

Bridging Generations and Geographies: A Review on Youth Leadership and Rural Development Pathways

Nazni Noordin, Zaherawati Zakaria, Adnan Aminuddin*, Muhammad Syahmizan Azmi, Jazimin Zakaria

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sungai Petani Kedah, Malaysia

*Correspondence Author

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ABSTRACT

Rural communities are experiencing significant transitions driven by globalization, demographic shifts, and technological change, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive leadership. Within this context, youth leadership has emerged as a critical pathway for resilience, rural revitalization, and sustainable development. This review synthesizes insights from Scopus AI analytics (accessed 11 September 2025), including Summary, Expanded Summary, Concept Map, Topic Experts, and Emerging Themes, to map the landscape of youth leadership in rural development. Using a structured search strategy, the study identifies three interconnected clusters: education and training, community engagement, and pathways to leadership. Findings reveal that higher education, professional development, and online degree programs contribute to the professionalization of youth leaders; community-based programs and participatory governance enhance rural revitalization; and entrepreneurship and local champion models provide alternative leadership routes. However, systemic barriers such as sociopolitical constraints, limited access to resources, and uneven institutional support continue to prevent youth engagement. Emerging themes point to the growing relevance of digital platforms, climate-smart agricultural innovations, and gender-sensitive approaches in shaping the next generation of rural leaders. This review contributes for inclusive rural transformation by offering an integrative framework that bridges generational and geographical gaps, highlighting policy, practice, and research directions for strengthening youth leadership in rural communities.

Keywords: Youth; youth leadership; rural development; community engagement; rural communities.

INTRODUCTION

Rural communities worldwide are undergoing complex transitions shaped by globalization, technological change, and urban migration, placing unprecedented pressure on their economic, social, and cultural fabric. In this context, young leaders have emerged as pivotal agents of transformation, bridging generational divides while addressing the developmental challenges faced by marginalized rural populations. Leadership among youth is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor for enhancing community resilience, sustaining rural livelihoods, and ensuring inclusive participation in governance, as well as for development processes (Garst et al., 2019; Puxley & Chapin, 2021).

Despite growing recognition, the pathways through which youth leadership contributes to rural development remain break apart Many rural youths continue to encounter blockade such as inadequate education and training, limited access to resources, and systemic exclusion from policymaking structures (Masuku & Macheka, 2021).

While programs like graduate degrees in youth development leadership (Garst et al., 2023) and community-based initiatives (Parkhill et al., 2018) have illustrated promising outcomes, these efforts are often localized and lack integration into broader rural development strategies. Similarly, innovative approaches such as the Local Champions model in Malaysia (Malek et al., 2022) and agricultural initiatives in North Africa (Amichi et al., 2015; Bouzidi et al., 2015) highlight youth potential, but structural gaps in governance and support mechanisms persist.

Previous studies have provided valuable insights into community engagement, education pathways, agricultural innovation, and governance participation; however, there remains no comprehensive synthesis that connects these dimensions into a coherent understanding of how youth leadership functions across geographical and generational contexts. The absence of an integrative review limits the ability of scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to design effective interventions that harness youth leadership for rural transformation.

This review aims to address this gap by systematically analysing research on youth leadership and rural development, identifying emerging themes, and mapping conceptual linkages across disciplines and geographies. Specifically, it focuses to construct a concept map of the field, highlight the contributions of topic experts, and outline pathways that extend across generational knowledge and geographical disparities. By doing so, the paper contributes to both scholarship and practice by offering a synthesized framework for understanding youth leadership in rural development contexts.

METHODS

This review used Scopus AI (access date: 11 September 2025) as the primary analytic engine to map the research landscape on youth leadership and rural development. Scopus AI is a generative-AI layer built on Scopus's curated database that provides reproducible, visual concept maps, referenced summaries, author/topic analytics, and an "Emerging Themes" feature for recent topic clustering (Elsevier, product page). To operationalize the review aim, to analyse the research area, generate a concept map, identify topic experts, and surface emerging themes, the following steps were performed.

