



“Coffee is Ours, but the Future is Uncertain”: Youth Aspirations, Institutional Trust, and Livelihood Decisions in Tanzania’s Coffee Heartland

David G. Mhando¹

¹Department of Policy Planning and Management, Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA), Morogoro, Tanzania. Email: david_mhando@sua.ac.tz

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Abstract: *This study examines how youth in Mbinga District, Tanzania, navigate their engagement with coffee farming amid shifting institutional, economic, and climatic conditions. Coffee serves as both a livelihood foundation and a marker of Matengo identity, yet generational participation is declining as youth increasingly perceive it as high-risk and low-reward. Drawing on six focus group discussions and four key informant interviews across four villages, and guided by Aspirations Theory and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, we find that youth aspirations are institutionally mediated: while coffee is valued for its cultural and intergenerational significance, engagement is constrained by delayed payments, opaque cooperative governance, limited access to land and finance, and climate-related risks. These conditions narrow youth aspiration windows, prompting informal pre-harvest sales “magoma” and livelihood diversification. Youth express conditional optimism, noting that coffee could remain viable with improved institutional transparency, timely payments, gender-inclusive governance, and climate-resilient support. The study concludes that revitalizing youth engagement requires simultaneous structural and aspirational reforms—strengthening cooperative accountability, enhancing asset access, and integrating climate adaptation into livelihood strategies. These findings contribute to debates on intergenerational renewal, rural youth livelihoods, and institutional trust in African smallholder economies.*

Keywords: *Youth Aspirations; Coffee Value Chains; Institutional Trust; Cooperative Governance; Livelihood Diversification; Tanzania*

1. Background Information

Globally, the agricultural sector faces a critical challenge of intergenerational renewal, as youth across sub-Saharan Africa increasingly disengage from farming, perceiving it as unprofitable, physically demanding, and misaligned with modern livelihood aspirations (Anyidoho & Sumberg, 2020; White, 2021). This “youth exodus” is not merely a demographic shift but reflects deeper structural tensions within rural economies, shaped by limited access to productive assets, inadequate institutional support, and the allure of non-farm opportunities influenced by education and media exposure (Mwaura *et al.*, 2021; Yeboah & Jayne, 2018). In perennial crop systems such as coffee, these dynamics are exacerbated by long investment horizons, climate vulnerability, and volatile global markets, raising urgent questions about the future viability of smallholder agriculture (Bunn *et al.*, 2019; Samper *et al.*, 2021).

The coffee industry, a vital source of income for millions of smallholders, is particularly susceptible to these generational pressures. Research from Latin America, East Africa, and Southeast Asia indicates that youth increasingly view coffee farming as a high-risk livelihood, characterized by delayed returns, price instability, and growing climate-related

production risks (Jha *et al.*, 2023; Pham *et al.*, 2019). Studies further show that the “aspiration windows” of young farmers, their perceived range of achievable futures, are highly sensitive to institutional reliability; where cooperatives, financial systems, and extension services are perceived as untrustworthy or exclusionary, youth are more likely to disinvest from coffee and pursue diversified or off-farm livelihoods (Bernard & Taffesse, 2014; Genicot & Ray, 2017). This underscores the centrality of institutional trust and governance in shaping not only economic decisions but also the intergenerational continuity of coffee-producing communities (Ponte, 2019; Vicol *et al.*, 2019).

In Tanzania, coffee remains a cornerstone of the rural economy, supporting livelihoods in major growing regions such as Kilimanjaro, Mbeya, and Ruvuma. However, the sector faces mounting structural challenges that disproportionately affect younger generations. These include fragmented land tenure systems that limit youth access to secure plots, liquidity constraints that hinder investment in inputs and farm upgrades, inconsistent and delayed payments from agricultural marketing cooperatives (AMCOS), and increasingly unpredictable climate patterns that threaten Arabica suitability and yield stability (Craparo *et al.*, 2015;



Tanzania Coffee Board, 2021; Ochieng, 2020). While national policy instruments such as the National Youth Development Policy (URT, 2007) and the Coffee Development Strategy 2021–2030 (TCB, 2021) rhetorically position youth as catalysts of agricultural transformation, a persistent implementation gap remains between policy ambition and the institutional realities confronting young farmers (Mdee *et al.*, 2020).

Despite growing academic and policy interest in youth and agriculture, empirical research on how young people envision their futures within perennial commodity value chains remains scarce, particularly in the African context. Existing scholarship on Tanzanian coffee has largely focused on value chain governance, certification schemes, climate adaptation, and market liberalization (Ponte, 2019; Grabs & Ponte, 2019; ICO, 2019), often neglecting the subjective, aspiration-driven dimensions of youth engagement. There is limited understanding of how institutional trust, or its erosion, mediates youth aspirations, how gendered and generational dynamics shape livelihood trajectories, and how climate and market risks are navigated in everyday decision-making (Bacon *et al.*, 2017; Guido *et al.*, 2020). This represents a significant knowledge gap, particularly in regions like Mbinga District, which is renowned for its high-quality Arabica coffee and strong socio-cultural ties to coffee production, yet is experiencing generational strain and climatic stress.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the interplay between youth aspirations, institutional trust, and livelihood decisions in Mbinga District, Tanzania. It asks: *How do young coffee farmers perceive their future within the coffee sector? How do institutional structures, especially cooperatives, enable or constrain their engagement? And how do intersecting vulnerabilities related to gender, assets, and climate shape their livelihood strategies?* To answer these questions, the study integrates Aspirations Theory (Appadurai, 2004; Bernard *et al.*, 2019) with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998), offering a dual lens through which to analyze both the cognitive-emotional dimensions of future-making and the material-institutional conditions that structure opportunity.

