

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Group Learning Challenges and Emerging Perspectives in Non-Formal Training Programs for the Vulnerable Youth in Nakuru County, Kenya

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Abstract:

Youth participation in education and training for self and national development is a right and among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) advocated for by UN to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. The same is envisaged in Kenya's youth policy document, SDGs and also as a right entrenched in the constitution. However, this right is not enjoyed by all but those who can afford to access formal system of education and training. This excludes the vulnerable and disadvantaged youth who may have dropped out of the system for one reason or another with no alternative path to acquisition of skills, knowledge and attitudes. Addressing the challenges surrounding non-formal training programs for vulnerable youth would provide an alternative pathway to access skills and benefit all other disadvantaged groups. This paper examines challenges facing delivery of skills to the vulnerable youth in non-formal training programs in Nakuru County, Kenya. The study employed mixed methods research design where data was collected as part of feed-back after skills training sessions. The target population was all the vulnerable youth in Nakuru County, while the accessible population was vulnerable youth groups registered with different organizations. Group learning model together with supporting techniques was adopted as the delivery method. A sample of four youth groups comprising of 120 members was purposively selected. Two groups were trained in craft skills using transformative methods of training while the other two were trained in the same skills using transmissive methods. Multiple sources of feedback such as attendance register, observation checklist and recording of exhibited behavior during and after the training, ability to make quality craft products and participants were used for evaluation. This information was recorded and analyzed qualitatively. The training evaluation process revealed challenges which included; Absenteeism, Apathy and low motivation, social cultural factors, learning difficulties, lack of financial support, psychosocial issues. The challenges inhibit acquisition of skills in different ways, and it is therefore imperative for trainers and other stake holders in non-formal training programs to be aware of this development and equip the trainers with the necessary skill to mitigate the challenges for effective training.

Keywords: Group Learning, Non-formal training, vulnerable youth, transformative, transmissive

1. Introduction

Among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) passed in the United Nations forum of September 2015 is to ensure equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by the year 2030 (UNDP, 2015). While in Kenya among the six main SDGs is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. In return this would result to sustainable human dignity and inclusive participation in the development undertakings. These goals are intended to address issues that pertain to the poor and the marginalized, thus addressing poverty and vulnerability resulting from inequalities in socio economic opportunities so that no one is left behind.

One of the key challenges facing the Kenyan youth is lack of necessary and relevant training, knowledge skills and attitudes required to lead sustainable lives especially among the vulnerable youth (Omolo, 2010). Vulnerable youth refers to the disadvantaged youth between the age of 12 to 24 years who dropped from the school system or never attended at all, and do not receive any form of care or support from parents or government. They become victims of risk factors and are vulnerable to all form of abuse and their successful transition to adulthood is interfered with (Zweig, 2003). Failure to provide

them with opportunities not only shuts down a key economic window to national development, but exposes the society to political and social insecurity as these youths seeks for alternative engagements (Adrienne & Alcantara, 2014). Youth development through skills training provides opportunities, supports and empowerment to usefulness, sense of belonging and attributes that improves their productivity (Odhiambo, 2006).

Non-formal education and training aims at improving the lives of people by increasing their skills, information literacy and enhancing positive attitudes. It is a form of training program that brings equity and access to opportunities with a bias on the disadvantaged and rural youth. Participants of these programs are out of school youth and adults who would like to gain skills for self-development, take control of one's life and social participation. A well planned and facilitated non-formal training program could be used to harness the potential of school drop outs at primary and secondary school levels. Right to education, health and access to information for every person is entrenched in Kenya's constitution GoK, (2010). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the government of the day to put in place mechanisms for every citizen within the socio-economic stratum to access these rights. However, learning requirements for vulnerable youth are inevitably different from their counterparts in formal training programs. For effective training to take place trainers must recognize and adapt delivery methods that respond to individual learning styles and differences, and harness the development of positive attributes. There is a positive association between skills delivery methods and increased levels of self-esteem which in return encourage the youth to actively engage in activities that lead to their own development (Hussain, 2013).

