relationships between mentorship and entrepreneurial success, little empirical evidence exists on its contribution to economic empowerment within highly marginalized urban informal settlements where institutional support systems are weak or absent. Moreover, previous studies have predominantly examined formal business environments and have rarely integrated quantitative and qualitative evidence to explain how mentorship influences youth economic outcomes in contexts of structural exclusion. Consequently, policymakers and development practitioners lack context-specific evidence to guide mentorship interventions for vulnerable urban youth. This study therefore sought to examine the contribution of entrepreneurial mentorship to the economic empowerment of youth in selected informal settlements of Nairobi City County, Kenya, with the aim of generating evidence to inform effective policy and programme design.

1.3 Research Objective

To examine the contribution of entrepreneurial mentorship to the economic empowerment of youth in selected informal settlements of Nairobi City County, Kenya.

1.4 Research Question

What is the contribution of entrepreneurial mentorship to the economic empowerment of youth in selected informal settlements of Nairobi City County, Kenya?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Literature

The importance of mentorship to youth entrepreneurial outcomes is well-established across diverse geographic

contexts. Abaho and Olokundun (2020) demonstrated that mentoring significantly improves entrepreneurial self-efficacy, knowledge transfer, and business performance in resource-constrained environments. Abaho and Turyakira (2021) confirmed that mentorship programs in developing economies improve business survival rates and strengthen entrepreneurial ecosystems. Morris et al. (2020) established that structured mentorship reduces business failure and enhances strategic decision-making among youth in resource-constrained environments. At the continental level, Bonareri (2024) argued that entrepreneurship mentorship schemes are vital to the start-up success and sustainability of youth-led enterprises in developing economies.

In the Kenyan context, Wendo et al. (2025) confirmed that mentorship significantly increases entrepreneurial abilities, market access, and income earning, though their study provided limited disaggregation by gender, age, or socioeconomic background. Muriithi (2020) demonstrated the value of mentorship linked to microfinance initiatives for developing entrepreneurial capacity in Nairobi's informal settlements, though his focus was confined to financial literacy outcomes, without examining the psychosocial or network dimensions of mentorship impact. Kamau and Muturi (2021) showed that gender-responsive mentorship significantly enhances resilience, confidence, and business sustainability for female entrepreneurs in Kisumu. Otieno and Onyango (2022) found that community-based and informal mentorship in Nairobi's informal settlements builds planning, adaptability, and confidence as key components of economic empowerment, though their study focused primarily on psychosocial mentoring without integrating structural barriers. A significant gap in the existing literature is the relative absence of analysis examining what happens when the mentorship ecosystem itself collapses, and what institutional conditions are required for alternative models to function effectively. The present study addresses this gap directly.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks. Empowerment Theory, as developed by Zimmerman (2000) and Rappaport (1987), holds that empowerment is a multidimensional process encompassing access to resources, participatory guidance, and individual psychological agency. Applied to mentorship, the theory proposes that mentorship operationalises all three dimensions simultaneously: it provides youth with experiential knowledge (cognitive empowerment), network access and practical skills (resource empowerment), and the confidence to act (psychological empowerment). Critically, Empowerment Theory implies that when mentorship infrastructure is dismantled, what is lost is not merely a service but the enabling mechanism through which empowerment itself is produced. This study extends Empowerment Theory by

theorising the institutional collapse of mentorship as structural disempowerment, a formulation with significant implications for how programme loss is analysed in policy and academic literature.

Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory provides a complementary lens for understanding the mechanism by which mentorship generates its effects. The theory demonstrates that observational learning from peers and near-peers, individuals of comparable experience and social position, is particularly powerful for developing self-efficacy, the belief in one's capacity to organise and execute actions required to produce specific outcomes. Applied to peer mentorship in informal settlement contexts, this theoretical framework explains why youth-to-youth mentorship, in which experienced youth entrepreneurs mentor their peers, may be more effective than expert-to-novice models: the mentor's demonstrated competence is credible precisely because the mentee recognises their shared structural position. Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) provides a third analytical lens, supporting the expectation that investment in knowledge and skills through mentorship generates economic returns, while also being challenged by this study's finding that mentorship's low aggregate explanatory power reflects supply collapse rather than limited effectiveness.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a convergent concurrent mixed-methods research design, in which quantitative and qualitative data strands were collected concurrently and merged at the interpretation stage to produce a more complete understanding of the research phenomenon than either strand alone could provide (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative strand was designed to establish the statistical significance and magnitude of mentorship's relationship with economic empowerment, while the qualitative strand was designed to explain the mechanisms, barriers, and contextual conditions underlying those statistical patterns. Convergent integration was achieved by first interpreting each strand independently and then synthesising findings to identify convergences, complementarities, and divergences.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The study adopted a pragmatist philosophical stance, which holds that research questions should guide the selection of methods and that both quantitative and qualitative approaches generate legitimate and complementary forms of knowledge. Pragmatism supported the convergent mixed-methods design by enabling the combination of Likert-scale survey data and thematic interview analysis within a single coherent analytical framework (Morgan, 2007).

