A Qualitative Evaluation of a Systems Thinking Education Program for Youth in Kenya

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Intro

- In Kenya youth unemployment is a major problem
- Systems thinking is still new in development, thought it has lots of applicability for more holistic approaches to development problems
- **Systems Thinking for Youth Led-Development Solutions (SAYDS)** is an innovative program in Kenya that teaches youth systems thinking principles. The program lasts one year, and it has three main structural components that are important:
  - A **group model**, where youth are put into groups that they stay in for the duration of the program. Each group picks an issue in their community that they wish to work on, and conducts workshops with a local organization
  - **Coordinator model**, where each group has a coordinator that provides mentorship and support
  - **Systems thinking education**, where students learn complexity thinking and systems thinking principles through a weekly lectures

Why This Matters

- The SAYDS program aims to have youth address issues in their community through partnerships with community organizations and policy advocacy. This evaluation helps to understand the impact of the SAYDS program on SAYDS fellows and their communities.
- The results from this evaluation can be used in designing future iterations of the program, which can positively affect future impact.
- This program is working to empower youth in their own communities through systems thinking. This is important for the context of this program, but it also potentially has applicability as a model that could be used in other contexts. Results from this evaluation can provide a useful case study of a development-focused systems-thinking program.

SAYDS
Systems Acumen for Youth-led Development Solutions

Methods

Semi-Structured interviews with program fellows (n=21), alumni (n=5), and staff members (n=7)

Group discussions (n=4) with fellows using a combination of a group activity where participants drew a visual representation of their group dynamics, and questions
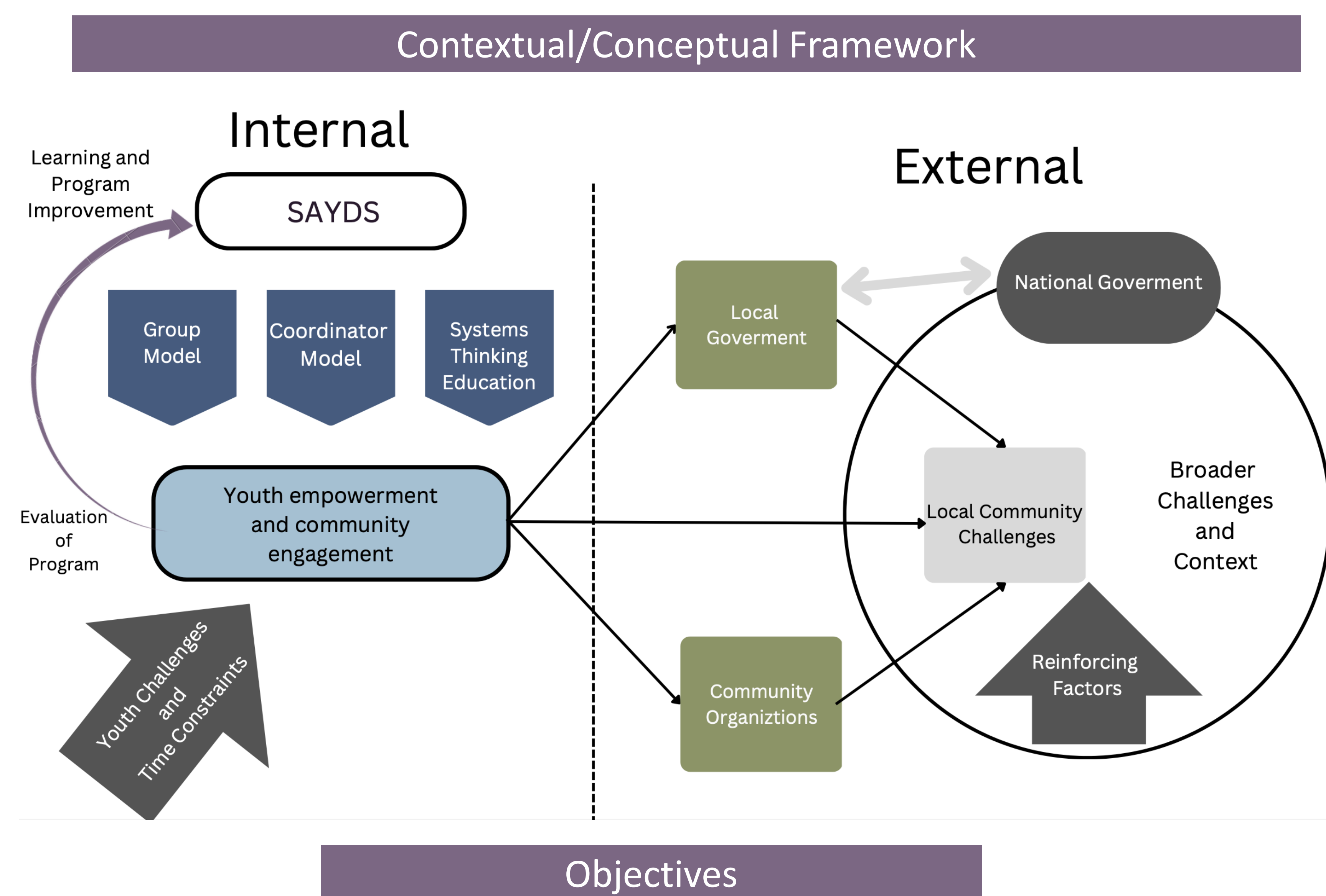
Analysis
Semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded using a combination of inductive and deductive coding. A thematic analysis was done. Recordings from workshop sessions was summarized for key information and used to supplement interview data.