Group learning model according to Cheong and Christopher (2010) is a highly structured interactive/participative approach to learning, which does not over emphasis on the learner, trainer or the content but on the process thus engaging the trainee in an interactive learning focusing on group work. The model is transformative and enhances transferable skills and a genuine paradigm shift on learners thinking, which transform their lives and the world around them. The method is based on situational analysis where the trainer and trainees decide on what is most appropriate to learn and the expected learning outcomes. The model is used with other complementary method, where the trainer acts as an organizer or facilitator (Lucas, Spencer, & Claxton 2012). The method involves high level of interaction resulting in effective learning process and motivation to work for a common goal.

Group learning results to attributes that enhances skills in problem solving; develop critical thinking skills as well as positive attitudes. The approach facilitates the transfer of some latent skills both cognitive and social during interaction and encourages active learning and self-reliance (Jaques, 2004). The study used the model together with interactive techniques such as; role play, group discussion, games, demonstrations, simulations and computer supported learning. These methods were used on the vulnerable youth to encourage sharing of common norms and interaction which influences the performance and other behavioral aspects of group members such as interpersonal skills and group cohesion.

According to Gwamoiza, Haidara and Schniepper (2013), group learning takes a non-formal approach to education and training and has a long tradition in youth work at all levels. It is a long-established feature of non-formal training in the youth fields as it directly relates to the objectives of youth training which require the development of personal and interpersonal competences beyond the acquisition of specific knowledge. Kenya National youth policy (GOK, 2007) envision youth participation in self and national development. Therefore managers, leaders, teachers, trainers and parents should identify new ways of educating and training all the youth to ensure that they fulfill this mandate.

Group learning motivates and promotes interdependence and accountability and would therefore help the youth uphold the values of unity and cohesion. There is a lot of debate on the best practice in skills training for the youth, considering that skills training programs have different level/types of trainees and conducted in varied environments. According to World Bank (2015), like adults, vulnerable youth are aware of the specific learning needs generated by life experiences such as peer pressure, parenting and antisocial behavior and lack of jobs. However, their needs and interests are the starting points and serve as guideposts for training activities; likewise, the need to empower all youth socially and economically determines how the group learning is structured.

Considering vocational/crafts skills training and adult education programs are some of the interventions that have proved successful in addressing socio-economic, cultural, political and environmental problems when deliberate methods of delivery are used. In transmissive training programs, learners are generally regarded as passive recipients of the content, where they mostly memorize for the purpose of passing examinations rather than promoting tenets that will enhance their productive engagements to life. These methods do not enhance self-confidence, critical thinking and problem-solving skills but promotes individualism and dependency on the trainer (Lucas, Spencer, & Claxton, 2012). Transmissive methods would therefore reinforce the antisocial behavior common with the vulnerable youth through emphasis on individual work. Transformative methods facilitate learners' participation through approaches which transform their lives and the world around them. The methods enhance transferable skills and a genuine paradigm shift on learners thinking when directed by an effective trainer. This study sought to introduce craft skills to the vulnerable youth using group learning and related techniques to not only impart skills but also transform enhance their social skills

The training process was followed by reviewing the achievement of the objectives with the trainer recalling the strength and weaknesses of group task performance and how challenges were overcome. Evaluation was structured around the training objectives, interest and needs of the task irrespective of the environment under which the implementation was done. This process provides room for individual trainees' growth (Kechagias, 2011). Review or evaluation of group learning process at the end of the activities in order to get feedback to use in improving group performance is important as observed by

Faraday, Overton & Cooper (2011). Based on this observation, this study evaluated the group learning activities to obtain feedback from the participants and the trainer as well as the products; the feedback result is what has been discussed in this paper.

2. Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

- i. Highlight group learning challenges encountered when training vulnerable youth non-formal training program.
- ii. Present the emerging perspectives drawn from the training process.

3. Methodology

This study used mixed methods design, the population of the study was all the vulnerable youth in Nakuru County. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 120 vulnerable youth as participants, where 60 were used as control group and 60 as the treatment group. Small learning groups of 5 to 6 members were created from the large group of 30 and one-month training in simple craft skills was conducted using group learning model and supporting delivery methods in line with the expected outcomes. An evaluation was conducted at the end of the training where feedback was sought from 60 trainees, 30 from either group who consistently attended and completed the training. Multiple sources of data such as attendance register, observation checklist and recording of exhibited behavior during and after the training, ability to make quality craft products and participants feedback were used. Group learning entailed dividing the main group of 30 to small learning groups of 5 to 6 members and introducing the skills to be learnt and the delivery methods for each skill. Each learning group registered their members and gave each group a brand name as an identity which was very helpful during outdoor activities. The small learning groups developed their expected learning outcomes, group rules and selected the materials they wanted to use for specific craft skills. The delivery methods used with group learning aimed at enhancing craft, transferable and lifelong learning skills among the trainees. Varied information was recorded during training and final evaluation then analyzed qualitatively to meet the objectives of the study.