3.3 Sampling and Participants

The target population consisted of youth aged 18 to 35 residing in four informal settlements in Nairobi City County: Kibera, Mathare 4A, Kangemi, and Mukuru kwa Ruben. These settlements were selected purposively on the basis of their geographic spread across the city, their socioeconomic comparability, and their established status as representative sites of informal settlement conditions in Nairobi. Using Yamane's (1967) sample size formula at a 95% confidence level, a sample of 384 respondents was determined from an estimated target population of 10,000 youth entrepreneurs. After accounting for incomplete returns, the valid quantitative sample comprised 339 respondents. Stratified proportional sampling was applied across the four settlements, with subsequent random selection within each stratum. The resulting sample comprised 181 male respondents (53.4%) and 158 female respondents (46.6%). The majority of respondents (59.6%) held secondary-level education, and 74.6% were self-employed or running small businesses.

The qualitative strand comprised six Key Informant Interviews (KII) conducted with purposively selected participants representing community-based organisations, civil society networks, and a government department across the four settlements. Participants were selected on the basis of their direct involvement in youth economic development and their institutional knowledge of mentorship and entrepreneurship support systems. Combined, participants possessed over 62 years of institutional experience. The KII sample included the Secretary of Ubuntu CBO (Kangemi), the Secretary General of Shangilia Youth to Youth Network, the Secretary of Kibra Soweto Young Achievers, the Chairman of Big Brothers CBO (Mathare), a Youth Affairs Officer from the State Department for Youth Affairs, and a Resilient Advocate from Mukuru for Change.

3.4 Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The

mentorship subscale comprised seven items measuring formal program participation, access to a regular mentor, and the impact of mentorship on decision-making, resource access, confidence, feedback quality, and measurable business outcomes (Cronbach's α confirmed adequate reliability across all subscales). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes, conducted in Kiswahili and English according to participant preference and transcribed verbatim.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics. For the mentorship objective, the following procedures were employed: descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis) to characterise the distribution of mentorship-related items; an independent samples t-test to compare economic empowerment means between mentored and non-mentored youth; Pearson correlation analysis to examine bivariate relationships between mentorship and economic empowerment; simple linear regression to determine the unique contribution of mentorship to variance in economic empowerment; and multiple linear regression to assess the independent contribution of mentorship after controlling for entrepreneurial skills, social networks, and government policy support. Regression assumptions (normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity) were examined and confirmed before modelling. Qualitative data were analysed using NVivo software, employing a six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006): data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme development, review, definition, and report writing. Quantitative and qualitative findings were subsequently integrated at the interpretation stage through a convergent synthesis framework.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics for Entrepreneurial Mentorship

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the seven items comprising the entrepreneurial mentorship subscale.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Entrepreneurial Mentorship (N = 339)

Item	M	SD	Skewness	Skew SE	Kurtosis	Kurt SE
F1. Participated in formal mentorship program (past 2 years)	2.30	1.213	.399	.132	-1.217	.264
F2. Have a mentor who regularly advises on business	2.90	1.257	-.121	.132	-1.120	.264
F3. Mentorship has improved business decision-making	3.47	1.139	-1.060	.132	.289	.264
F4. Mentors helped access customers, finance, or training	3.72	.754	-.912	.132	1.512	.264
F5. Mentorship has increased confidence in business	3.91	.718	-.732	.132	1.226	.264
F6. Receive timely and relevant feedback from mentors	3.93	.805	-.789	.132	.877	.264
F7. Mentorship led to measurable improvements in business	3.94	.784	-.966	.132	1.834	.264
Overall	3.45	.461				

Note. Responses on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). SE = standard error. Source: Research data (2026).

