

Building relational well-being: empowering street-connected young people to transition from precarity to security through youth associations

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ABSTRACT

Street-connected young people (SCYP) in Tanzania face intersecting challenges, including economic vulnerability, social marginalisation and limited access to supportive networks. This study examines the impact of the Youth Association (YA) model, implemented by Railway Children Africa, and does so through the lens of the relational well-being approach, which emphasises the interplay of material, relational and subjective dimensions of well-being, as well as personal, societal and environmental drivers of well-being. Using a mixed methods design, this study tracked 116 SCYP in Mwanza and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, through four stages of the YA model. Quantitative data revealed gains: 71% transitioned into stable housing, 84% reported increased pride and self-worth and 58% initiated income-generating projects. Qualitative insights provided deeper context, capturing participants' reflections on how peer networks and leadership opportunities, and vocational training fostered self-confidence, economic independence and community integration. Participants' recommendations included expanding educational opportunities, enhancing health services and addressing logistical barriers to increase the model's accessibility and impact. This study demonstrates the transformative potential of relationally driven interventions for vulnerable young people. By leveraging existing networks and prioritising relational support, the YA model offers an effective pathway for SCYP to transition from precarity to stability. The findings underscore the importance of participatory approaches and call for further research into the invisible networks of care supporting SCYP, ensuring that future interventions are responsive to their lived experiences and evolving needs.

INTRODUCTION

Street-connectedness refers to the experiences of young people who navigate public and urban spaces to meet their economic, lifestyle and emotional needs.¹ Street-connected young people (SCYP) can be broadly categorised into two groups: 'on the street', using the street primarily for economic activities, and 'of the street', relying on the street for economic activities and considering it their place of living.² In recent years, the understanding of street-connectedness has evolved

to encompass not only the physical realities of street life but also the social, cultural and relational dimensions that shape young people's identities and experiences.^{3,4}

This paper begins by examining the evolving concept of street-connectedness, followed by an introduction to the relational well-being (RWB) approach, which serves as the guiding theoretical framework for this research. It then presents the Youth Association (YA) model as a practical intervention informed by RWB principles. This research seeks to understand how SCYP transition from precarity to stability, with a focus on the personal, societal and environmental drivers of well-being, as well as the subjective, relational and material dimensions of well-being. By exploring the effects of the YA model on both the drivers and dimensions of RWB, this paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on the application of the RWB approach to fostering empowerment among young people in the Majority World.

In this research, we focus on SCYP in Mwanza and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where a growing population of young people are moving in pursuit of better opportunities. These migrations are driven by a combination of personal drivers such as economic aspirations; social drivers such as familial instability and lack of employment; and environmental drivers such as climate change and urbanisation pressures.^{3,5,6}

These young people face significant material challenges, including limited access to education and healthcare, unstable housing and difficulties securing sustainable livelihood opportunities. These are exacerbated by inadequate government services for this group of young people, particularly in education, healthcare and social protection. Relational challenges stem from stigmatisation and marginalisation by the authorities, as well



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as strained family and community connections. Negative public perceptions of SCYP as delinquents or a social burden contribute to their isolation, reducing opportunities for social integration.⁷ Additionally, punitive legal frameworks, police harassment and detainment disproportionately target SCYP, deepening their marginalisation and further weakening their relational networks. Subjective challenges experienced by SCYP include the psychological toll of exclusion and exploitation, often manifesting as diminished self-worth and emotional stress. These challenges are compounded by societal attitudes that perpetuate stigma and exclusion, leaving SCYP with few avenues for emotional or psychological support.^{6,7}

Despite these obstacles, recent studies highlight the resilience and agency of SCYP, demonstrating their ability to navigate complex social environments and build informal networks for survival.^{4,8}

RWB as a theoretical approach

White and Jha describe well-being as “the interactive experience of being seen, known, respected, and even loved” [⁹, p. 1]. The RWB approach moves beyond traditional notions of well-being as an individual and inner state, instead framing it as a dynamic process emerging from interactions among people, places and things. RWB conceptualises well-being through three interwoven and co-constitutive dimensions: material, relational and subjective. A distinctive feature of the RWB approach is its emphasis on “the role relationships play as the means through which needs are addressed and capabilities achieved” [⁹, p. 6].