4. Participants of the Study

These included selected vulnerable youth groups in Nakuru County who are disadvantaged victims of risk factors such as; family poverty, learning disabilities and related conditions, living in single or no parent households, having a child before age 18 years and dropped out of primary and secondary school education. The age at which these youths disconnected from the family, society and school system is too young for the experiences that they go through. Since education and training is a pillar to youth empowerment. The study developed a non-formal flexible training program using group learning model to enhance acquisition of broad based skills for self-development and evaluate the training process to highlight the challenges involved.

5. Result and Discussion

The findings of the study were drawn from the evaluation exercise carried out after the training, which sought the trainees' feedback. The trainer's observations during the training sessions also formed part of the evaluation report discussed as challenges in the following sections.

5.1. Absenteeism

This referred to inconsistency or absence from the training either full day or partly. An attendance register was used during training sessions for students to sign in daily upon arrival. The total enrolment for the group trained using transmissive methods was 60 while those using transformative group learning methods had the same number. However, during the training only 30 members from each group consistently attended the one-month training sessions. Some would attend in the morning session but miss in the afternoon while others missed for a whole week. The threshold for attendance was 70%, and half of the members in each category did not meet the threshold and could not participate in the evaluation. Each trainee had different reasons for absenteeism ranging from health issues, social issues and lack of finances among others. This affected the organization of the learning groups as each member had a specific task to enable the group attain their goal. This challenge resulted to delays in completing group task and interfered with the development of interpersonal attributes. However, the absenteeism provided the group members with an opportunity to adapt to the situation as they stepped in to make up for the gaps left by the absentees. The trainees also got a chance to enhance their problem solving and critical thinking skills as they reorganized themselves to cover up tasks for the absentees and perform the group task.

One characteristic of group learning is interdependence and accountability among the members which enhanced unity and cohesion, each member viewing the other/s as a resource, recognize and respect each other's contribution towards group task. Absenteeism overstretched the participation of members in each learning group as they had to work hard to achieve their expected outcomes. This enhanced their individual sense of responsibility, a view also supported by Otten & Fennes (2008) observation, that group learning enhances learners' interpersonal skills, accountability and responsibility as they work towards a common goal. The learners develop a team spirit and work together to accomplish a task and also emerge more cohesive as none wanted their group project to fail. Consistency in attendance is very crucial for non-formal training programs using group learning, though difficult to achieve as trainees have varied reasons for absenteeism. Wilson (2013) observes that socio economic aspects may affect consistency and participation in learning programs which also was evident

through evaluation. The study realizes that the vulnerable youth are neither supported by the government nor the parents unlike the other youth in formal training programs. However, the trainers in non-formal programs should be aware of this challenge and plan for mitigation measures for both social and economic issues at least during the training period.

5.2. General Apathy and Low-Motivation

This refers to lack of passion and interest during training on part of the trainees. This was an observed behavior for most of the trainees. At the beginning of the study majority of the vulnerable youth portrayed lack of passion and individual motivation to learn. The behaviour was manifested in the training session where trainees would delay going back to the room after tea or lunch break including lateness to report in the morning during training with no apparent reason. Others took too long to prepare for the sessions and argued that government bodies and NGOs have often been collecting information from them and they had not benefited in any way. The base line survey also showed that 60% (36 out of the 60 participants) had attended workshops on HIV and Aids, Business management and environmental conservation, the youth felt that these skills did not address their needs and that some people were using their condition for self-gain. This was one reason for low motivation at the introduction stage of craft skills, until it was clear that the outcome of the training were products that they could sell. However, there was some improvement after developing products like ear rings.