The research contributes to three key areas of scholarship and policy. First, it advances the literature on youth in agriculture by foregrounding aspirations as a critical, yet understudied, driver of engagement in perennial crop systems. Second, it highlights the role of institutionally mediated aspiration windows, demonstrating how trust in cooperatives and payment systems fundamentally shapes young farmers' willingness to invest in long-term crops. Third, it provides empirical, contextually grounded insights to inform the design of youth-inclusive, gender-responsive,

and climate-resilient interventions in Tanzania's coffee sector and similar smallholder contexts across sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To analyze the complex interplay between youth aspirations, institutional contexts, and livelihood decisions in Tanzania's coffee sector, this study employs an integrated theoretical framework combining Aspirations Theory and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). This dual approach is essential for capturing both the subjective, future-oriented dimensions of youth decision-making and the structural, asset-based constraints that shape their opportunities. We further draw on insights from Global Value Chain (GVC) governance and climate resilience literature to situate these dynamics within the broader political economy of coffee, where power asymmetries and environmental risks critically influence livelihood outcomes (Grabs & Ponte, 2019; Jha *et al.*, 2023).

The choice of this integrated framework responds to critiques that livelihood analyses can become static audits of capital assets, overlooking the historical processes, power relations, and aspirational "*capacity to aspire*" that drive human agency (de Haan, 2012; Natarajan *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, while Aspirations Theory illuminates motivational drives, it can underplay the material and institutional barriers that define the realm of the possible. As such, by bridging these perspectives, we offer a more holistic analysis of why youth in Mbinga District make the choices they do regarding coffee, a perennial crop requiring long-term investment under conditions of institutional and climatic uncertainty (Bunn *et al.*, 2015).

2.1 Aspirations Theory: The Capacity to Aspire and Institutionally Mediated Futures

Aspirations Theory, anchored in the work of Appadurai (2004), posits that aspirations are not merely individual preferences but a "*capacity to aspire*", a navigational capacity cultivated through social experience, exposure to alternative futures, and engagement with social imaginaries. This capacity is unevenly distributed; marginalised groups often have narrower "*aspiration windows*," or ranges of perceived achievable futures (Bernard & Taffesse, 2014; Genicot & Ray, 2017). In agrarian contexts, aspirations are profoundly shaped by institutional credibility. When cooperatives, markets, or state services are perceived as unreliable, the aspiration window for investing in long-gestation crops like coffee contracts, prompting risk-averse behaviours such as pre-harvest sales (magoma) or livelihood diversification (Bernard *et al.*, 2019; Samper *et al.*, 2021).

This study extends this theory by proposing the concept of institutionally mediated aspiration windows. We argue that in perennial crop value chains, the translation of aspiration



into sustained investment is filtered through the perceived trustworthiness and transparency of meso-level institutions, particularly cooperatives (AMCOS) that control market access, price information, and payments. This aligns with GVC scholarship highlighting how governance structures shape upgrading opportunities and value capture for producers (Ponte, 2019). Thus, youth aspirations for coffee are co-produced by their social observations and their institutional encounters.

2.2 The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF): Assets, Structures, and Processes

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998) provides a complementary structural lens. It posits that individuals pursue livelihood strategies by drawing upon five types of capital assets, human, social, natural, physical, and financial, within a context shaped by vulnerability factors (e.g., climate shocks, market volatility) and transforming structures and processes (e.g., policies, institutions, power relations).

In this study, SLF is used to systematically analyse the material and institutional constraints facing youth in Mbinga:

- **Natural capital:** Access to land, soil quality, and climate suitability.
- **Financial capital:** Access to credit, liquidity for inputs, and reliable payment streams.
- **Human capital:** Education, skills, and access to agricultural extension.
- **Social capital:** Membership in cooperatives, trust in leadership, and informal networks.
- **Physical capital:** Infrastructure for processing, storage, and transport.

The framework's emphasis on vulnerability context is crucial for understanding climate and market risks in coffee systems (Craparo *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, SLF's focus on transforming structures (like AMCOS) directly intersects with our focus on institutional trust, allowing us to examine how these structures mediate access to assets and market opportunities (Scoones, 2009).

2.3 Integration: Bridging Aspiration and Structure for a Holistic Analysis

The integration of these frameworks addresses a key gap in understanding youth engagement in high-value perennial crops. While SLF maps the *objective conditions* of livelihood (e.g., a youth's lack of land or credit), Aspirations Theory explains the *subjective interpretation* of those conditions (e.g., whether that lack is seen as a temporary hurdle or an insurmountable barrier). This interplay is dynamic: supportive institutions and visible pathways to success can expand aspiration windows, encouraging investment in "stepping up" strategies within coffee farming (Dorward *et al.*, 2009). Conversely, institutional failure and asset poverty can contract aspirations, leading to "hanging in" survival tactics or "stepping out" of coffee altogether (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

This integrated approach is particularly relevant for analysing gendered and intergenerational inequalities. Young women often face a double constraint: limited asset access due to age *and* gender norms, which simultaneously narrows their aspiration windows and material opportunities (ICO, 2018; Howland *et al.*, 2020). Our framework thus enables a nuanced analysis of how differentiated positions within the livelihood landscape produce divergent futures for young men and women in the coffee sector.