Relationality is central to the RWB approach, operating in five key ways:

1. **Relational subjects:** Individuals are both active agents in their own lives and shaped by relational, material and contextual forces. In this sense, people are relational subjects, intrinsically connected to others and their environment.
2. **Meeting needs through relationships:** Drawing on the capability approach, RWB conceptualises needs in terms of what people can do and be, and think and feel, rather than solely as material resources. Relationships act as critical means through which these needs are met.
3. **Drivers of well-being:** RWB identifies three types of drivers that influence well-being. Personal drivers include factors such as personality, an individual history and direct social interactions. Societal drivers encompass broader systemic factors, including economic structures, social inequalities, cultural norms and institutional processes. Environmental drivers consider the interdependence of people and the biosphere, focusing on factors such as built environments, biodiversity, climate and ecological sustainability. These drivers interact with the dimensions of well-being to shape lived experiences.

4. **Relationships as conduits of power and identity:** Relationships not only support well-being but also act as spaces where power is negotiated, and identities are formed.
5. **Research concepts and methods are inherently related to how persons and well-being are represented:** The questions asked and methods employed significantly shape these representations, highlighting the need for context-sensitive and relationally grounded approaches to research.¹⁰

RWB’s value lies in its integrative approach to investigating the role relationships play as the means through which needs are addressed—or capabilities achieved.

The YA model strives to enable SCYP to transition from precarity to stability

The YA model, developed by Undugu Society in Kenya and implemented by Railway Children Africa (RCA) in Tanzania, is a participatory, peer-driven approach designed to empower SCYP to transition from precarity to stability. The model draws on principles from community psychology, participatory development and subjective and psychological well-being, emphasising the importance of agency, social connections, peer support and skill development in fostering sustainable change.

Unlike many traditional interventions that focus solely on addressing deficits in skills or material resources,^{11 12} the YA model taps into SCYP’s existing peer network and fosters group cohesion, building on theories from social capital.¹³ The YA model uses a structured yet flexible process that guides young people through five key stages: identification, formation, capacity building, empowerment and eventually disengagement. Each stage is designed to build on the young people’s inherent strengths and peer support, aiming to foster self-reliance and integration into their community.

There is considerable alignment between the design principles of the YA model and RWB. Both share a common ontological foundation, adopting a person-centred approach that views SCYP as “relational subjects, navigating their own lives while being essentially intertwined with others” [⁹, p. 13]. Both frame relationships as the means through which people address a wide variety of needs. The YA model operationalises this perspective by strengthening and formalising SCYP’s pre-existing relationships, fostering peer leadership and supporting their integration into broader social networks. Moreover, the five stages of the YA model can be mapped onto the RWB framework, aligning with its drivers (personal, societal, environmental) and dimensions (material, relational, subjective), underscoring the conceptual synergy between the two approaches.

The five stages of the YA model

Stage 1: identification (environmental and societal drivers of RWB and relational dimensions)

The identification stage is about tapping into the trust and social connections of SCYP who are both 'on the street' and 'of the street' and working with them within the street environment. By engaging SCYP through outreach efforts, this stage leverages societal drivers, such as their existing peer networks, to support RWB. Grouping young people into associations of 15–20 members foster a sense of belonging and peer-to-peer support, aligning with the relational dimension of RWB and laying the foundation for positive group dynamics.

Stage 2: formation (personal drivers and subjective and relational dimensions of RWB)

Formation focuses on establishing a group identity and nurturing individual leadership roles, aligning with the subjective dimension of RWB. The formation stage supports young people to reflect on their personal identities, build emotional resilience and develop agency within a supportive peer environment. Personal drivers, such as readiness to engage and self-motivation, are critical.

Stage 3: capacity building (societal drivers and material dimensions of RWB)

The capacity-building stage emphasises on developing life skills, vocational training and entrepreneurial opportunities, addressing the material dimension of RWB. This stage also seeks to influence the societal drivers that limit SCYP's access to training opportunities and to provide them with broader structural support that enhances their individual capabilities and promotes economic stability.