The youth thought the training was just like any other initiative they had in the past which was being done as evidence for national or county government performance or NGOs funding, and this could have been another cause for low motivation. This is a common behavioral trait among the vulnerable youth, due to their life experiences and unfriendly environment. This observation agrees with Morton and Montgomery (2011) that vulnerable youth have low self-concept and lack passion for life which affects their desire to change their lives for the better. This behavior affects group learning where the effectiveness is dependent on members' interrelationship. The disinterested members affect group achievement and individual contribution. However, Bast & Walberg (2014) advocates for giving rewards to motivate learning and especially for the vulnerable youth who want to feel appreciated. Making products that had a money value was rewarding enough to the group members. The trainer also introduced small gifts daily to reward those who adhered to learning group rules. Low motivation affects members' interdependence and common values which are important for effective group learning outcomes. As in adult learning the youth also put interest in learning that is either entertaining or has other obvious benefits to their lives (Zweig & Aron, 2003; Knowles 1996). This is a challenge that calls for vulnerable youth trainers to explain the socio-economic benefits of the content to the trainees before the training as well as field visits of related businesses and use delivery methods that are interactive and fully engaging.

5.3. Social Cultural Factors

This included behavioral traits and beliefs that were influenced by the trainee's ethnicity. These mannerisms came into play at learning group formation level as considerations by members while choosing who should belong to the group. The vulnerable youth group members came from different ethnic background with different beliefs and values, which came into play especially when selecting skills, materials and the academic games to engage in, as some felt it was a taboo to do certain things which went against some cultural norms. However, in Kenya and Africa at large, for sustainable development to be realized, the youth have to be encouraged to interact and coexist peacefully and take advantage of their social and cultural diversities, a paradigm also supported by Hussain (2013). Group learning promotes cohesion and social values, it is therefore imperative that trainers use approaches that tap from different ethnicity to enrich the groups experiences through harmonious relationships considering that non-formal skills training contribute towards positive attitude formation.

5.4. Learning Difficulties

In this study learning difficulties referred to a condition where the trainee is unable to derive meaning from concepts or express themselves. From individual trainee's information collected during the baseline survey, 58.3% of the vulnerable youth had primary level education, 20% had secondary level while 18.7 % had dropped out from the education system at different levels. The secondary level of education was however questionable as majority of the youth could hardly read or write notes during the training and also had difficulties in expressing themselves in English. Majority of the trainees found it difficult to understand and interpret information presented orally during training. They also manifested poor listening skills and miscommunication. Though no scientific test was done on the trainee to assess the nature and level of difficulties, Heymann (2014) refers to this condition as auditory disorder which can also be associated to individual learning style. There was also a challenge in self-expression in both English and Kiswahili languages by some of the trainees. Others demonstrated poor writing skills and inability to derive meaning from procedures written on the chalk board or other media. Group presentations are one way of assessing individual performance in a group, a good number had difficulties expressing their work verbally and one could read the frustration from the facial expression. This could be associated with the low level of basic education and life experiences as well as lack of self-confidence, although Davis (2002) describes the condition as Language processing disorder (LPD) which only relates to processing of language.

The study associated learning difficulties to the level of education, which inhibited the ability to understand concepts and take instructions resulting to miscommunication. Lack of self-confidence was explicitly manifested during group discussions and the presentations conducted at the end of the training. However, the use of more interactive training methods such as role play and academic games created a platform for self-expression and adherence to instructions. The implication is

that contrary to the common belief that craft skills training do not require any level of education or cognitive ability, it came out clearly during training and evaluation that a sound level of basic education and experience is required to enhance any learning. This observation is in line with the National Quality Council, (2010) report which acknowledges that a persons' level of education affects their level of personal development, productivity and adaptability to different circumstances. The trainer need to mitigate these challenges by using simple language and avoid giving the trainees written exercises but instead give them projects where they can apply the learnt skills. Giving more interactive sessions may also help in improving communication. Lack of mitigation measures may affect the effectiveness of group learning and transferability of some elements of latent skills.