Table 1: Integrated Analytical Framework: Linking Aspirations, Livelihoods, and Institutional Context

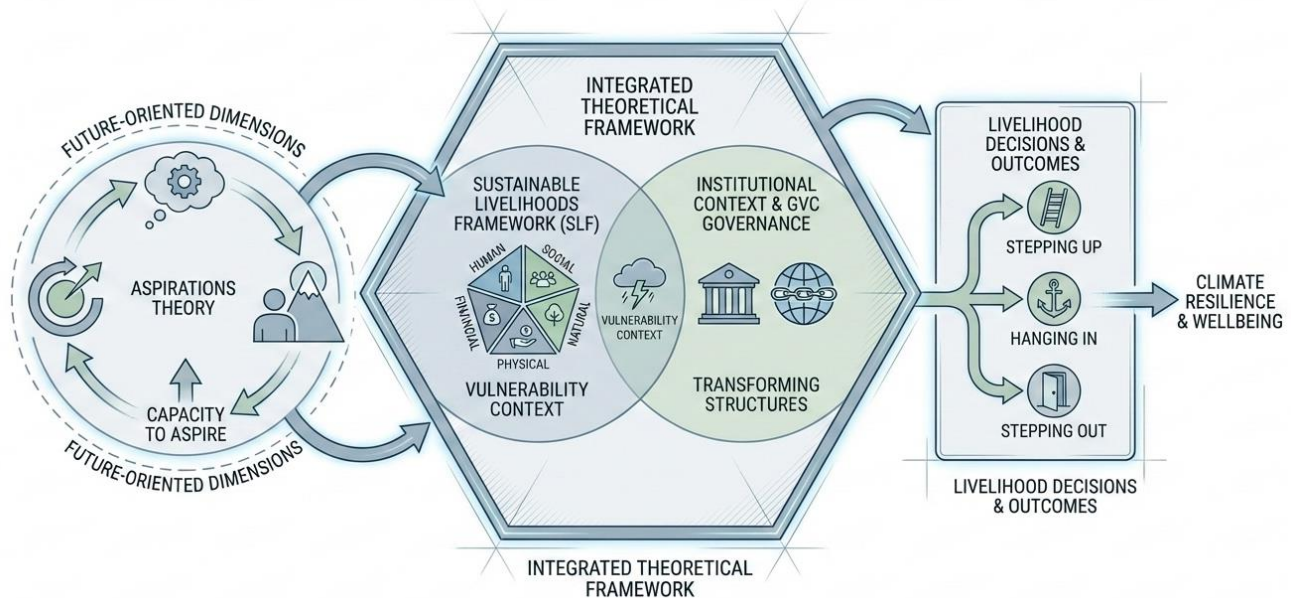
Analytical Dimension	Core Concept	Application to Youth in Mbinga Coffee Sector	Theoretical Source
<i>Aspirations & Futures</i>	<i>Capacity to Aspire / Aspiration Windows</i>	How youth perceive coffee as a viable future; shaped by role models and <i>institutional trust</i> in AMCOS.	Appadurai (2004); Bernard & Taffesse (2014)
<i>Livelihood Assets</i>	<i>Five Capitals (SLF)</i>	Analysis of constraints: land (natural), credit (financial), training (human), cooperative ties (social), infrastructure (physical).	Chambers & Conway (1992); Scoones (1998)
<i>Context & Risk</i>	<i>Vulnerability Context (SLF)</i>	Exposure to climate variability, price shocks, and pests affecting coffee production and income stability.	Craparo <i>et al.</i> (2015); Pham <i>et al.</i> (2019)
<i>Institutional Mediation</i>	<i>Transforming Structures (SLF) / GVC Governance</i>	Role of AMCOS in marketing, pricing, payments; how their governance (transparency, accountability) enables or constrains youth.	Ponte (2019); Grabs & Ponte (2019)
<i>Livelihood Strategies</i>	<i>Hanging In, Stepping Up, Stepping Out</i>	Youth responses: <i>Hanging in</i> via <i>magoma</i> ; <i>Stepping up</i> via quality improvement; <i>Stepping out</i> via diversification.	Dorward <i>et al.</i> (2009); Neilson (2019)
<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Livelihood Upgrading / Downgrading</i>	Whether strategies lead to improved wellbeing, economic upgrading, or a reinforcement of poverty and vulnerability.	Gereffi & Lee (2016); Neilson (2019)

Table 1 synthesises the integrated theoretical framework guiding data collection and analysis.