Stage 4: empowerment (environmental drivers and material and relational dimensions of RWB)

In the empowerment stage, SCYP transitions towards self-reliance, as the environmental drivers that expose them to the street are addressed with the provision of stable housing. Linking SCYP to secure livelihood opportunities reflects the material dimension of RWB and the provision of safe spaces to live and work play a crucial role in fostering stability. The relational dimension is evident in the continued peer support within the YAs.

Stage 5: disengagement (material, relational and subjective dimensions of RWB)

The disengagement stage integrates all three dimensions of RWB. Young people achieve independence while maintaining social networks (relational), sustaining personal growth (subjective) and benefiting from improved living and working conditions (material). This stage seeks to ensure that the RWB cultivated through the YA model continues to support participants as they navigate life beyond the programme.

This paper describes the findings of a 1-year tracking study that was undertaken to explore the effectiveness of the YA model in enhancing SCYPs RWB.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design

The study design was grounded in the RWB approach, which emphasises the interconnectedness of personal, societal and environmental drivers with the material, relational and subjective dimensions of well-being.^{9 10} To explore the experiences of SCYP engaging with the YA model, the study combined quantitative and qualitative methods. A survey tool was developed to examine changes across the drivers and dimensions of RWB, while qualitative questions deepened and contextualised the findings from the survey.

The study incorporated two globally validated scales—the General Self-Efficacy Scale¹⁴ and the Coping Strategies Scale,¹⁵ but the core focus was on capturing the nuanced ways in which the YA model influenced participants' lives. After developing the monitoring and evaluation framework for the YA model, custom survey questions were designed to explore shifts in SCYP's feelings, thoughts and behaviours as they progressed through the YA process. Additional qualitative questions gathered participants' reflections on the most significant changes in their lives, challenges that they had faced during their participation in the YA model and their recommendations for improvement. These qualitative responses enriched the analysis, providing insights into how SCYP articulated their evolving sense of self, connections with their peers and perceptions of stability and opportunity.

The study explored the personal drivers of RWB by examining changes in participants' ability to express themselves, set goals and manage challenges. Societal drivers, such as community integration and access to supportive networks, were assessed through questions on connection to the community, barriers to participation and access to help in times of need. Environmental drivers were captured through questions on living conditions, safety and physical well-being. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the study offers a fuller understanding of how the YA model influenced the interconnected dimensions and drivers of well-being in the lives of SCYP.

Setting and sample

The study was conducted in Mwanza and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, with 116 participants who engaged in four stages (identification, formation, capacity building and empowerment) of the YA model and participated in both baseline and endline surveys. They were aged 15 years and above, with 'youth' defined as those aged 15–18 years and 'young adults' as those over 18 years. These age ranges were selected to capture critical stages of development, as individuals transition from adolescence into adulthood, which aligns with the YA model's focus.



Data collection

Data were collected at two time points. The baseline survey was conducted in May 2023, at the beginning of the formation stage of the YA model, characterised by goal setting, and the establishment of group identity. The baseline survey captured participants' initial expectations of the YA model after they had participated in the identification stage and their self-evaluation of their personal capacities as they began engaging in these processes.

The endline survey was conducted in May and June 2024 during the empowerment stage, a phase where participants are expected to take ownership of their associations with minimal staff support. This survey assessed participants' RWB after a year of structured engagement with the YA model. At the time of this survey, participants had not yet disengaged from the model. RCA plans to conduct a final follow-up survey in May 2025 to explore participants' experiences a year after their disengagement from the YA model.

Data analysis was conducted using Tableau for its advanced analytics capabilities. Participant identifiers were removed to maintain confidentiality. Responses were filtered by gender, reported age at baseline and location (Mwanza or Dar es Salaam).

Limitations

The research team was acutely aware of the social dimensions of data generation, particularly how the relationships between participants and RCA could shape their responses. As participants were receiving services from RCA while being asked to share personal reflections, there was a risk that they might feel pressure to provide responses they perceived as favourable. To mitigate this, survey questions were carefully framed in neutral language to encourage honest responses, and trauma-informed training was provided to data collectors to ensure sensitive, non-leading questioning. These practices likely contributed to participants' openness, as reflected in the nuanced qualitative data shared, including candid reflections on challenges and successes within the YA model.