5.5. Financial Support

The baseline survey result showed that majorities (83.3%) of the participants were female and among them, 78.3% were single parents. The results further revealed that all the participants did not have regular source of income but depended on undefined activities to earn a living. Low level of education with no skills training cannot offer any reliable form of employment. Furthermore, majorities were between the ages of 14-20 years with two or three kids, which means that they became mothers in their early teenage. Without a regular income and children to be provided for, time for skills training was not a priority. Lack of financial support for these mothers made them susceptible to various forms of abuse or engagements that could give them money, resulting to low self-esteem and life-threatening diseases. This observation is consistent with Zweig (2003), that one of the major problems facing vulnerable youth is lack of financial support which denies them access to basic services. This challenge was manifest from the beginning of the study, where the participants indicated that it was not possible for them to attend the training throughout the week as they needed time to go and look for money. The training period was therefore spread out to give room for the trainees to look for money to sustain their children and attend to other roles. The training was scheduled to take place twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursday but after the first week some participants expressed further dissatisfaction with two days arrangement, therefore it was conducted once a week thus prolonging the training duration for the learning group members to participate comfortably.

Non-formal training programs are flexible and can be planned to accommodate the learner's needs. For the trainees to settle and attend the training consistently it would be advisable to provide allowances to the trainees for meals and transportation so that the process is not disrupted. It was also observed that the government financial support services to youth groups through devolved youth fund was not known to the vulnerable youth. It is only accessible to groups which are registered with the ministry of youth affairs and planning which by the time of this study, this group had no such information due to lack of civic education and inability to access information on support services available from the government. Trainers in the non-formal programs should include information literacy as part of the content to expose this category to support services at their disposal from the government. It is also important to include other stake holders while planning for training to ensure that there is adequate financial support.

5.6. Adequate Psychosocial Support

This refers to an intervention that will address the mental wellbeing as well as their social welfare. The results of the study revealed that the vulnerable youth disconnected with their families and society at an early age (14-20 years). This is an indication that some had left the family care at such a tender age most probably before teenage or in the early teenage years. This left them unprotected and vulnerable to all kind of risks such as drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile remand, sexual harassment and homelessness. These experiences at such an early age may have affected their personalities thus creating anger and bitterness within the individual which was manifested as antipathy and withdrawal as well as low self-concept. With this type of character, it was difficult to form cohesive learning groups as each of the participant engaged in a blame game and felt they had nothing in common with the group members apart from vulnerability. There are several approaches which researchers in psychological field have identified as effective in providing psychosocial support to the vulnerable youth.

According to Bücklein (2007), non-formal education and training through established youth centers, focus groups or group work activities, media supported activities and art and sports as well as networking form an important component of psychosocial support. The study used non-formal training approach and provided networking plat forms where the group members could share out their experiences. This could be taken a notch higher where the government and other stake holders facilitate the networking of the vulnerable youth with others from different regions who have had similar experiences and were able to overcome. This will give them chance to grasp new ideas and share common understanding of causes and consequences of the path they took

Group learning through delivery methods created a common bond for the group members as they shared their past experiences before active participation. Each day training session started with a debriefing session or an ice breaker intentionally designed to enable each member of the learning group share their previous day's experiences especially those not related to the training. Outdoor academic games were also used to relax and provide a temporary escape from the reality of their lives. This rises the trainee's morale enabling them connect with each other's world and work as a team. This approach concurs with Morton & Montgomery (2011) observation that the youth need emotional support to give them a sense of safety and belonging while motivational support provides guidance on available opportunities within appropriate boundaries. The trainer has to go beyond the preparation of the 'ecosystem' that is the training environment, content and facilitation process

and ensure that he/she establishes a relationship with the individual trainee for them to feel appreciated and also network with agencies that can provide the psychosocial report required.

6. Emerging Perspectives

During the training and subsequent evaluation process the following issues were noted that interfere with training or positive development process of the vulnerable and require the attention of policy makers.

- i. Some members live with critical health issues and cannot afford the treatment from public health facilities; this affects their chances of uplifting their living standards.
- ii. Ethnicity is also a very sensitive issue among the vulnerable youth where even new opportunities for manual labour are enjoyed by the dominant ethnic group among them. Encouraging social activities such as performing arts and creative crafts among the youth would neutralize this and result to acceptance.
- iii. Most of these youths unless those under the support of NGOs do not take their children to school due to the cost involved through levies. This means that vulnerability will become a family life cycle.
- iv. Majority of the vulnerable youth dropped out of school for various reasons and over the years have developed an interest of going back but cannot afford the levies charged in most public schools.
- v. There are no training programs or alternative education and training pathways in Kenya that cater for the vulnerable youth
- vi. The vulnerable youths are not aware of their rights as citizens as entrenched in Kenya's constitution. There is need to promote civil education and information literacy among these groups.