First, a broad, transparent search was executed in Scopus AI using the user-specified Boolean string: ("youth" OR "young" OR "teen*" OR "adolescent") AND ("leadership" OR "governance" OR "management" OR "authority") AND ("rural" OR "countryside" OR "remote" OR "agricultural") AND ("development" OR "growth" OR "progress" OR "improvement") AND ("community" OR "participation" OR "engagement" OR "involvement") AND ("empowerment" OR "capacity building" OR "skills" OR "training"). This query was run on **11 September 2025**, and all search parameters, database filters, and date range were recorded within the Scopus AI session to ensure reproducibility (Scopus AI logs query steps and optimizations).

Second, Scopus AI generated an initial **Summary** of the retrieved literature (hereafter "Summary"), which condensed the topical scope, dominant regions and disciplines, and frequently occurring conceptual terms. The Summary served as the first-pass map of the literature, used to refine inclusion criteria (peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, and relevant reports in English; publication years unrestricted for mapping but later filtered to emphasize 2018–2025 for emerging themes). Scopus AI's copilot and explainable pipeline make transparent the documents used to create the Summary and provide confidence indicators for each claim, which was used to judge the trustworthiness of automated syntheses.

Third, an **Expanded Summary** (deeper synthesis) was requested from Scopus AI. This Expanded Summary included structured components; background trends, geographic distribution, methodological patterns (qualitative vs quantitative prevalence), and policy/practice implications, and explicitly listed the top 50 source documents (title, authors, year, source) that underpinned the narrative. The Expanded Summary was exported as a machine-readable file and used as the basis for manual cross-checking by the research team (authors scanned the top 50 list to confirm domain relevance and removed off-topic items). Scopus AI's ability to show the underlying document references and confidence levels increased efficiency while allowing human verification.

Fourth, the **Concept Map** tool in Scopus AI was invoked to visualize conceptual clusters and the relationships among high-frequency keywords, research constructs (e.g., “participation”, “leadership development”, “agricultural innovation”), and disciplinary nodes (e.g., development studies, education, rural sociology). The Concept Map was exported as a high-resolution image and inspected to identify major thematic clusters and bridging nodes that connect “generational” topics (intergenerational knowledge transfer, mentorship) to “geographical” topics (rural livelihoods, agroecology, remoteness). Scopus AI’s interactive map allowed zooming into subclusters for targeted follow-up searches (e.g., “youth entrepreneurship + smallholder agriculture + training programs”), and it recorded the document counts supporting each cluster, which was used to prioritise themes for narrative synthesis.

Fifth, Scopus AI’s **Topic Experts / Author Analytics** output was used to identify leading researchers, institutions, and collaboration networks across the mapped literature. The tool ranked authors by publication volume, citation impact in the retrieved set, and topical centrality (authors who connect otherwise disparate clusters). The research team reviewed the ranked list to identify a core group of topic experts whose work was repeatedly cited across clusters (these experts informed the “topic expert” discussion in the review and guided targeted manual searches for grey literature and regional case studies). Scopus AI’s author analytics include affiliations and recent publications, enabling quick verification of expertise and topical focus.

Sixth, the **Emerging Themes** feature was applied with a recency filter (last two to three years) to capture novel and rising topics, such as post-COVID patterns of rural youth mobility, digital youth engagement platforms, and climate-smart agripreneurship for youth. Scopus AI’s Emerging Themes clusters documents from the most recent window and classifies themes as “established,” “rising,” or “novel,” with reproducible clustering metrics. This feature helped pinpoint white spaces and opportunities for future research (e.g., gaps in longitudinal evaluation of youth leadership interventions). The Emerging Themes module and its provenance reporting were explicitly referenced in our mapping and gap analysis.