In essence, this integrated framework allows us to move beyond simplistic narratives of youth disinterest. It instead facilitates a rigorous examination of how the interaction between the cognitive-emotional realm of aspirations, and the concrete realm of assets and institutions shapes the precarious futures of young coffee farmers in Mbinga.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select four villages: Masimeli (Kigonsera Ward), Kindimba (Ukuli Ward), Kitunda (Litembo Ward), and Mangwagala (Mkumbi Ward). Selection criteria were designed to capture maximum variation relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015) and included: (1) agro-ecological variation within the coffee-growing belt, (2) differing levels of youth involvement in

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework; Youth Aspirations, Institutions, and Livelihoods in Coffee



3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate the complex, socially embedded phenomena of youth aspirations, institutional trust, and livelihood decision-making within the coffee sector of Mbinga District, Tanzania. An exploratory design is particularly suited to contexts where limited empirical knowledge exists and where the goal is to understand nuanced perceptions, experiences, and social processes from the participants' own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The methodology was guided by the integrated theoretical framework (Section 2), which necessitated methods capable of capturing both subjective narratives of the future (aligned with Aspirations Theory) and the structural conditions of livelihoods (aligned with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework).

3.1 Study Area and Site Selection

The research was conducted in Mbinga District, Ruvuma Region, in southern Tanzania. The district is part of the Matengo Highlands, renowned for producing high-quality Arabica coffee. The area is characterized by volcanic soils, altitudes ranging from 1,200 to 1,800 meters above sea level, and a bimodal rainfall pattern—agro-ecological conditions ideal for coffee but increasingly vulnerable to climate variability (Craparo *et al.*, 2015; TCB, 2021).

coffee farming, (3) varying performance and perception of the local Agricultural Marketing Cooperative Societies (AMCOS), and (4) accessibility and logistical feasibility. These villages represent typical smallholder coffee communities with strong cultural ties to coffee but differing institutional and demographic contexts.

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

Methods

The primary data collection methods were Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), facilitating triangulation and depth (Bryman, 2016).

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Six FGDs were conducted between 26 May and 2 June 2025, each with six participants (n=36). FGDs were chosen as they generate interactional data, allowing participants to co-construct meanings, debate viewpoints, and reveal shared cultural norms around coffee and aspirations (Kitzinger, 1995; see Table 2). The FGD guide was semi-structured, organized around thematic domains derived from the theoretical framework: coffee and identity, aspirations and future plans, access to assets (land, finance), experiences with AMCOS, climate and market risks, and gender roles.
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Four KIIs were conducted with individuals possessing specialized



institutional knowledge. These included AMCOS chairpersons from two of the study villages, a Ward Agricultural Extension Officer, and a Village Executive Officer. KIIs provided crucial context on cooperative governance, policy implementation, and official perspectives on youth challenges, complementing the community-level FGD data (Kumar, 1989).

All FGDs and KIIs were conducted in Kiswahili by the principal researcher with the assistance of a trained local facilitator. Sessions were audio-recorded with prior informed consent, and detailed field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

3.4 Data Management and Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Kiswahili and subsequently translated into English by a bilingual research assistant. A subset of transcripts underwent back-translation to ensure conceptual accuracy and minimize translation bias (Twinn, 1997).

Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), which aligns with the study's exploratory and constructivist orientation. The process involved six phases:

- **Familiarization:** Repeated reading of transcripts and field notes.
- **Initial Coding:** Generating codes inductively from

Table 2: Summary of Data Collection Activities

Method	Number	Participant Profile	Villages Covered	Primary Purpose
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	6 FGDs (n=36)	3 FGDs: Youth (19-35) 2 FGDs: Adult Women (>35) 1 FGD: Adult Men (>35)	Masimeli, Kindimba, Kitunda, Mangwagala	Elicit collective norms, shared experiences, and aspirational narratives related to coffee farming.
Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)	4 Interviews	2 AMCOS Chairpersons 1 Ward Agricultural Officer 1 Village Executive Officer	Across study villages	Understand institutional structures, policy contexts, and official perspectives on youth engagement challenges.
Field Observations	Throughout		All four villages	Contextual data on farming practices, village life, and cooperative infrastructure.

Table 2 provides an overview of the methodological approach, demonstrating the strategy for generating rich, triangulated qualitative data.

3.3 Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment

A stratified purposive sampling approach was used to recruit FGD participants, ensuring representation across key social strata relevant to the study (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Participants were stratified into three categories:

- **Youth** (ages 19-35): The primary cohort of interest.
- **Adult Women** (above 35): To provide gendered and intergenerational perspectives.
- **Adult Men** (above 35): To understand patriarchal norms and intergenerational transfer.

Within each village, participants were identified with the help of local leaders based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) permanent residency in the village, (b) direct engagement in coffee farming or coffee-related activities for at least one agricultural cycle, and (c) for adult categories, active involvement in household agricultural decision-making. Efforts were made to balance participants across levels of coffee engagement (e.g., full-time farmers vs. those diversifying).

the data and deductively from the theoretical framework (e.g., codes for "land insecurity," "trust in AMCOS," "aspiration for education").

- **Theme Development:** Collating codes into potential themes and mapping them against the research questions (e.g., "Coffee as Identity and Inheritance," "Institutional Trust and Cooperative Dynamics").
- **Reviewing Themes:** Checking themes against coded extracts and the entire dataset for coherence.
- **Defining and Naming Themes:** Refining the essence of each theme.
- **Producing the Report:** Uniting the analytic narrative with vivid data extracts.