The results reveal a fundamental asymmetry between mentorship access and mentorship impact. Access indicators are markedly low: formal program participation (M = 2.30, SD = 1.213, skewness = .399, kurtosis = -1.217) and having a regular mentor (M = 2.90, SD = 1.257) are the two lowest-scoring items, with wide dispersal indicating a highly uneven distribution of access across the sample. In contrast, impact indicators among those with mentorship access are consistently high: decision-making improvement (M = 3.47), access to opportunities (M = 3.72), confidence enhancement (M = 3.91), feedback quality (M = 3.93), and measurable business improvements (M = 3.94) all score above the midpoint and are characterised by strongly negative skewness (range: -.732 to -.966) and positive kurtosis, indicating that respondents

with mentorship access overwhelmingly report its benefits. The overall scale mean of 3.45 (SD = .461) reflects the combined averaging of a large, mentorship-deprived majority and a smaller but strongly positive mentored minority.

4.2 Independent Samples T-Test: Mentorship Status and Economic Empowerment

Table 2 presents the results of an independent samples t-test comparing economic empowerment between mentored (n = 210) and non-mentored (n = 129) youth.

Table 2 Independent Samples T-Test: Mentor Status and Economic Empowerment

Variable	Mentor Status	N	M	SD	p
Economic Empowerment	Mentored	210	3.34	0.455	< .001
	Not Mentored	129	2.86	0.642	

Note. $t(337) = 7.963$, $p < .001$. Mean difference = 0.476. Source: Research data (2026).

The test reveals a highly significant difference in economic empowerment between the two groups ($t = 7.963$, $df = 337$, $p < .001$). Mentored youth recorded a mean economic empowerment score of 3.34 (SD = 0.455) compared to 2.86 (SD = 0.642) for non-mentored youth, a mean difference of 0.476. The lower standard deviation among mentored

youth indicates more consistent empowerment outcomes and less variability, suggesting that mentorship not only raises average economic empowerment but also reduces the dispersion of outcomes, producing more reliable developmental returns across the mentored group.

4.3 Simple Linear Regression: Mentorship on Economic Empowerment

Table 3 presents the regression coefficients for the simple linear regression model with entrepreneurship mentorship as the sole predictor of economic empowerment.

Table 3 Simple Linear Regression: Entrepreneurship Mentorship Predicting Economic Empowerment

Model	B	SE	β	T	p
Constant	2.143	.232		9.230	< .001
Entrepreneurship Mentorship	.293	.067	.233	4.396	< .001

Note. $R^2 = .054$, Adjusted $R^2 = .051$, $F(1, 337) = 19.323$, $p < .001$. Durbin-Watson = 1.551. Source: Research data (2026).

Entrepreneurship mentorship is a statistically significant predictor of economic empowerment ($B = .293$, $\beta = .233$, $t = 4.396$, $p < .001$). For every one-unit increase in mentorship support, economic empowerment is predicted to increase by .293 units. The model explains 5.4% of the variance in economic empowerment ($R^2 = .054$, Adjusted $R^2 = .051$, $F(1, 337) = 19.323$, $p < .001$). The Pearson correlation between mentorship and economic empowerment was $r = .233$ ($p < .001$), the weakest

correlation among the four study predictors but statistically significant.

4.4 Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis

Table 5 presents the qualitative theme matrix mapping the four themes emerging from the Key Informant Interviews to their sub-themes and illustrative participant quotations.

Table 5 Qualitative Theme Matrix: Entrepreneurial Mentorship and Youth Economic Empowerment

Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative Participant Quotation
1. The Mentorship Vacuum	Ecosystem collapse (NGO withdrawal, aid cuts, government disengagement)	"Mentorships were there but they no longer exist. You understand currently NGOs are not many. Lack of funding." (KII-1, January 2026)
	Structural mentorship conflict (NGOs competing with youth)	"There is conflict because you are in business and they are fighting for empowerment. So, you have conflicting interests." (KII-2, January 2026)
2. Mentorship as Transformative Infrastructure	Psychosocial and strategic impact (VSLA model, follow-up tracking)	"Mentorship is very important in sharpening entrepreneurial skills. Through good mentorship, one will understand they need to stay calm when the entrepreneurship is not generating profit." (KII-4, January 2026)
3. Barriers Within: Demand-Side Constraints	Poverty-driven incentive dependency and scarcity of cognitive bandwidth	"Lack of reimbursements. Youth want to be reimbursed with some money at the end of the day. Without this, they are reluctant to attend these sessions." (KII-5, January 2026)
	Substance abuse as cognitive barrier to mentorship engagement	"Drugs. You tell someone; this can work, but they want something tangible. They want cash money instead of business." (KII-6, January 2026)
4. Youth-to-Youth Mentorship: Viable Path Forward	Peer model with institutional coordination as precondition for scale	"Youth to youth. We need youth educating other youths. The elderly are tired. We want young bright-minded youths encouraging their fellow youths." (KII-2, January 2026)

Note. Quotations derived from six Key Informant Interviews conducted in January 2026 across four informal settlements. Source: Research data (2026).

Theme 1: The Mentorship Vacuum

The most structurally significant qualitative finding is the near-complete collapse of the formal mentorship ecosystem across all four studied settlements. KII-3 articulated the experiential reality of this absence directly: "I cannot lie to you. I have survived on my own. Formal mentorship is absent in Kibra." KII-1 contextualised this historically: "Mentorships were there but they no longer exist. You understand, currently NGOs are not many. Lack of funding is the reason." Three convergent forces are identified across interviews as driving this collapse: the disruption of NGO-led programming by the COVID-19 pandemic; the withdrawal of US foreign aid under the Trump administration (independently referenced in three interviews); and government institutional disengagement from grassroots youth affairs.

A distinct and previously undocumented dimension of this collapse was the phenomenon this study terms structural mentorship conflict. KII-2 identified that some remaining organisations "are not as active as they used to be. There is conflict because you are in business and they are fighting for empowerment. So, you have conflicting interests." This observation reveals that institutional architecture designed to support youth entrepreneurship has, in some cases, inverted: organisations compete with the youth they were established to mentor. This structural conflict simultaneously reduces the supply of willing mentors and corrupts the trust relationship that effective mentorship requires.

Theme 2: Mentorship as Transformative Infrastructure

Where mentorship has functioned, its impact is documented as demonstrably transformative. KII-5 provided the most systematic evidence, noting that from follow-up assessments of youth who received government-linked pre-disbursement training, "most of them are doing well with their business. Previously, the youth were succeeding in businesses at a very low rate." KII-6 described the Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) model, in which mentorship was integrated with group formation and access to startup capital, as highly effective precisely because it combined financial literacy, collective accountability, and resource access in a sequenced intervention architecture. KII-4 offered the most direct articulation of mentorship's functional significance: "Mentorship is very important in sharpening entrepreneurial skills. Through good mentorship, one will understand that they need to stay calm when the entrepreneurship is not generating profit."

Theme 3: Barriers Within: Demand-Side Constraints

The supply-side collapse of formal mentorship is compounded by demand-side barriers that prevent uptake even when mentorship is available. KII-5 identified

poverty-driven incentive dependency as a primary structural barrier: "Lack of reimbursements. Youth want to be reimbursed with some money at the end of the day. Without this, they are reluctant to attend these sessions." This rational economic calculation, consistent with Mullainathan and Shafir's (2013) scarcity theory, reflects the reality that under resource-constrained conditions, cognitive bandwidth is consumed by immediate survival needs, leaving insufficient capacity for engagement with deferred developmental investments.

KII-6 identified substance abuse as the most deeply entrenched demand-side barrier: "Drugs. You tell someone; this can work, but they want something tangible. They want cash money instead of business." Drug dependency impairs the capacity to defer gratification that mentorship engagement requires. KII-3 identified peer influence as a third barrier: "Just peer influence. Your friend can divert your attention to attend. He may tell you, let's go somewhere, I will buy you some drinks. In that situation, you botch your intention to go for some mentorship." These three barriers operate simultaneously and require programme designs that address material, cognitive, and social constraints as preconditions for access.