Seventh, all automated outputs (Summary, Expanded Summary, Concept Map, Topic Experts, Emerging Themes) were exported and integrated into a **human-led synthesis pipeline**. The integration workflow included: (a) removal of duplicates across result lists; (b) manual screening of the top 200 records for topical relevance and methodological appropriateness (titles/abstracts, then full text when available); (c) extraction of metadata (year, country, methods, sample, intervention type) to populate a narrative evidence table; and (d) triangulation of Scopus AI outputs with independent keyword searches in Scopus and manual checks of key journals and reports (to ensure no major relevant works were missed due to indexing lags). This mixed human-AI workflow follows recommended best practices for responsible use of research AI tools: use AI to accelerate discovery and mapping while retaining expert human judgment for selection and interpretation.

Eighth, to address reproducibility and transparency, the methods record contains: (1) the exact Boolean search string used; (2) the date and time of the Scopus AI session (**11 September 2025**); (3) the Scopus AI outputs saved (Summary.json, Expanded_Summary.json, ConceptMap.png, TopicExperts.csv, EmergingThemes.csv); and (4) an audit trail of query refinements (Scopus AI’s copilot shows query optimization steps). These records enable other researchers to reproduce or extend the analysis using the same Scopus AI pipeline. Scopus AI explicitly documents its steps and provides reproducible calculations for emerging-theme identification, which supports transparent meta-mapping.

Finally, the Scopus AI findings were synthesised into the review’s analytical components: (a) a **concept map** in the paper that integrates Scopus AI clusters; (b) a short list of **topic experts** and their representative works; (c) an **expanded summary** that frames historical trends and the current state of evidence; and (d) a curated list of **emerging themes** with suggested research priorities. All AI-generated claims were cross-checked by the authors against the underlying cited documents before inclusion in the manuscript narrative. This combined Scopus-AI + expert verification method allowed the study to meet its stated objectives: to provide an in-depth, reproducible exploration of the landscape of youth leadership and rural development, to identify leading scholars, and to surface emerging themes worthy of future empirical inquiry (Figure 1)