7. Conclusion

The development of any nation depends on the ability to accept the youth as a resource and hence the level of investment in positive youth development. The general objective of this study was to enhance broad based skills of the vulnerable youth. While absenteeism affects the development of the intended skills in craft and transferable skills, on the other hand it sharpened the problem solving and critical thinking of the members who attended consistently as they reorganized themselves and increased their tasks to cover the absentees.

Apathy and low motivation is part of intrinsic motivation and results to passion or interest in pursuing something. This manifested itself in various forms as afore discussed. In this study this challenge affected the development of interdependence and accountability among the members which is an important element of group learning. The trainer should have explained how the training in craft skills would change the social economic lives of the youth before starting the training. His would have raised their interest and motivation to learn right from the beginning of the training.

Kenya is a multiethnic country with each group having different language, norms, dress, beliefs and artistic forms. Though socio cultural manifestation was not expected based on the circumstances of the youth group, the challenge affected group formation, choice of craft skills and materials. Those learning groups that choose member of same ethnic group were disadvantaged that there was no diversity of skills and indigenous knowledge which is very important in craft production. The purpose of group learning was not only to develop craft skills but also to enhance unity and cohesion among the members which in return embrace each person's role and contribution. This would in return help them value their diversity and view each other as a 'resource' in the learning process.

Learning difficulties is not only a problem of non-formal programs but even in formal programs as well. However, it may be almost impossible to categorize this problem without any scientific assessment of the learner. In this study the challenge manifested as miscommunication, lack of listening, reading and writing skills. However, group learning is learner centered and highly interactive and when well organized can result to addressing some of the difficulties.

Lack of financial support is also another change though not peculiar to the vulnerable youth, but it contributed to other challenges like absenteeism during training, as well as very low living standards among the vulnerable youth. Any training programs should network with other stake holders to raise funds to provide allowances for this group during training to cushion the youth and make the training more effective.

Unfavourable past experiences created psychosocial problems to the vulnerable youth, a characteristic manifested unfriendly behavior due to anger and bitterness to the society and the systems. It was evidence that it would be difficult to train the vulnerable youth effectively without including psychosocial support as part of the training activities. Debriefing and icebreaking sessions were part of every training session and this relaxed the mood among the trainees and created a bond between the trainees and the trainer. Other activities such as media supported learning, academic games and networking of the groups provided some emotional relief to the members.

Group learning if well-organized avails a way of reducing the amount of learning materials required for practical skills as it provides for sharing of resources. The model also provides an environment for the trainees to socialize hence developing their interpersonal skills other transferable attributes. The study exposes a category of youth whose education and training needs need to be addressed as an attempt to support the fulfillment of international and national SDGs on the right to access quality education for all by 2030. The results and subsequent discussion gives the importance of non-formal training programs as an alternative pathway for school dropouts and the importance of group learning and interactive delivery methods to transform the lives of the youth.

8. Recommendations

- i. All stake holder's government, religious organizations, NGOs, business communities, the media and education institutions should come together and formulate policies and a sustainable framework to collectively address the challenges involved in providing skills to the vulnerable youth.
- ii. Non-formal training programs should include basic literacy skills to address learning difficulties and improve the effectiveness of the training process of the vulnerable youth.
- iii. Community trainers and extension workers handling the vulnerable youth should be specially trained just like those dealing with special needs education. This will improve interaction during and invoke behavioral change through delivery methods.
- iv. Kenya's youth development policies and adult learning programs should be reviewed to accommodate non-formal education as alternative pathways for vulnerable youth
- v. Adequate monitoring and evaluation processing for all initiatives that are meant for the vulnerable use to ensure that there is documented feedback on successful milestones and the gaps that exists.
- vi. The government should establish psychosocial services in a community either through the local administration office telephone hotline, and train the police and local administration on the special needs of the vulnerable youth. This will enable them to handle the youth appropriately and avoid suspicion.

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