This study highlights critical areas for further research, particularly in mapping and understanding the invisible networks of care that SCYP depends on. Future research should investigate how these relational dynamics evolve over time, especially as young people progress through different stages of the YA model or transition out of street-connectedness altogether. Social network analysis could illuminate the structure and function of these informal support systems, revealing how emotional, material and social resources are exchanged and sustained. Additionally, exploring the interactions between formal services (offered by non-government organisations or government programmes) and informal networks could identify opportunities for better integration, enhancing the overall support ecosystem for vulnerable young people.

Further research would also benefit from adopting a more participatory approach. While this study involved young people as respondents, it did not engage them

as active participants in the co-creation of the research design or implementation. Participatory action research methods would offer a more inclusive approach, ensuring that young people actively shape the research agenda, design and interpretation of findings. Such an approach aligns closely with the principles of RWB, enabling young people to become agents in their own narratives. By involving SCYP as coresearchers, future studies could not only deepen the insights gained but also strengthen ethical rigour by empowering participants to contribute meaningfully to the research process. This would address a key limitation of the current study while enriching the broader understanding of RWB in practice.

RESULTS

Stage 1: identification

The identification stage of the YA model focused on building trust and social connections among SCYP. This stage aligns with the relational and environmental dimensions of RWB and leverages societal drivers to lay the foundation for meaningful change.

Environmental drivers at this stage underscored the precarious circumstances of participants, with 51% relying on the streets for their economic livelihoods and shelter and an additional 37% engaging in street-based economic opportunities. Despite these challenges, 73% of participants reported having a trusted peer or group they relied on for support at baseline, demonstrating the pre-existing networks of supportive relationships that the YA model sought to strengthen. However, participants also faced significant barriers to broader community integration, with only 26% reporting feeling very close to people in their communities. This highlights the stigma and marginalisation experienced by SCYP, which the YA model aimed to address.

Relational bonding was already evident at this stage, with 88% of participants reporting a sense of connection to others in their YA groups, illustrating the model's early traction in reinforcing and strengthening existing social ties.

Stage 2: formation

The formation stage focused on establishing a group identity and nurturing individual leadership roles, aligning with the subjective and relational dimensions of RWB. Personal drivers, such as motivation and readiness to engage, were particularly evident. Baseline data revealed high levels of enthusiasm among participants: 97% were motivated by the opportunity to gain new knowledge, 98% felt they were becoming more patient and 98% were excited about the future possibilities. Additionally, 96% felt more confident about achieving independence, 97% were motivated to improve their lives and 95% were comforted by the prospect of stability and security. However, some hesitations persisted, with 61% expressing concerns about the duration of the process

and 77% harbouring doubts at this stage about the trustworthiness of RCA.

Relational dimensions continued to strengthen, with 71% of participants reporting a strong sense of belonging within their associations. Peer networks also became a source of emotional and social support, as 94% viewed their participation as an opportunity to access supportive relationships that could bring happiness and 98% appreciated the chance to share experiences and conversations with others.

Subjective dimensions of well-being were overwhelmingly positive at this stage as participants were asked to reflect on their feelings about their participation in the YA model: 84% reported feelings of pride and accomplishment, 84% felt safe and secure, 81% felt seen and valued by RCA social workers and their peers and 81% expressed a sense of control over their circumstances.

Stage 3: capacity building

The capacity-building stage emphasised the development of life skills, vocational training and entrepreneurial opportunities, addressing the material dimensions of RWB. Societal drivers, such as access to structured skill development opportunities, were critical. A total of 130 participants joined group savings plans, 99 attended life skills seminars and 80 participated in trade selection workshops. Entrepreneurship training was provided to 71 participants, 66 received tailored one-on-one coaching, 65 underwent leadership training and 47 benefitted from vocational training scholarships and apprenticeships.