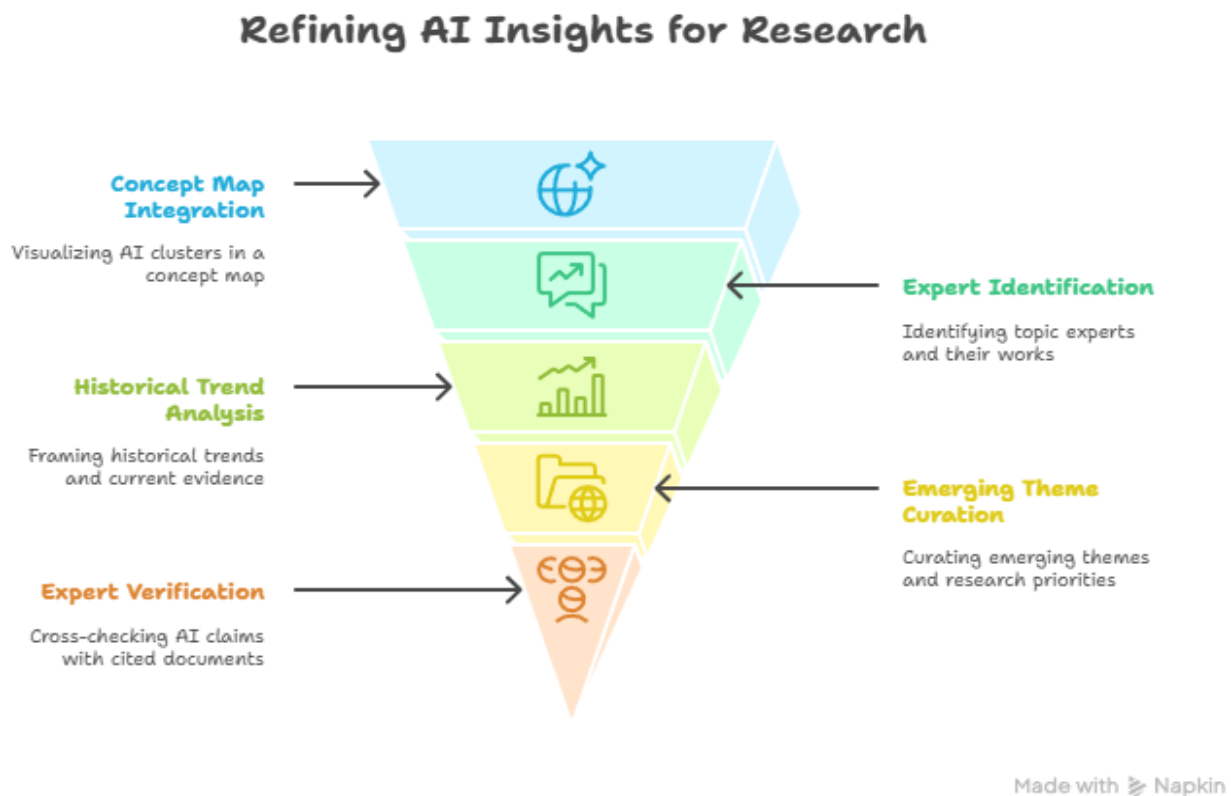


Figure 1: Refining AI Insights for Research

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this review are organized around insights generated through Scopus AI analytics, accessed on 11 September 2025. The **Summary and Expanded Summary** outputs provided a structured overview of the research landscape, highlighting the increasing scholarly attention to youth leadership as a driver of rural area development, with publications spanning education, agricultural innovation, community engagement, and governance participation. The Expanded Summary further emphasized the diversity of methodological approaches, ranging from qualitative case studies in Africa and Asia to quantitative program evaluations in Europe and North America, and illustrated how youth empowerment is linked to both rural transformation and generational continuity (Garst et al., 2019; Puxley & Chapin, 2021).

SUMMARY AND EXPANDED SUMMARY

The review of the Scopus AI *Summary* and *Expanded Summary* highlights multiple pathways through which youth leadership contributes to rural development, while also exposing persistent hurdle. At the broadest level, rural youth leadership programs are consistently positioned as central mechanisms for aligning young people's aspirations with the broader objectives of national development strategies as well as community growth (Malek et al., 2022). Leadership development initiatives strengthen human capital, enhance community capacity, and build networks, thereby producing measurable environmental, social, and economic benefits (Etuk et al., 2013). These findings reinforce the argument that youth leadership functions not only as a developmental outcome but also as a transformative pathway toward sustainability and community resilience.

Several models illustrate how these pathways are structured. Redmond and Dolan (2016) propose a conceptual framework that emphasizes skill development, enabling environments, and a strong commitment to civic action as basis to youth leadership growth. This model resonates with evidence from community-based programs in rural contexts, where participants report improved leadership competencies, increased social engagement, and heightened community awareness (Puxley & Chapin, 2021). These outcomes suggest that structured leadership

programs serve as accelerators of youth agency in contexts where traditional opportunities for participation are limited.

Despite this promise, notable challenges undermine the establishment of robust leadership pathways. One recurring barrier is the lack of access to productive resources such as land, water, and credit, which restricts youth participation in agriculture and other rural enterprises (Bouzidi et al., 2015). In South Africa, Geza et al. (2022) observe that constraints on both the demand and supply side of agricultural labor markets, coupled with exclusionary policy environments, create structural barriers to youth empowerment. Similarly, Yu et al. (2024) highlighted that institutional weaknesses, limited funding, and the absence of multidisciplinary collaboration hinder integrated rural development efforts. These challenges underscore the systemic inequalities that persist even when leadership potential exists.

At the same time, opportunities to leverage technology are increasingly evident. Nain et al. (2015) stated how participatory action research projects focusing on agripreneurship introduced mentorship structures and new agricultural technologies, enabling rural youth to gain practical leadership experience. Technology also provides platforms for practicing leadership skills, cultivating peer networks, and modeling role expectations (Redmond & Dolan, 2016). As such, technological and digital innovations present scalable avenues for amplifying youth voices in rural transformation.

Social and cultural dynamics further shape the effectiveness of youth leadership pathways. Community leaders often perceive changes in family structures, such as the shift from nuclear to extended or fragmented households, as influencing young people's capacity to engage in collective action (Anakwe et al., 2020). Likewise, the performance of youth leaders is mediated by institutional support, socio-economic background, and traditional bases of authority (Famakinwa et al., 2019). These contextual factors highlight the importance of embedding leadership programs within culturally sensitive and socially inclusive frameworks.