Analytical rigor was ensured through triangulation (cross-checking FGD, KII, and field note data), member validation (sharing preliminary findings with a subset of participants), and the maintenance of a reflexive journal to document methodological decisions and researcher positionality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

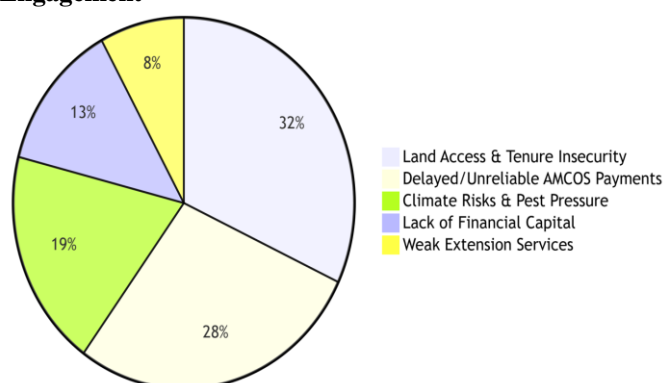
3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Sokoine University of Agriculture Research Ethics Committee (Reference: SUA-REC/2025/089). Prior to data collection, research permits were obtained from the Mbinga District Council and permission was secured from each village government. All participants provided written informed consent after the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study were explained in Kiswahili. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; all names and identifying details have been replaced with pseudonyms or generic identifiers (e.g., Youth FGD, Kitunda) in this report.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses key findings from the qualitative data analysis, following an integrated approach that blends empirical results with theoretical interpretation. This methodological integration, consistent with our mixed theoretical framework of Aspirations Theory and Sustainable Livelihoods, allows for richer analysis where field data immediately engages with scholarly debates. We organize our presentation around six thematic areas that emerged from the analysis, each incorporating direct participant quotations, theoretical discussion, and policy implications. A visual summary of the main constraints and youth responses is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Perception of Main Constraints to Coffee Engagement



4.1 The Dual Nature of Coffee: Cultural Inheritance vs. Economic Uncertainty

Empirical across all villages, coffee was consistently framed as both cultural heritage and economic gamble. Participants articulated what we term the “inheritance paradox”, coffee as simultaneously a source of pride and a source of precarity. A youth participant in Kitunda captured this duality:

“Coffee is in our blood as Matengo people. My grandfather taught my father, and my father teaches me. But today, the coffee does not teach us how to survive. We plant with hope, but we harvest with uncertainty.” (Youth FGD, Kitunda, 28 May 2025)

This narrative of intergenerational transmission was particularly strong among older participants, who framed coffee farming as essential to Matengo identity. However, youth expressed more ambivalent attachments, recognizing coffee’s cultural significance while questioning its economic viability. As one young farmer in Masimeli noted:

“We are told it is our inheritance, but what good is inheritance that cannot feed your family reliably?” (Youth FGD, Masimeli, 2 June 2025)

Theoretically, this finding resonates with Appadurai’s (2004) concept of the “*capacity to aspire*” as culturally embedded but economically constrained. Coffee serves as what Bourdieu (1986) would term “*cultural capital*”, a marker of social belonging and identity, but its conversion to economic capital is increasingly uncertain. This aligns with White’s (2012) observation of agriculture becoming a “*pathway of last resort*” despite its cultural centrality. The inheritance paradox represents a tension between what Archer (2012) calls “*cultural continuity*” and “*practical-evaluative*” concerns, where youth must reconcile familial expectations with economic realities.

The finding also connects to broader debates about “*landesque capital*” in perennial systems (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). Coffee trees represent intergenerational investments in place, but their value depends on institutional and market contexts that are increasingly volatile. This creates what we conceptualize as aspirational dissonance, the gap between culturally valued activities and economically viable pathways.

Policy-wise, this implies interventions must recognize coffee’s dual nature. Rather than focusing solely on productivity or profit maximization, programs should support what we term culturally-embedded economic resilience, strategies that honour coffee’s cultural significance while addressing its economic vulnerabilities. This might include heritage branding that leverages cultural narratives to secure premium prices, or intergenerational knowledge transfer programs that frame adaptation strategies as continuity rather than rupture.

4.2 Institutional Trust as the Linchpin of Youth Aspirations

Empirically, the most consistent theme across all participant groups was the centrality of institutional trust, particularly in AMCOs, in shaping engagement decisions. Youth described what one participant called “*the waiting game*”, uncertain periods between harvest and payment that test patience and economic planning. A young woman in Kindimba explained:

“We deliver our coffee in June, we get a small advance in July, and then we wait... September, October, sometimes November. Each month we ask: When will our money come?”



This waiting makes planning impossible.” (Youth FGD, Kindimba, 27 May 2025)

Trust levels varied significantly between villages, correlating with perceived AMCOS governance quality. In villages where leaders provided regular updates and transparent accounting, youth expressed greater willingness to commit to coffee. Where communication was poor and payments delayed, informal market engagement increased. The KII with an AMCOS chairperson revealed structural challenges:

“We are caught between global price fluctuations and members’ immediate needs. When prices fall, we must choose between paying members less or paying them late.” (KII, AMCOS Chairperson, 30 May 2025)

Theoretically, this finding powerfully illustrates our concept of institutionally mediated aspiration windows. Drawing on Genicot and Ray’s (2017) work on aspirations and inequality, we observe that institutional reliability functions as a critical parameter in young farmers’ assessment of coffee’s viability. When institutions are perceived as trustworthy, the “*aspirational horizon*” extends, enabling long-term planning and investment. When trust erodes, the horizon contracts, favouring short-term strategies.