By the endline, participants demonstrated significant improvements in life skills. Self-reported data revealed a 10% improvement in their ability to communicate their needs, a 19% increase in confidence to express themselves in meetings and a 23% improvement in resolving peer conflicts. Participants also reported a 29% increase in avoiding harmful or abusive relationships, with 45% actively motivating their peers. Furthermore, 36% held formal leadership roles within their associations, and 32% acted independently to support others.

Access to economic opportunities also improved. By the endline, 66% of participants were contributing to savings groups, 77% expressed greater enjoyment of life due to improved financial management and 14% reported being able to handle unexpected expenses.

Stage 4: empowerment

In the empowerment stage, participants demonstrated progress towards self-reliance, reflecting material and relational dimensions of RWB. Environmental drivers played a crucial role, with 71% transitioning into stable housing. Among these, 32% were living independently in rented rooms and 9% were sharing accommodation with friends or partners.

Material dimensions were evident in entrepreneurial outcomes, with 58% starting income-generating projects, 53% identifying as running their own businesses and 56% reporting consistent work. These achievements

underscored participants' growing economic independence and stability.

The relational dimension of well-being was equally prominent. By the endline, 49% of participants reported regular participation in community events, 94% felt close or very close to people in their communities and 92% believed they could access support during difficult times.

Participants were also asked to describe the most significant change in their lives. In doing so they spoke of the impact of their participation in the YA model on their self-perception, confidence and emotional well-being. Many described how their engagement helped them feel empowered and optimistic about their futures. One participant shared, "Nimeweza kujitambua na kujiongoza mwenyewe. Nimeacha matendo machafu (pombe, bangi)," meaning, "I have been able to discover myself and lead my own life. I have stopped undesirable behaviours (alcohol, marijuana)." This sentiment of self-discovery was echoed by others, such as one who stated, "Nimepata ujasiri wa kuongea mbele za watu na kijisimamia," or "I have gained the courage to speak in front of people and stand up for myself." Participants also reflected on the hope they now have for the future, with one remarking, "Matumaini ya kufanikiwa baadae," or "Hope for future success." These testimonies highlight the shifts in self-confidence and emotional resilience that the YA model fostered, helping participants develop a sense of control and purpose in their lives.

The material changes were equally significant, as SCYP described how the programme supported them in achieving economic stability and improving their living conditions. For many, the provision of stable housing and vocational training was life changing. One participant explained, "Kutoka mtaani na kupangiwa chumba, kupatiwa biashara, kubadilika tabia na kujitambua," meaning, "I moved off the streets, was provided with a room, started a business, changed my behaviour, and became self-aware." Another reflected, "Nimepata elimu ya kujitambua na kuweza kupata mtaji wa biashara," or "I have gained self-awareness and was able to receive capital for my business." These interventions not only improved their immediate circumstances but also provided a foundation for sustainable independence, as one participant noted, "Nimejifunza kuweka akiba na kujikimu kimaisha," meaning, "I learned to save money and support myself."

Finally, SCYP described their strengthened social connections, a sense of belonging and improved relationships with their communities. Participants emphasised the value of peer collaboration and shared experiences. One noted, "Kushirikiana na wenzangu, kubadilishana mawazo na kujiamini," which translates to "Collaborating with my peers, exchanging ideas, and building confidence." Another shared, "Najiona mwenye furaha kuwa na wenzangu," or "I feel happy being with my peers." These strengthened relationships extended beyond the group, as participants reported improved ties with their communities. One participant stated, "Ninaweza kuishi kwenye



jamii na kuheshimiwa,” meaning, “I can live in the community and be respected.” This relational transformation demonstrates how the YA model fosters a supportive network that contributes to both personal growth and social reintegration.

DISCUSSION

The design approach of the YA model: why it is effective

The effectiveness of the YA model lies in its intentional design, which manifests the principles of RWB. This approach emphasises the importance of interconnected personal, societal and environmental drivers, alongside the material, relational and subjective dimensions of well-being. The YA model’s four distinct stages—identification, formation, capacity building and empowerment—guide SCYP through a structured process of self-discovery, skills development and community reintegration.