Finally, the economic implications of investing in youth leadership are considerable. Evidence suggests that empowering youth leaders not only strengthens community governance but also generates broader economic and social returns, including autonomy, recognition, and increased sustainability of rural livelihoods (Etuk et al., 2013; Bouzidi et al., 2015). Yet, many strategies remain under-implemented due to weak policy follow-through and entrenched sociopolitical obstacles (Geza et al., 2022). This tension reflects a persistent gap between programmatic intentions and the realities of rural governance, underscoring the need for stronger alignment between grassroots initiatives and national development policies.

In short, the findings from the *Summary* and *Expanded Summary* affirm that youth leadership pathways in rural development are multifaceted, shaped by education, socio-cultural contexts, community engagement, and technological innovation. They also reveal enduring structural barriers that hinder youth from realizing their full potential as development actors. Addressing these hurdles while investing in leadership development is therefore central to bridging generational divides and creating inclusive rural futures.

Introduction to the Concept Map

The concept map generated through Scopus AI (11 September 2025) provides a visual overview of the major clusters and subthemes associated with *Youth Leadership in Rural Development*. At the core, the map illustrates three interconnected domains: **Education and Training**, **Community Engagement**, and **Pathways to Leadership**. Each domain branches into specific dimensions that reflect both structural opportunities and practical mechanisms for youth empowerment in rural contexts. Figure 2 illustrated the subtheme for the main three domains, which is;

Education and Training - Youth Development Leadership + Online Degree Programs + Professional Development + Higher Education.

Community Engagement - Rural Revitalization + Community Leader.