Contextual/Conceptual Framework

Objectives

There are two main objectives of this work: (1) to provide useful program recommendations to the SAYDS program for program improvement, and (2) to understand the program's affects to understand the usefulness of this program as a model for other systems thinking education programs.

The following evaluation questions, broken down by area of focus, guided the research into different aspects of the program:

Individual Fellows

- What knowledge and skills have participants gained?
- How confident are participants in the knowledge/skills they have gained?
- How well do participants apply these skills during the program?
- How do participants describe their participation with their sense of purpose in life?

Groups of Youth

- In each group's opinion, how well do they collaborate together? Successfully solve problems together?
- How do youth groups practically engage together? (frequency of meetings, mode of meeting, etc.)

Coordinator-Youth Relationships

- To what extent does the "high touch" coordinator model sustain/encourage the youth groups?
- How/in what ways do coordinators guide youth through their research processes?

Community-Youth Interaction

- To what extent has the program increased participants' ability/knowledge to facilitate workshops or community events?
- How have the workshops gone? What did participants think of these workshops? Of the youth?
- Did participants who attended the workshops change their perspectives about complex problems and how they should be solved?
- How involved in the community are SAYDS members?
- Do SAYDS members/alumni feel their community engagement has been affected by SAYDS membership?

Results

- Many youth experienced an increase in self-efficacy and confidence as a result of the program
- Most youth reported close relationships with their group members and felt like they were supported by their groups. Fellows felt like they had become friends with members of their group in ways that went beyond the program
- Workshops were critical to the program, and youth felt like they provided valuable opportunities to learn about their chosen topic and apply the knowledge they had gained in practical ways
- Alumni members who were still active participants in the **SAYDS Community Association (SCA)**, (which functions as a sort of alumni organization) had sustained this motivation and felt like they belonged to a community of practice. These alumni members were actively working on partnerships with local organizations, starting their own organizations, and policy advocacy.
- Nearly all interviewed youth were planning to join the SCA after finishing the SAYDS program, and a few planned to start social enterprises or community organizations
- Youth mostly reported positive relationships with their coordinators. The main problem brought up in relation to the coordinator model was that some of the coordinators were not themselves trained in systems thinking, and were unable to help youth directly when they had trouble with the material
- One of the biggest challenges youth faced was the ability to commit time to the program. Many youth worked, or were in school, or both, and many struggled to keep up with the pace of the program. Youth reported in many instances that their groups and their coordinators helped sustain their engagement and helped them when they were struggling with their life outside of the program

Conclusions and Takeaways

- Fellows had different experiences, and different versions of the program will work better for different fellows. Program design should consider the intended program participant
- The group model did have challenges, but it seemed to be effective in sustaining engagement and interest in the program, at least for some participants
- Coordinator support and mentorship was a critical factor for some fellows, but not for others. The program should carefully consider the role of coordinators, and try to be aware of the fact that fellows will differ in what they need from their coordinator
- There is a tradeoff in the program between accommodating and demanding a level of commitment. Some fellows had members of their group drop out or become very disengaged, which to varying extents impacted their time in the program. Other fellows needed accommodation through a particular period of the program but became more engaged. SAYDS should consider the question: At what point should a fellow be kicked out of the program?
- More work should be done looking at members of the SCA, because it seems likely that a substantial portion of SAYDS's long-term impact will be primarily realized through the SCA

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