Theme 4: Youth-to-Youth Mentorship as the Viable Path Forward

Emerging independently from multiple interview sources and convergently endorsed across the data is a constructive and contextually validated alternative to the collapsed formal system: peer mentorship. KII-2 articulated the rationale with force: "Youth to youth. We need youth educating other youths. The elderly are tired. We want young bright-minded youths encouraging their fellow youths." KII-5 provided the institutional articulation: "The well-established youth groups should mentor the upcoming groups for the betterment of the community." KII-2 further specified the group-based architecture through which this would operate: "A lot of trainings as a group. You get them as their group, mentor them as a group and they grow up as a group."

Critically, however, the data challenge romanticised views of peer mentorship as self-sustaining. KII-6 specified that "to strengthen the mentorships, there should be continuous assessment through follow-ups. The person should be delegated from the youth department." This specification that institutional backing from the Youth Affairs department, including coordination and quality assurance, is a precondition for peer mentorship to scale from individual practice to systemic solution is among the most practically significant findings of the qualitative analysis.

4.5 Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative findings, when read in convergence, produce an analytically coherent and

theoretically significant account of mentorship's role in youth economic empowerment in informal settlements. The account is characterised by a central paradox: mentorship is demonstrably transformative when available, yet structurally absent for the majority of youth who need it most. Resolving this paradox requires moving beyond programme-level analysis to the institutional conditions that determine whether mentorship can exist, be accessed, and produce the outcomes the evidence demonstrates it is capable of generating.

The Floor Effect: What the Statistics Cannot Show

The simple regression model explains only 5.4% of variance in economic empowerment, the lowest among the four predictors, a result that might conventionally be interpreted as evidence of mentorship's limited importance. The t-test evidence renders this interpretation analytically untenable. A mean difference of 0.476 between mentored and non-mentored youth, at a significance level of $p < .001$, indicates that when mentorship is present, its effect is not marginal but substantial. The resolution of this apparent contradiction lies in the distinction between a variable's effect size when present and its aggregate explanatory power across a sample in which it barely exists. When 38% of the sample reports formal program participation as below the scale midpoint, the regression coefficient represents what fractured, underfunded, and structurally conflicted mentorship can still deliver at the margins. The 5.4% R^2 is therefore most accurately interpreted as a floor rather than a ceiling of mentorship's potential. This reading directly advances Muriithi's (2020) analysis of mentorship-microfinance combinations by demonstrating that even under conditions of severe institutional collapse, mentorship generates independent empowerment returns that policy must treat as a conservative estimate of achievable impact.

Structural Disempowerment and Empowerment Theory

The collapse of the formal mentorship ecosystem, traced consistently across all six interviews to the convergent forces of COVID-19, US foreign aid withdrawal, and government institutional disengagement, is theorised in this study as structural disempowerment rather than mere service delivery failure. The distinction is theoretically significant: Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 2000; Rappaport, 1987) holds that empowerment requires enabling structures through which individuals can actualise their potential. When these structures are dismantled, what is lost is not a programme output but the enabling mechanism through which psychological, cognitive, and behavioural empowerment are simultaneously produced. The qualitative data confirm this: the collapse did not merely reduce the number of trained youths; it eliminated the relational infrastructure through which the skills-to-livelihood spiral that mentored youth navigate is established and maintained. This contribution extends

Empowerment Theory by specifying the institutional conditions under which empowerment becomes structurally impossible, an extension that challenges programme evaluators to treat ecosystem reconstruction, not individual skill delivery, as the primary unit of intervention.

The aid dependency paradox identified in the data constitutes a parallel theoretical contribution. Kenya's youth development architecture has, in practice, delegated programme delivery to Western donors whose engagement is contingent on geopolitical calculations external to community need. The withdrawal of US foreign aid is therefore not an external shock to be absorbed but a diagnostic revelation of a structural dependency that must be disaggregated from any honest analysis of the mentorship crisis. This finding extends the aid effectiveness literature (Ntaganda & Kwena, 2024) to the community level, providing the most granular documentation to date of the immediate and cascading costs of aid-cycle volatility for marginalised youth. Morris et al. (2020) noted that poorly scaled and underfunded programmes produce mixed impacts on youth empowerment; the present study specifies the mechanism: aid dependency means that programme continuity is governed by donor geopolitics, not by community evidence, making sustainability a function of Washington rather than Nairobi.