Pathways to Leadership - Entrepreneurship + Local Champion

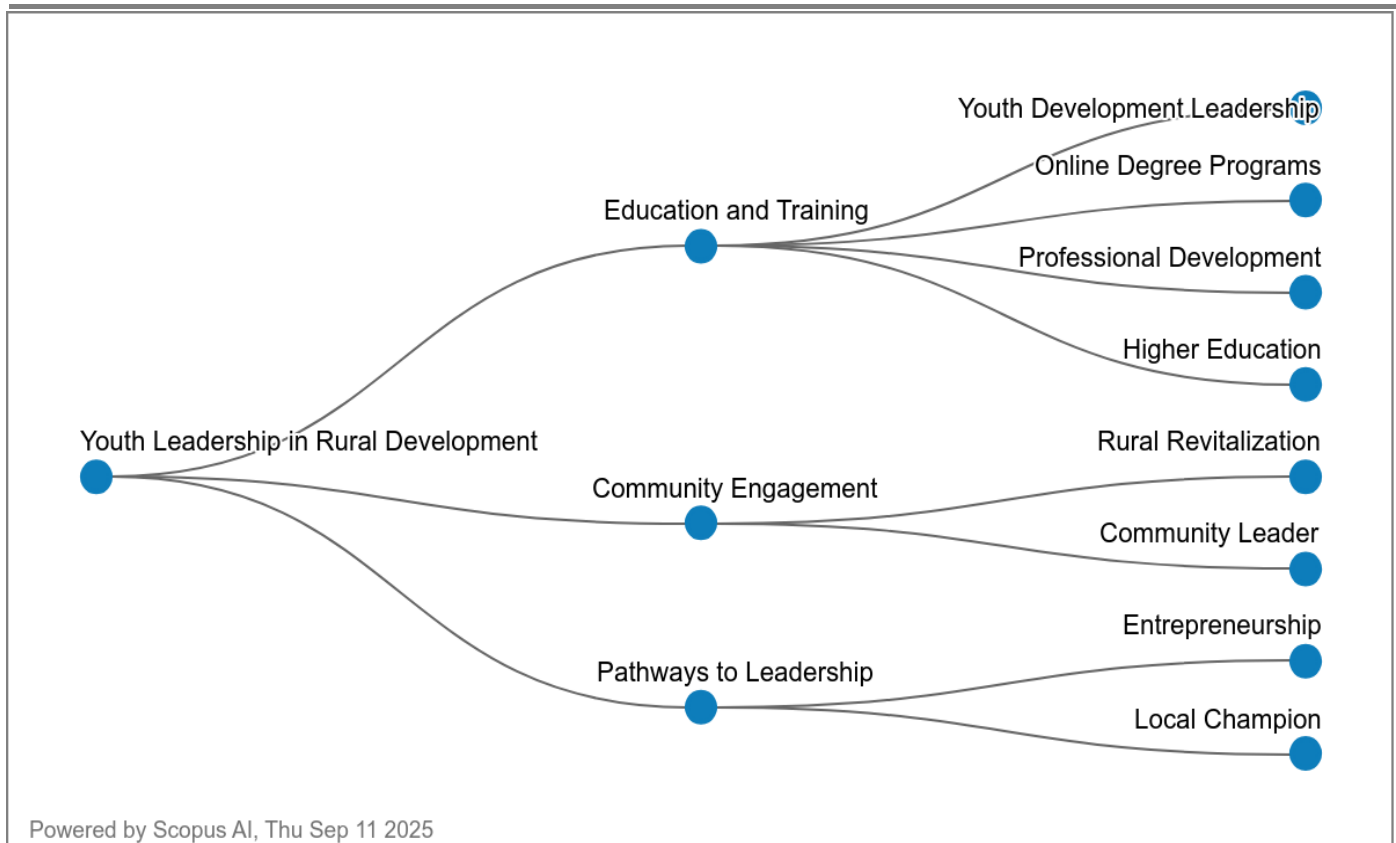


Figure 2: Concept Map of Youth Leadership in Rural Development

Major cluster: Youth Leadership in Rural Development

Youth leadership in rural development represents a dynamic and increasingly indispensable force in transforming marginalized communities into hubs of sustainability, innovation, and resilience. Rural youth, often perceived as passive recipients of development interventions, are emerging as proactive agents of change who mobilize technical and social resources to address local challenges. For instance, in Morocco, young people have developed strategic approaches to establish livelihoods and enterprises by leveraging community networks and local knowledge, demonstrating that leadership begins with resourcefulness and contextual adaptation (Bouzidi et al., 2015). These initiatives not only create economic opportunities but also foster social cohesion, challenging the narrative of rural decline and positioning youth as architects of place-based development etc.

The cultivation of youth leadership is significantly enhanced through structured community leadership programs that provide training, mentorship, and platforms for civic engagement. Research from rural U.S. communities illustrates how participation in such programs builds not only leadership competencies, such as public speaking, project management, and critical thinking, but also deepens youths' awareness of community needs and assets (Puxley & Chapin, 2021). Furthermore, pre-leadership processes, including identity formation and values clarification, are critical in preparing adolescents for formal leadership roles (Parkhill et al., 2018). These programs serve as incubators for civic responsibility, enabling young people to transition from beneficiaries to decision-makers in local governance and development planning, thereby ensuring that rural policies reflect intergenerational perspectives.

Despite their potential, rural youth also face systemic barriers to leadership, including limited access to education, infrastructure, and institutional support, as well as sociocultural norms that may undervalue their contributions. In rural South Africa, disengagement among youth has been linked to historical marginalization and a lack of trust in community leadership structures, resulting in what Majee et al. (2019) term "scars of disengagement." Similarly, family structure diversity in rural settings can either facilitate or hinder youth participation, depending on the community norms and level of parental encouragement (Anakwe et al., 2020). These challenges underscore the need for inclusive, culturally responsive strategies that validate youth voices and create safe spaces for them to lead without fear of exclusion or reprisal.

Pathways for youth leadership in rural development are thus multifaceted, requiring coordinated efforts across education, policy, and community practice. One promising pathway is participatory, youth-led community development, where children and adolescents conducted visual SWOT analyses to identify local strengths and opportunities, thereby influencing community priorities and resource allocation (Robson et al., 2020). Another pathway involves institutionalizing youth as “local champions” within rural development policy frameworks, as seen in Malaysia, where youth advocates are formally integrated into policy design and implementation to ensure relevance and sustainability (Malek et al., 2022). These models highlight the importance of agency, co-creation, and structural support in enabling youth to lead effectively.