The data reveals what Rothstein and Uslaner (2005) would identify as a “*social trap*”, individual rational responses (e.g., selling early to informal buyers) collectively undermine the cooperative system that could provide better long-term returns. This dynamic exemplifies Ostrom’s (1990) institutional analysis framework, where trust is both a precondition for and outcome of successful collective action. The varying trust levels between villages suggest that local governance matters as much as, or more than, national policy frameworks.

The finding also connects to GVC literature on governance and upgrading (Ponte, 2019). Youth engagement decisions represent a form of what Neilson (2019) calls “*livelihood upgrading assessment*”, weighing whether institutional arrangements facilitate upward mobility or reinforce marginalization. Where cooperatives fail to demonstrate what we term procedural dignity, respectful, transparent, and predictable interactions, youth logically disengage.

Policy-wise this implies strengthening institutional trust requires moving beyond technical capacity building to address what we identify as the three pillars of credible institutions: transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. Specific interventions might include:

- i. Digital payment systems to reduce delays
- ii. Regular, accessible financial reporting to members
- iii. Youth and women quotas in cooperative leadership
- iv. Formal grievance mechanisms

- v. Price information systems that explain fluctuations

These measures would expand what we conceptualize as the “*institutional bandwidth*” available to youth, the range of reliable institutional pathways for converting effort into reward.

4.3 Gendered Livelihoods: *The Double Bind of Young Women in Coffee*

Empirically, gender emerged as a critical axis of differentiation in both labor patterns and decision-making authority. Women, especially young women, described what participants called “*the work without the wallet*”, extensive involvement in production with limited control over proceeds. A young woman in Mangwagala articulated this clearly:

“From dawn until the coffee is picked, we are there. But when the money comes, it goes to his [husband’s] pocket. I must ask for everything, even money to buy soap or schoolbooks for our children.” (Women FDD, Mangwagala, 30 May 2025)

However, some participants noted generational shifts. Younger couples increasingly reported joint decision-making, particularly regarding education expenses and household investments. As one young man explained:

“My wife and I discuss everything about the coffee money. She knows the costs as well as I do. This is different from my father’s time.” (Youth FGD, Kitunda, 28 May 2025)

Theoretically, these findings illuminate the intersection of gender, generation, and institutional access in shaping livelihood possibilities. Young women face what Crenshaw (1989) would identify as intersectional marginalization, disadvantages compounded by both youth and gender. This manifests in what we term participation without power, inclusion in labor but exclusion from decisions that determine benefit distribution.

The data reveals what Agarwal (1997) calls “*bargaining within patriarchal constraints*.” While absolute control remains with male household heads in many cases, younger women demonstrate increasing negotiation capacity, particularly around expenditures perceived as benefiting the whole household. This aligns with Sen’s (1990) cooperative conflict model of household decision-making, where individual bargaining power depends on fallback positions and perceived contributions.

The partial shifts toward joint decision-making among younger couples suggest generational change in gender norms, a finding consistent with research on the “*quiet revolution*” in gender relations in African agriculture (Doss,



2018). However, these changes remain fragile and context-dependent, requiring institutional support to become entrenched.

Policy-wise, addressing gender constraints requires what we conceptualize as simultaneous empowerment at three levels:

- i. *Household level*: Dialogues on joint planning, women's financial literacy training
- ii. *Cooperative level*: Women's leadership programs, gender-sensitive bylaws
- iii. *Market level*: Direct payment mechanisms to women, women's producer groups

Programs should recognize the specific constraints of young women, who may lack both the authority of age and the autonomy often afforded to men. Interventions might include youth-specific gender dialogues and mentorship programs pairing young women with established female coffee entrepreneurs.

4.4 Climate Risk and Temporal Dilemmas: The “Magoma” Strategy

Empirically, climate vulnerability emerged as both immediate concern and long-term threat, profoundly shaping livelihood strategies. Participants described increasing unpredictability in rainfall patterns, more frequent pest outbreaks, and changing harvest timing. In response, many youth engage in *magoma*, the pre-harvest sale of coffee at discounted prices. A youth participant explained this calculus:

“When the rains fail or pests come, the harvest will be small. Better to sell some cherries early at low price than to wait and maybe get nothing. This money buys food now, not promises later.” (Youth FGD, Masimeli, 2 June 2025)

KIIs with agricultural officers confirmed these climate challenges:

“The seasons we learned in school no longer match what farmers experience. Our extension messages are based on patterns that are disappearing.” (KII, Ward Agricultural Officer, 1 June 2025)

Theoretically, *magoma* practice represents a sophisticated temporal strategy for managing what Beck (1992) would call “*manufactured uncertainty*”, risks produced by the intersection of climate change and market integration. This aligns with Watts' (1983) concept of “*silent bargaining*” in peasant economies, where short-term survival frequently trumps long-term optimization.