The initial stages of identification and formation are pivotal in creating trust and collective identity. Bringing participants together these stages fosters a sense of belonging and mutual support. This builds a foundation for relational thinking (understanding one’s role within a network of relationships) and relational working (engaging with others to achieve shared goals). As the programme progresses, the capacity building and empowerment stages provide SCYP with life skills, economic opportunities and leadership roles. The model’s effectiveness stems from its ability to strengthen pre-existing informal networks while introducing structured mechanisms that promote sustainable social and economic independence. This integrative approach ensures participants feel valued, safe and motivated to pursue long-term personal and collective goals.

Practice lessons for working with vulnerable youth in the global majority

The YA model offers the following insights for practitioners designing interventions for vulnerable young people:

1. Centre relationships: Interventions should prioritise building trust, fostering social connections and encouraging community integration. Programmes that cultivate collective goals and peer support are more likely to succeed in creating meaningful, lasting change.
2. Leverage existing networks: Effective programmes build on the informal networks of friends and family that young people already rely on, ensuring sustainability and respect for participant agency.
3. Prioritise early stages: The initial phases of any intervention are crucial for establishing trust and group cohesion. Carefully structured beginnings can ensure participants remain engaged and committed.
4. Integrate economic empowerment: Addressing financial stability through vocational training, entrepre-

neurship and financial literacy helps participants lay a strong foundation for their future.

5. Address practical barriers: Ensuring that logistical challenges such as transportation, scheduling and resource accessibility are addressed can significantly improve participation and outcomes.

Participants’ recommendations: refining the YA model

When participants were asked how the YA model could be improved, they provided valuable insights. Participants emphasised the importance of enhancing educational opportunities, advocating for broader skill-building initiatives that include self-care, community living and diverse vocational training. Many highlighted the need to expand interventions that fostered self-confidence, courage and leadership skills, noting that these initiatives were instrumental in building their self-efficacy.

Participants also valued the social connections that were built through the YA process and recommended increasing group activities to deepen relationships and strengthen peer support networks. Health and well-being services were identified as another critical area of need, with calls for comprehensive mental and physical health support. Economic empowerment remained a priority, as participants suggested providing additional vocational resources, job-specific skills training and entrepreneurship support to enhance employment opportunities.

In addressing logistical challenges, participants proposed refining the programme’s structure by reducing delays in the implementation of activities and resolving scheduling conflicts to improve accessibility. Financial barriers, such as transport costs, food and business capital, were also highlighted, with suggestions for increased financial support to the SCYP to ensure broader participation. Finally, participants recommended expanding the reach of the YA model, particularly to underserved and remote areas, ensuring that more young people could benefit from its interventions.

These recommendations underscore participants’ deep engagement with the YA model and their understanding of its potential to drive meaningful change. Incorporating their insights would further strengthen the programme’s ability to empower SCYP.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the potential of the YA model in fostering RWB among SCYP in the Majority World. By integrating material, relational and subjective dimensions of well-being, the model demonstrates a holistic approach to supporting vulnerable young people in their transition from precarity to stability.

While this study provides insights into the effects of the YA model, the findings would be further strengthened by a deeper qualitative exploration of SCYP’s lived experiences. Future research should prioritise in-depth participatory methodologies to capture the nuanced and dynamic nature of RWB, ensuring that the voices of

young people remain central to the development and evaluation of interventions.

The lessons learnt from the YA model have broader implications for practitioners and policymakers working with vulnerable youth globally. Emphasising RWB, leveraging existing social networks and addressing economic and structural barriers are essential strategies for designing sustainable interventions. This study contributes to an evolving understanding of how RWB frameworks can shape effective, context-sensitive approaches to youth empowerment.

As the global community seeks innovative and equitable solutions for vulnerable young people, integrating RWB into programmatic and policy frameworks offers a promising pathway. By building on this study's findings, stakeholders can design interventions that not only address immediate challenges but also foster long-term stability and empowerment for SCYP.

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Contributors KMcA conceived and designed the study, wrote the manuscript, oversaw the project and is the guarantor. RD oversaw the training and supervision of the enumerators. IC undertook the quantitative data analyses. During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT-4 in order to assist with editing. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Competing interests KMcA and RD are employees at Citizens 4 Change.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

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