Structural Mentorship Conflict: A Novel Theoretical Contribution

The identification of structural mentorship conflict, a condition in which organisations designed to support youth entrepreneurship begin competing with youth entrepreneurs for the same limited market space, represents this study's most novel theoretical contribution. This phenomenon has not been previously theorised in the youth enterprise mentorship literature. Its implications are twofold: it reduces the available supply of willing mentors by converting potential mentors into market competitors, and it corrupts the trust and non-exploitative orientation that effective mentorship requires. Abaho and Olokundun (2020) established that the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship is central to mentorship effectiveness; the structural conflict dynamic undermines this quality at the institutional level. Addressing this phenomenon demands governance mechanisms for NGO programmes in informal settlement contexts that include conflict-of-interest regulations, clear mandates, and community oversight, dimensions absent from current programme design discourse.

Demand-Side Barriers and the Scarcity Cognitive Framework

The dual demand-side barriers identified, poverty-driven incentive dependency and substance abuse as cognitive barriers, represent a finding that substantially advances

both the mentorship literature and social work practice frameworks. Existing literature has focused almost exclusively on supply-side barriers to mentorship, treating access as a function of programme availability. This study demonstrates that even when supply is restored, programmes that do not address demand-side barriers will systematically fail to reach the most marginalised youth. Wendo et al. (2025) noted limited disaggregation of mentorship outcomes by socioeconomic background; the present study specifies exactly the socioeconomic conditions that produce differential access. Mullainathan and Shafir's (2013) scarcity theory, which demonstrates that resource scarcity captures cognitive bandwidth and reduces capacity for long-term developmental investment, directly explains the incentive dependency finding and reframes it from moral failing to structural constraint. The implication is programmatic: attendance stipends must be treated as poverty-sensitive access enablers, not as financial extras, and partnerships with mental health and substance abuse rehabilitation services must be established as prerequisites for reaching the most marginalised youth.

Peer Mentorship: From Exception to System

The peer mentorship model, which emerged independently from multiple interview sources without researcher prompting, represents the qualitative findings' most constructive contribution. Bandura's (1997) social learning theory directly supports its efficacy: observational learning from near-peers who share the same structural position is particularly powerful for building self-efficacy because the credibility of modelled behaviour depends on its perceived attainability. Otieno and Onyango (2022) found that community-based mentorship in Nairobi's informal settlements builds confidence and adaptability; the present study advances this by providing the institutional design specifications, institutional coordination, quality assurance, and government department backing, that would allow such models to function at scale. The critical analytical contribution is the finding that peer mentorship is not self-sustaining without institutional infrastructure. Bottom-up resilience narratives that celebrate community mentorship without specifying the institutional preconditions for its sustainability risk romanticising informal practice rather than enabling its replication. This nuanced contribution directly challenges Rance's (2024) emerging optimism about peer-based youth development by demonstrating that the transition from inspiring exception to replicable system requires deliberate institutional design.

Convergence and Divergence of Mixed-Methods Findings

The mixed-methods findings converge on the central claim that mentorship is transformative but severely supply-constrained. Quantitatively, the t-test mean difference of 0.476 and the multivariate regression significance ($\beta = .102, p = .034$) establish impact. Qualitatively, the collapse

narrative, the VSLA evidence, and the KII-4 testimony on mentorship's psychosocial function explain both the impact mechanism and the access constraint. The one significant divergence between quantitative and qualitative strands concerns the apparent modesty of the regression R^2 : the statistical model suggests limited explanatory power, while the qualitative evidence suggests transformative potential. This divergence is not a methodological inconsistency but an analytical feature: it reveals that the current R^2 reflects what mentorship does under conditions of collapse, while the qualitative findings reveal what it is capable of under conditions of adequate resourcing. This convergent synthesis is the study's core mixed-methods contribution and advances the recommendation that programme evaluations of mentorship in informal settlement contexts must use comparative group designs, such as t-tests, rather than regression-only analyses, to avoid understating impact through supply-side ceiling effects.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that entrepreneurial mentorship is a statistically significant, practically substantial, and theoretically central determinant of youth economic empowerment in Nairobi City County's informal settlements, and that the formal mentorship ecosystem supporting this outcome has effectively collapsed. The mean economic empowerment gap of 0.476 between mentored and non-mentored youth ($p < .001$) establishes what mentorship delivers when present; the descriptive findings and qualitative evidence establish why it is largely absent. The article introduces three original contributions: the concept of structural mentorship conflict as a novel dimension of mentorship erosion; the reinterpretation of R^2 as a floor rather than a ceiling of mentorship impact under conditions of ecosystem collapse; and the identification of the institutional design conditions, governmental coordination, quality assurance, and demand-side poverty sensitivity, that must be met for peer mentorship to function as a replicable system rather than an inspiring exception. Limitations of this study include its cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inference about mentorship trajectories over time, and its geographic scope, which is restricted to four settlements in Nairobi City County, limiting immediate generalizability to other informal urban contexts in sub-Saharan Africa. Future longitudinal research should examine the sustained economic effects of peer mentorship under institutional coordination, and comparative studies across informal settlements in secondary Kenyan cities and other sub-Saharan contexts would strengthen the generalisability of the structural disempowerment framework developed here.