The data reveals what we term climate-induced aspiration compression, environmental uncertainty forcing contraction of planning horizons. Youth engage in what Dorward *et al.* (2009) would classify as “*hanging in*” strategies, maintaining

coffee production but through mechanisms that limit potential gains. This creates a poverty trap: discounted sales reduce resources available for climate adaptation, increasing future vulnerability.

The finding connects to literature on climate resilience in smallholder systems (van der Lee *et al.*, 2022). Youth responses illustrate the tension between absorptive capacity (coping with shocks) and adaptive capacity (adjusting to changing conditions). Currently, strategies like *magoma* demonstrate absorptive capacity but may undermine adaptive capacity by reducing investment capital.

Policy-wise, this implies addressing climate-related livelihood pressures requires what we conceptualize as temporal liquidity support, mechanisms that provide short-term stability without sacrificing long-term potential. Specific interventions might include:

- i. Index-based weather insurance tailored to coffee
- ii. Emergency credit facilities for climate shocks
- iii. Climate information services in local languages
- iv. Diversification support for complementary crops

These measures would expand what we term climate decision space, the range of viable options available to farmers facing environmental uncertainty.

4.5 Asset Differentiation and Youth Positionality

Empirically, youth engagement patterns revealed significant internal differentiation based on asset portfolios. Those with more secure land access, family support networks, and alternative income sources expressed greater optimism about coffee's future. A youth with inherited land explained:

“My father gave me one acre when I married. It is not much, but it is mine to plan with. I intercrop beans for food and coffee for cash. This gives me patience with the coffee.” (Youth FGD, Mangwagala, 30 May 2025)

In contrast, youth relying on temporary land access or sharecropping arrangements described more precarious engagement:

“I farm my uncle's land, but he can take it back anytime. Why would I invest in compost or new trees if the land is not mine?” (Youth FGD, Kindimba, 27 May 2025)

Theoretically, this differentiation illustrates the SLF premise that livelihood strategies emerge from specific asset configurations (Scoones, 1998). Youth are not a homogeneous category but occupy distinct positions within local political economies of land, labor, and capital.

The data reveals what we term asset-conditioned aspirations, future orientations shaped by current resource endowments.



This aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of habitus, dispositions formed through experience within specific social positions. Youth from more asset-secure backgrounds develop what Appadurai (2004) would call “*thicker*” capacity to aspire, with more pathways visible and credible.

The finding challenges simplistic policy narratives about “*youth in agriculture*” that ignore internal stratification. As Anyidoho and Sumberg (2020) note, rural youth constitute a heterogeneous category with diverse interests and constraints. Effective interventions must recognize what we conceptualize as positionality-responsive design, tailoring support to specific youth segments rather than offering one-size-fits-all solutions.

Policy-wise, this implies programming should adopt what we term segmented youth engagement strategies:

- For *asset-secure youth*: Quality upgrading, market access, entrepreneurial training
- For *asset-precarious youth*: Land access facilitation, safety nets, diversified skill building
- For *landless youth*: Off-farm opportunities, value chain employment, migration support

This approach recognizes that coffee's future depends not on retaining all youth in farming, but on enabling appropriate pathways for different youth segments.

4.6 Integrated Analysis: *The Constraint-Aspiration Nexus*

The integrated analysis reveals what we conceptualize as the constraint-aspiration nexus, a dynamic relationship where structural limitations shape future orientations, which in turn influence how constraints are navigated. This nexus operates through what Archer (2012) calls “*reflexive deliberation*,” where young people continuously assess their situations against perceived possibilities.

Three key patterns emerge from this integrated analysis:

- Institutional mediation is paramount*: Even when other constraints are present, trustworthy institutions can expand aspiration windows and enable more strategic engagement.
- Gender intersects with all constraints*: Young women face compounded limitations that require targeted, intersectional approaches.
- Climate change amplifies existing vulnerabilities*: Environmental uncertainty intensifies temporal dilemmas and asset-based inequalities.

4.7 Theoretical Contributions and Policy Implications

Theoretically, this study makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, we advance the concept of institutionally mediated aspiration windows, demonstrating how meso-level institutions (particularly cooperatives) critically shape the translation of observed opportunities into personal futures. This extends Appadurai's (2004) work by specifying institutional trust as a key mechanism in aspiration

Table 3: Constraint-Aspiration Nexus in Youth Coffee Livelihoods

Primary Constraint	Youth Response Strategy	Aspiration Impact	Theoretical Lens
<i>Institutional Distrust</i> (Delayed payments, opaque AMCOS governance)	Increased <i>magoma</i> (pre-harvest sales); Reduced cooperative engagement	<i>Aspiration Compression</i> : Shortened planning horizons; Reduced willingness to invest in long-term improvements	Institutionally mediated aspiration windows (Genicot & Ray, 2017)
<i>Gendered Exclusion</i> (Labor without decision-making power)	Selective disengagement; Pursuit of alternative income sources	<i>Aspiration Diversion</i> : Rechannelling ambitions toward activities with greater autonomy	Intersectional marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989); Household bargaining models (Sen, 1990)
<i>Climate Vulnerability</i> (Erratic rainfall, pest outbreaks)	Risk-spreading via diversification; Temporal adjustment of planting/harvest	<i>Aspiration Fragmentation</i> : Pursuit of multiple, often contradictory, livelihood pathways	Climate-induced temporal dilemmas (van der Lee <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
<i>Asset Poverty</i> (Limited land, capital, social networks)	“Hanging in” via survival strategies; Partial “stepping out”	<i>Aspiration Constraint</i> : Future possibilities limited to immediate resource context	Asset-conditioned aspirations (Bourdieu, 1986; Scoones, 1998)
<i>Intergenerational Tension</i> (Cultural inheritance vs. economic uncertainty)	Ambivalent commitment; Symbolic vs. substantive engagement	<i>Aspirational Dissonance</i> : Conflict between cultural values and economic realities	Cultural capital vs. economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986)

Table 1 synthesizes the integrated findings, showing how specific constraints generate particular response strategies with distinct impacts on youth aspirations.



formation.