Subtheme: Education and Training

The cluster on Education and Training demonstrates how structured learning opportunities form the backbone of youth leadership in rural development. Higher education and specialized programs, including online and blended degree offerings, have been shown to professionalize youth leadership and provide the competencies needed to navigate complex rural challenges (Garst et al., 2019; Garst et al., 2023). Online platforms expand access to leadership curricula, enabling rural youth to overcome geographical barriers to education. Professional development pathways, including targeted workshops and leadership institutes, further prepare young leaders with critical thinking, organizational management skills, and policy engagement. These investments contribute directly to rural revitalization by equipping youth with knowledge and networks necessary for community transformation. However, scholars caution that educational access remains uneven, with rural youth often disadvantaged due to digital divides and limited infrastructure (Yu et al., 2024).

Subtheme: Community Engagement

The Community Engagement cluster underscores that youth leadership is embedded in social contexts where collective action and participation are crucial. Community-based programs, such as local leadership projects and participatory governance models, enhance self-efficacy and build awareness of local development issues (Puxley & Chapin, 2021). Rural revitalization efforts increasingly rely on youth as agents of change, mobilizing their creativity and social networks to address demographic decline and economic stagnation in rural regions. The role of community leaders is particularly remarkable, as they provide mentorship and facilitate the integration of youth into decision-making structures (Masuku & Macheke, 2021). Yet, participation is often constrained by sociopolitical barriers, including patriarchal norms and limited institutional inclusivity. Overcoming these barriers requires policies that foster intergenerational collaboration and inclusive governance mechanisms (Malek et al., 2022).

Subtheme: Pathways to Leadership

The Pathways to Leadership cluster highlights entrepreneurship and local champion models as pivotal routes through which rural youth assume leadership roles. Entrepreneurship provides both social recognition and economic empowerment, enabling youth to become drivers of innovation in services, agriculture, and digital solutions (Nain et al., 2015). These entrepreneurial pathways also allow youth to reimagine rural futures by creating employment opportunities and reducing rural–urban migration pressures. The concept of the local champion emphasizes individual agency, where motivated young leaders inspire peers and mobilize communities toward shared goals (Malek et al., 2022). However, sustaining these pathways requires supportive ecosystems, including access to mentorship, resources, and enabling policies. Without such support, entrepreneurial initiatives risk becoming isolated successes rather than systemic transformations.

CONCLUSION

Youth leadership in rural development is a multidimensional process that is rooted in education, strengthened by community engagement, and supported by entrepreneurial models and local champions. This review highlights that while rural youth have strong transformative potential, their participation is often hampered by limited resources, sociocultural barriers, and uneven institutional support. These gaps need to be addressed with a more integrated approach that combines formal education, experiential learning, and innovative practices such as climate-smart agriculture and digital platforms.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest several actions that can be taken by stakeholders in this area. First, the federal and local governments should formulate policies that focus on youth, facilitating access to training opportunities, financial assistance, and land, thereby reducing structural inequalities. Second, ensuring the participation of youth representatives in rural governance structures, where their voices can be heard and their suggestions taken into account before decisions and policy implementation are finalized. Third, providing opportunities and spaces for sharing between universities, NGOs, and rural communities, where this culture and practice can generate a leadership ecosystem that fosters ongoing capacity building. Finally, gender-sensitive and inclusive policies are needed to ensure that marginalized youth groups also benefit from leadership opportunities.

In essence, it is hoped that this paper can contribute to the growing transformation of rural leadership that positions youth as leaders of rural transformation today and not simply as a continuation of the legacy of traditional rural leadership. The main recommendation is for policy makers and stakeholders in the rural development linkup space to move beyond rhetoric by incorporating youth leadership into concrete programs and funding streams. Doing so will not only strengthen community resilience and sustainability but also bridge generational and geographic gaps, positioning rural youth as active architects of equitable development.

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