The policy and practice implications are direct. Governments, civil society organisations, and development practitioners must treat the restoration of structured

mentorship, through institutionally coordinated peer models that address demand-side barriers as a first-order structural priority in any credible youth economic empowerment strategy. Programmes that continue to relegate mentorship to a secondary add-on while prioritising fund disbursement and skills training will systematically underdeliver on economic empowerment for the most marginalised youth, as the study unambiguously demonstrates.

5.2 Recommendations

1. The State Department for Youth Affairs should establish structured community-based entrepreneurial mentorship programmes in informal settlements by partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs), youth groups, universities, and successful entrepreneurs to provide continuous mentorship, coaching, and business advisory services. This recommendation responds to the finding that formal mentorship systems have largely collapsed despite mentorship having a significant positive effect on youth economic empowerment.
2. County Governments, particularly Nairobi City County, should institutionalize youth-to-youth mentorship programmes by identifying successful young entrepreneurs, training them as certified peer mentors, and supporting them to mentor emerging entrepreneurs through ward-level entrepreneurship hubs. This approach builds on the study's finding that peer mentorship is the most feasible and contextually appropriate model for informal settlements.
3. Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs), and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) should rebuild the mentorship ecosystem by integrating mentorship into all youth economic empowerment programmes instead of focusing solely on financial support and skills training. They should implement regular mentor-mentee meetings, business coaching sessions, networking forums, and follow-up visits to ensure sustained support for youth enterprises.
4. The National Government and development partners should prioritize long-term investment in local mentorship structures rather than short-term donor-funded projects by creating sustainable financing mechanisms, including youth mentorship grants and public-private partnerships. This will reduce dependence on external donor funding, which the study identified as one of the causes of the mentorship vacuum.
5. The Ministry of Health, National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA), and youth-serving organizations should integrate substance abuse prevention, counselling, and rehabilitation services into entrepreneurship programmes through community outreach, referrals, and psychosocial support services. This will improve youth participation in mentorship programmes by addressing one of the major demand-side barriers identified in the study.
6. The State Department for Youth Affairs and programme implementers should provide attendance facilitation packages, such as transport reimbursement, meals, or modest participation stipends for economically vulnerable youth attending mentorship sessions. These incentives should be used strategically to reduce poverty-related barriers that discourage participation while promoting consistent programme attendance.
7. Youth enterprise support organizations should integrate mentorship with financial literacy training, business incubation, market linkage, savings groups (VSLAs), and access to affordable credit by adopting an integrated enterprise development model rather than offering isolated interventions. This recommendation is informed by evidence that mentorship combined with financial support produces better business outcomes.
8. The Government should develop national guidelines and quality standards for entrepreneurial mentorship programmes by establishing mentor accreditation systems, mentorship curricula, monitoring frameworks, and regular programme evaluations to ensure accountability and consistency across implementing organizations. Such standards will strengthen programme quality and facilitate scaling of effective mentorship models.
9. Civil society organizations and development partners should establish conflict-of-interest guidelines for organizations implementing youth entrepreneurship programmes by separating commercial activities from mentorship functions to prevent competition between implementing organizations and youth entrepreneurs. This addresses the structural mentorship conflict identified in the study.
10. Researchers and universities should conduct longitudinal and comparative studies on peer mentorship models across informal settlements and other urban centres in Kenya to generate evidence on their long-term effectiveness, sustainability, and scalability. Such research will strengthen the evidence base for policy and programme design beyond the cross-sectional scope of the present study.

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