Second, we develop the framework of asset-conditioned aspirations, showing how youth positionality within local political economies structures both objective possibilities and subjective orientations toward the future. This bridges the SLF's focus on material assets with Aspirations Theory's emphasis on cognitive-emotional dimensions.

Third, we identify aspirational dissonance as a key dynamic in contexts of rapid socio-economic change, where cultural values and economic imperatives increasingly diverge. This concept helps explain why symbolic attachment to coffee persists even as substantive engagement declines.

Policy-wise, based on these integrated findings, we propose a multidimensional youth engagement framework for coffee systems:

- i. *Institutional revitalization*: Prioritize AMCOS governance reform with youth participation metrics
- ii. *Gender-transformative approaches*: Address both practical needs and strategic interests of young women
- iii. *Climate-resilient livelihoods*: Integrate adaptation support with economic diversification
- iv. *Asset pathway programs*: Tailored support based on youth positionality and aspirations
- v. *Intergenerational dialogue platforms*: Bridge cultural continuity with economic innovation

This framework recognizes that revitalizing youth engagement requires simultaneous action across institutional, social, economic, and environmental dimensions. As one youth participant succinctly stated:

"We want to farm coffee, but coffee must also farm us, it must nourish our present and our future." (Youth FGD, Kitunda, 28 May 2025).

Achieving this reciprocal relationship between youth and coffee requires reimagining not just farming practices, but the institutional and social arrangements that make farming meaningful and viable.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has untied the complex negotiation between heritage and uncertainty that defines youth engagement with coffee farming in Mbinga District. We find that young people do not reject agriculture out of hand, nor do they lack ambition. Rather, their conditional and often ambivalent commitment to coffee reflects a rational assessment of a livelihood system where profound cultural value is increasingly misaligned with economic reliability. The practice of *magoma*, delayed payments from cooperatives, gendered barriers to decision-making, and the encroaching

pressures of climate change are not peripheral issues but central determinants that contract what we have theorized as institutionally mediated aspiration windows. When the institutional bridges between effort and reward appear unstable, youth logically gravitate toward livelihood strategies that prioritize short-term security over long-term investment, even for a crop that remains a core marker of identity.

The implications of these findings are clear: sustaining coffee as an intergenerational livelihood in Tanzania requires moving beyond technical solutions or motivational campaigns. It demands a fundamental reworking of the institutional architecture and social contracts that govern the coffee value chain. Efforts must be simultaneous and interconnected, recognizing that trust in cooperatives, access to land, gender equity, and climate resilience are not separate challenges but interlocking pieces of the same systemic puzzle. Revitalizing youth engagement is therefore less about making coffee attractive and more about making the institutional environment around coffee trustworthy, transparent, and responsive.

In this light, we propose an integrated pathway forward. Central to this is the urgent need to rebuild credible and accountable cooperatives. This requires transparent financial management, the adoption of digital payment systems to ensure timeliness, and the formal inclusion of youth and women in governance structures. Parallel to this, facilitating secure access to productive assets for young people is non-negotiable. This involves supporting models for intergenerational land transfer, developing financial products tailored to the seasonal income flows of perennial crops, and massively scaling up accessible training in climate-smart agronomy. These interventions must be explicitly gender-transformative, designed to dismantle the double bind young women face by promoting their leadership, ensuring their direct control over income, and fostering equitable household decision-making.

Concurrently, policy must embrace the reality that resilient rural futures are often diversified. Supporting youth does not mean anchoring them exclusively to coffee production. A robust strategy will also foster opportunities for value addition within the local coffee economy, such as roasting and branding, and for prudent diversification into complementary agro-enterprises. This builds household resilience and provides the very economic stability that can make long-term investment in coffee tenable. Finally, for these efforts to be coherent and sustainable, young people must be recognized as legitimate stakeholders in national policy dialogues. Creating permanent forums for youth voice within the Tanzania Coffee Board and ensuring that youth-specific metrics are embedded in the monitoring of all



agricultural programs are critical steps to translate top-level strategies into grounded, relevant action.

Ultimately, the future of coffee in communities like Mbinga hangs in the balance between inherited pride and calculated risk. The uncertainty young people express is a diagnostic of systemic failures, not a generational character flaw. By embarking on the integrated reforms outlined here, centered on institutional trust, asset justice, gender inclusion, and climate adaptation, stakeholders can realign the sector's cultural foundations with its economic prospects. Only then can the statement "*coffee is ours*" reflect not just a claim to heritage, but a confident claim to a viable and dignified future.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

I hereby declare that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the research and findings presented in this paper.

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